

ACT I: PRELUDE

All is darkness and silence. From the silence, a low rumble of voices builds slowly and steadily towards cacophony. The sound lingers just beyond the point of comfort. Voices, whispers, screams, and inhuman howls bombard the darkness until they don't. In newfound silence, narrow daggers of moonlight shine down from above in neat rows, illuminating the space. For now- all we can tell is that we are somewhere dank and dark and underground. MICHAEL lays sleeping in the middle of the floor. He wears a filthy, tattered white T-shirt and ripped blue jeans caked with a mixture of mud and blood. MICHAEL stirs... then bolts upright- listening for something. He turns downstage and-

Sees.

Something.

Miraculous.

MICHAEL

(To WITNESS) My god... that's new.

MICHAEL leaps to his feet and inspects the WITNESS without touch throughout:

MICHAEL

Greetings salutations warmest regards and gladdest of tidings to you! I can't tell you how happy I am to make your acquaintance. *My*. Aren't you beautiful... and so life-like! If I may... I feel I could touch you if I just reached far enough. I won't- of course. That would be rude seeing as we've only just met and to be frank I'm not positive you're real in the first place! But the fact that I feel I *could*... still- no contact. Just to be on the safe side. Touching ruptures seals. It cracks one open at the seams. Therefore and naturally, touching is against the rules. Oh, you should know- there are many rules down here. No smoking, no drinking, no carnal indulgence, no nothing! Pleasure is a dirty word these days... oh dear, what day is it?

MICHAEL considers his surroundings.

Sorry for the smell. In my defense, it's a literal shithole. I'd have cleaned if I knew you were coming... but of course, how could I have known? I've just... *been* here.

Minding my prayers, holding my silence. Breathing in, breathing out for weeks... months? I don't know anymore. Then again, I suppose it doesn't matter now that *you* are with me.

Beat

I was told something would happen if I waited. Just sit and wait- those were my marching orders. Sit and wait and pray and take your meals silently when they come. 'You'll know it when you see it.' And I *see* you. I *really* see you. It's really nothing short of the greatest relief I've ever felt in my life. I was beginning to worry nothing was going to happen. In case it wasn't evident, I'm not built for solitude. Too much idle time sends the mind spiraling down dark paths.

Beat

No- it's best that you arrived when you did. I was in no state to entertain yesterday- or was it the day before? Time passes slowly when you're waiting for something to happen- or to begin, don't you find? Anyways- the *point* is the place was even more of a pigsty the other day. It wasn't supposed to be- I had just cleaned. She was so very disappointed with me for the mess. Rightfully so, granted, but she can be so cruel when she's cross sometimes. I had to re-do the all cleaning all by myself! No- best you weren't here then. I like you exactly *when* you are. I- if I may... I think we're meant to be friends. You and I. Or- or... if that's too much too soon... maybe cohorts? Compatriots, perhaps... I'd like that. But only if you'd want it too. Only if you'd have me-

The ceiling creaks. MICHAEL freezes, his eyes snapping upwards. He waits... and waits... nothing.

MICHAEL

Just the wind. Good- I don't want her knowing about you just yet. I think I'll let myself be selfish for once. I don't want to hide you or anything. I'm not ashamed of you or embarrassed of you. That's the furthest thing from the truth. I want you tucked safely away because... because I have no idea what's coming. Because I'm scared for you. You have the worst possible ally in this shithole of ours and for that I am truly sorry. It's just- there's a great deal I'm not privy to. I don't know how she'll take your being here. I don't even know if she'll be able to see you! But... she hurts people sometimes- or makes them hurt themselves... not that she'd ever put it quite like that. You'll see when you meet her, I think. You'll see what I mean. It's all *process* with her. Procedure and process and tedium and-

MICHAEL beats himself over the head.

But there I go gossiping! Not nice! You ought to be afforded the right to make your own

assumptions. Form your own first impressions. That's essential in a healthy relationship, I think. I won't crowd you like that again. I'm sorry. It's just... *so* good to have some company again. Just the view of you is enough for me- honest.

Beat

I prayed for you, you know... before I knew what I was praying for. I don't believe in God and I prayed for you. I pleaded with the air for something- *anything*. Someone to talk to. That was, let's see- oh dear. Either last night or last year. Ha! Doesn't really matter- remember? Time's gone all fuzzy and frankly I'm beginning to enjoy the sensation. It's the closest to a buzz I've had in ages.

Beat

If you hated me or found me off-putting you'd have left already, right? You can do that, can't you? Leave whenever your want? Well... in case you didn't know, I think you can. I won't hate you, resent you, or begrudge you if you leave me. Should you choose, whatever door you came in through will take you right back out. I don't want you to stay because you pity me. No. *I need* you to stay because if you're here... something is working. Something is working and we are one step / closer to-

Somewhere in the darkness, a door opens. Several overhanging fluorescent tubes flicker and flare to life, illuminating the space below. We now see MICHAEL is sitting in the middle of what appears to be an underground bunker. Concrete walls stretch upward into the ceiling, which consists of several planks laid flush together. In the far corner of the room, a small chain-link cage is bolted to the wall, forming an impenetrable shell. It is impossible to tell what is inside the cage, which is padlocked with a chain. On the floor behind the cage, obscured to all but the most eagle-eyed, a lumpy burlap sack soaked through with blood. Hanging on the upstage wall next to the chain-link cage, is a framed document signed at the bottom with two bloody signatures. An industrial metal staircase dominates the upstage wall. The kind you'd buy in pieces at a hardware store and reassemble on-site. The stairs scale upwards to a cellar door high above the chamber. Tucked beneath the stairs is a gutted bathtub, two buckets, a garden hose, a water spigot, a military cot with one blanket and one pillow, and the long cord of a butler bell pulley which hangs limp from the ceiling.

Without warning, a pair of mud-stained gardening boots appears on the top step of the staircase. For now, this is all we can see of SERAPHINE.

SERAPHINE (*OFF*)

Anything?

MICHAEL

(*To WITNESS*) *Shit!* Not a peep... (*Calling up*) No!

SERAPHINE (*OFF*)

I heard a voice... what were you talking to?

MICHAEL

...myself?

Beat

SERAPHINE (*OFF*)

Alright... give a ring if anything changes.

SERAPHINE flicks off the lights (*the switch is offstage-just outside the cellar door*) and slams the cellar door shut, plunging the chamber back into near-total-darkness. Michael looks to the WITNESS, barely able to suppress a winning smile.

MICHAEL

You see? Fooled her!-

MICHAEL clamps his mouth shut.

MICHAEL

Shouldn't push my luck. She must have been listening at the door. Little sneak. She does that sometimes- lingers. Just to hear me losing my grip. Or to make sure I'm following her rules- which are, incidentally: "Don't break the circle, don't think of home, and no matter what- don't come outside..." Wait! This is perfect- I can just show you...

MICHAEL disappears into the shadows and returns with the framed document signed in blood.

MICHAEL

I'm under contract. Did I mention? Yup yup! I'm a bonafide gainfully employed individual! How many can say that? Here- this will help you make some sense of things.

Reading aloud:

"I, the undersigned Conduit-" that's me, "do hereby swear to obey, respect, and follow the lead of my Conjurer and High Confessor-" that's her. Bit more than she deserves, if you ask me. Let's see- "I swear on my life and everlasting soul to do as I am told, keep my solitude, commit wholly to my Conjurer's aims, and to ask as few questions as humanly possible." So basically when she says jump, I'm already miles up. "I, the undersigned Conduit-" me again! "will abstain from all pleasures of the mind, spirit, and flesh. I will fast as instructed and spend my days in rapt contemplation until further steps may be taken. At such a point as such steps are deemed attainable-" *awful* prose, really- "I will not back out on pain of death. As I have taken, so must I return. As I have wronged, so will I make right. I will be patient, contrite, and honest." Notice how I've yet to read a single caveat affecting her? Must not have wanted to waste the printer ink. Ah well- here's the last bit: "Above all, I will hold our sacred aim squarely and firmly in my mind at all times. I will worship no gods, idols, or ideals while I am entreated here. I will steel my nerves and harden my conviction at every possible opportunity. So it is. So it shall be." And then it goes on in another language for a bit... Hebrew? I want to say Hebrew. And then we both signed in blood, wanna see?

MICHAEL displays the contract.

Right here- Oh! But how rude of me! I still haven't given you my name! You don't have to give me yours in return, of course. That would be an expectation and *expectation* is the death of intimacy. Anyways, I'm Michael. See? Right there in red and white so you know I'm no liar. And there's her. Seraphine.

MICHAEL replaces the contract on the wall, turns around, and jumps.

MICHAEL

Jesus!...sorry. I'm still getting used to your... being there? Is that what we're calling it? I only know I'm here and you seem to be committed to riding it out with me- what ever *it* is... so... welcome to it! The single worst meditation retreat in existence! Let me assure you, I'm not all pain and process. That's her business. And *we* are not like *her*. It is a 'we', isn't it? She never mentioned being outnumbered but... here I am. Outnumbered. Actually- I think that's healthy in a relationship. It strips the ambiguity from so many wasteful little decisions. Those unproductive stupid questions you have to confront in a balanced partnership disappear when one party holds all the cards, you know?

Where are we going to dinner tonight? Wherever you want! Should we paint the nursery pink or blue? Whichever you prefer! Do you feel like ordering in or-

MICHAEL's stomach churns.

MICHAEL

Fuck... shouldn't think of food. Please don't worry- I'm not entirely without sustenance. She brings my meals in the mornings and evenings. At least- she *did* bring meals. Now I'm lucky to get a cup of tea and an apple slice to last me the whole day. Her fucking *process*. She says: 'Hunger tempers the soul. Where prayer delivers us unto the divine, fasting delivers the divine unto us.' So if date night is out, when am I going to meet your parents oh numerous one? Whenever you decide! See? Simple. And what if you came to dinner at my house? What if it was *my* folks welcoming you at the front door with a smile and a hug? I can't speak for Mom, but I think my Dad would like you. If you came from my head, I mean, he'd have very little choice but to love you on sight. Or... maybe you're from somewhere farther out? That raises a good question- where *did* you come from? Did you have to travel far to be here? I hope you're feet aren't sore. That is, if you even have feet. From where I'm standing you look like a field of luminous eyes-

The lights flick on above and the cellar door opens. MICHAEL recoils from the sudden brightness as SERAPHINE descends the steps. We now see her in full. She wears mud-smearred denim overalls covered with happy flower patches under an oversized flannel shirt. Her long hair is tied back in a loose braid. She carries a metal tray laden with herbs, flowers, a mortar and pestle, a small camping stove, a tea set, a single pudding cup, and a spoon.

SERAPHINE

Come and get it.

MICHAEL gives the WITNESS one final look before turning to SERAPHINE.

MICHAEL

Thanks. Holy shit- *pudding*?

SERAPHINE

Profanity.

MICHAEL

Sorry... thank you.

SERAPHINE sets the tray on the ground and pushes it towards MICHAEL with her foot. He snatches up the pudding cup, tears off the lid, and eats with his fingers.

SERAPHINE

Hold on- hold on...

She offers the spoon to MICHAEL, but he has already scooped the last of the pudding into his mouth. SERAPHINE replaces the spoon on the tray.

SERAPHINE

You're breaking a fourteen hour fast. Go slow.

MICHAEL

I can take a bellyache.

SERAPHINE

Please. Without our health we are nothing.

MICHAEL

(Indicating the plant matter on the tray). What's all this?

SERAPHINE

An activity. I thought we could brew tea together... would you like that?

MICHAEL

I guess.

SERAPHINE

I've been thinking. I feel I've been too harsh with you.

MICHAEL

Oh... okay.

SERAPHINE

I cannot take back the fury I felt... the fury I feel for you. I won't apologize for it but you are making a sacrifice being here. I hope you know I understand that. Your time and energy is important to me. You may owe me all this and more but this is no debtor's prison... understand?

MICHAEL

Okay... sure.

SERAPHINE

Shall we brew, then?

SERAPHINE approaches the tray on her knees and readies her ingredients.

SERAPHINE

Right... here we are. (*Indicating the individual components as she speaks*) Yarrow, bay, mugwort, clary sage, myrtle, honeysuckle, and Saint John's Wort. Excellent for love, fertility, psychic auras-

MICHAEL

Fertility?

SERAPHINE

Among other things...

SERAPHINE scoops the dried ingredients into the mortar, places the pestle inside, and hands it to MICHAEL.

SERAPHINE

Grind to a fine powder. I'll tell you when you're done.

MICHAEL

(*As he grinds*). So... psychic auras... did I hear that right?

SERAPHINE

You did. Though fertility is the more powerful attribute by far.

MICHAEL nods.

MICHAEL

At the risk of sounding naive, do I have any reason to be concerned for what I'm about to put in my body? I'm not gonna... trip or anything?

SERAPHINE

Goodness no! No- I'll give you ample warning before we venture anything resembling that territory. Love, fertility, aura amplification- nothing more.

MICHAEL

Uh-huh...

MICHAEL continues grinding... until-

MICHAEL

And... again- not wishing to question your methods but-

SERAPHINE

Michael... I am not trying to kill you. If I wanted you dead, which I have, I'd have poisoned you already. I've a million ways to do it growing just above your heads. If it will make you feel better, Saint John's Wort is toxic if taken in excess but I measured the dosage carefully. You're going to be fine. Better, even. Now quite whining and do the work. It has to be you.

MICHAEL resumes grinding. After some time:

MICHAEL

Did you search the river?

SERAPHINE

I did.

MICHAEL

And?

SERAPHINE

Nothing.

MICHAEL

But you found our place?

SERAPHINE

Certainly *a* place. The setting matches your hazy description. There just wasn't anything there... (*Indicating the mortar and pestle*) That's enough.

SERAPHINE takes back the mortar and pestle and scoops the powder into a metal strainer which she deposits in the kettle. She kneels to light the camping stove. For fire, she merely snaps her fingers. As the kettle simmers:

SERAPHINE

So... anything new?

MICHAEL

...no.

Beat

SERAPHINE

And your dreams? Any changes of note?

MICHAEL

I don't even know if I'm sleeping anymore. I open my eyes and it looks like they're still closed. I couldn't trouble you for a nightlight, could I?

SERAPHINE

You may not.

MICHAEL

No- of course not.

SERAPHINE

You're still resisting... why?

MICHAEL

How can I be resisting if you won't tell me what it is I'm resisting in the first place? I know we both- or at least *I think* we both want the same thing. But it's difficult to commit when you leave me in the dark. You don't trust me.

SERAPHINE's eyes snap up from her work.

SERAPHINE

And why would that be? You have not paid me back for the damage done... not even remotely. You want a clear conscious? Clear it yourself. Better yet- tell me where you left him-

MICHAEL

I told you- the river. It's all smeared around in my head but it *was* our place. You know everything I know. I swear.

SERAPHINE

Then why are the waters empty? I scoured every last inch of riverbed- exactly where you told me to look.

MICHAEL

He must have floated downstream, then. I don't know- or I can't be sure but- maybe if you followed the current a ways-

SERAPHINE

I am finished with this conversation. It turns my stomach. Mind your work and I'll mind mine. I... tomorrow I will search further down. For your sake, I hope something turns up. Without his body-

The tea kettle begins to squeal. SERAPHINE removes it from the stove.

SERAPHINE

No presumed apparitions? Nothing?

MICHAEL forces himself not to look at the Witness.

MICHAEL

Not even a bump in the night. Not that I can tell what's night and what's day anymore. Why? Are apparitions important?

SERAPHINE

Hmm... I'd hoped by now. But you're as green as they come, aren't you? And woefully male. I shouldn't be shocked that things are taking their time.

MICHAEL

Are you disappointed in me?

SERAPHINE

Yes.

MICHAEL

Cool... no offense, right?

SERAPHINE

If offending spurns the process... then yes. Offense intended. Aggravation can be a powerful catalyst in my experience. Pain as well...

MICHAEL

So you've done this before?

SERAPHINE

Not under these particular circumstance, but yes. I've walked a similar path to the one you're walking now.

MICHAEL

I wish there was some actual fucking walking / involved-

SERAPHINE

Swearing.

MICHAEL

If I could just stretch my legs! Or see the sky- just for a minute!

SERAPHINE

Out of the question. I'm getting tired of repeating myself.

MICHAEL

But why-

SERAPHINE

You don't appreciate the gravity of what we're attempting, do you?

MICHAEL

How can I when you refuse to tell me what we're attempting?! It's fucking / infuriating-

SERAPHINE

PROFANITY. We are... or rather, *you* will be subjecting yourself to something no male has succeeded in, or even attempted before. In all my extensive research, all my planning, I've never encountered mention of a non-female Conduit before. There is no guarantee it will work but, circumstances being what they are, we've no choice but to brave uncharted territory together.

MICHAEL

I still don't see why I can't come up with you. Just a minute outside- no one would see me. I'm not going to bolt- just-

SERAPHINE

No-

MICHAEL

Why?

SERAPHINE

You may not leave this place because that would break your solitude and then we'd have to begin again from the top. Try this. Imagine yourself as a single particle of matter floating through space. You may pass a stray comet here, some death-portent asteroid there, but your path isn't swayed. Why? Because you are subject to a pull more powerful and ancient by far. You are bound for a black hole light years away. A millimeter to the left or right- doesn't matter a lick. Unnatural gravity has its hooks in you. Reeling you in, light year by light year. But- unlike the mercifully simple inner-life of a speck of dust floating through space, you still have your free will to cling to. For now.

You can shirk off your duties as casually as opening that door and taking a spin about my garden. That would be a profound and cataclysmic waste... am I understood?

MICHAEL

Yes...

SERAPHINE

What are you?

Beat

MICHAEL

The Conduit.

SERAPHINE

Correct... what else?

Beat

MICHAEL

A felon-

SERAPHINE

A wanted man. And what happens to wanted men when they peep out from their hidey holes?

MICHAEL

They get taken away. Locked up.

SERAPHINE

Would you like to be locked up, Michael?

MICHAEL

No.

SERAPHINE

Good. Now be quiet and drink your tea. Hold your solitude. Keep trying. If nothing presents itself within the week, we may as well turn in where we are.

SERAPHINE pours a cup and offers it to MICHAEL. He takes it, regarding the liquid inside with suspicion. SERAPHINE pours her own cup.

MICHAEL

Turn in like start over?

SERAPHINE

Hardly. You only get one chance to pierce a hole through reality. The powers we will open ourselves to do not look kindly on second attempts. If you were to rupture the seal now we'd be lucky to get even a whisper from beyond the veil. This. Here. Right now. This is all that matters. Hold your focus and let me know if anything appears. We can't progress until you have your Witness.

SERAPHINE sips lightly and shudders.

SERAPHINE

Honey? You a honey with tea kind of guy? I can get some if you-

MICHAEL

I'm fine, thank you.

MICHAEL takes his cup and sips bitterly. It's delicious. SERAPHINE takes a moment, studying MICHAEL. Her eyes drift upwards, studying the 4th wall as though memorizing cracks in the stone. She is searching for something... someone... but finds nothing. With that, SERAPHINE gathers her supplies and departs up the stairs.

SERAPHINE

Any developments... day or night... ring the bell. I will try the river again tomorrow.

MICHAEL nods and SERAPHINE departs, closing the door behind her and turning off the lights.

MICHAEL

(To WITNESS) Thank God- I thought she'd never leave. Did you catch that? That last bit-Witness... she said we need a Witness. I could be wrong... but I think that's you. You certainly seem to be doing a lot of it. Witnessing, I mean. Or are you made a Witness by virtue of my witnessing your witnessing? If there's nothing to witness; if I never torpedoed my life and signed myself away to indefinite solitary confinement, what would that make you? A thousand eyes staring at an empty room? Or is there some other Conduit miles away that needs your help? Jesus- this is all so fucked. I'm confused. I've *been* confused. And sad. And lonely. And not in the mood for fucking tea.

MICHAEL empties his cup onto the floor, watching the liquid disappear into the dirt.

You've met the witch now, at least. She's... well you've seen for yourself. Came into my life about... what, a year ago? Maybe less. Gave me the willies then, serves me tea in the dark now. She's not the worst, as far as wardens go. Not great for conversation but at least she's invested in my wellbeing in her own way. Cheers to that.

MICHAEL is possessed by a strange thought. He reaches down and runs his finger through the tea-soaked dirt. He withdraws his hand and licks it clean.

MICHAEL

Does soil count as protein? Desperate times. She brews a mean pot of tea, I'll give her that. It's not that I'm ungrateful. I just don't trust it. I'll drink my fill when I can pick the ingredients myself. By hand. No middle men. I know where she gets it, of course. Did you know, at this very moment, we're sitting beneath her greenhouse? I got a good look at it my first night. Before she kicked me down the stairs and thrashed me until I couldn't see straight. I wish I could take you up to see it. Say what you will about her bedside manner, but she has a way with making things just- *explode* to life. There are tomatoes big as basketballs up there. On my life. Peppermint and thyme and rosemary like you wouldn't believe. I can smell it if I concentrate.

MICHAEL closes his eyes and inhales deeply.

So... if you're here to Witness, I suppose that means I owe you a show. Perhaps you'd like to know where I go to the bathroom? See those buckets there? Under the stairs. She takes them away when they're full. It's gross but... I suppose it's better than no buckets at all. Hi-ho the glamorous life...

Beat

Or maybe... wanna know what I do all day... all night? When I'm not eating, shitting, taking a leak, or sleeping... I sit here and think of *him*. I suppose it's time to come clean on all that, actually. He's the reason I'm here and, by extension, the reason you're here. Not that you'd know that. But that's what happens when you arrive late to the party! You miss key details. You deprive yourself of context. His name was- no. *Is* David. His name is David. He's the love of my life. And he's dead now. Or- *for now*. I hope.

MICHAEL sits on the lip of the stage, dangling his feet, concrete wall be damned.

The day I met David comes to my mind in gold-tinted still-life's. David basking in the sun, waist-deep in water. The trees shaking with his laughter. The birds going quiet when he spoke. The river flexing and bending around him. That's where we first met- the river.

There's one bordering his families property and mine. I'd take you there myself... but, you know... rules. To reach the stream from David's house- you need only step out the front door and follow the slope of the ground. It's a gentle, downhill, straight shot. David never had to worry over left, right, up, or down. David had his own compass built in. Every path he walked straightened itself beneath his feet. Crooked corners broke their own spines to lay themselves neatly before him. Jagged stones in his way shrunk into the earth like turtle heads. He never walked. The earth moved around him. Not in seismic lurches, but in minute adjustments. Want to know how *I* came to the river? To get to the stream from my house, I had to sneak out my bedroom window and force my way through four and a half miles of unchecked wilderness. My path drove uphill. My path was unpaved and unmarked. At the beginning of things, I had to sweat. I had to tear patches of brush to smithereens with my bare hands. I had to rip stones from earth like pulling molars. My path didn't welcome me. I had to pry it open with blunt force. That was when I thought force was a simple thing. Nothing more than applied pressure with the right leverage. God- I was so stupid. *Am* so stupid. But perhaps that's unfair. I wasn't stupid. I was simple. Ignorant. I know the difference between stupidity and ignorance by now. Sera says while ignorance is a choice, stupidity is forever. In that *one* arena, we are totally agreed. She's smart... and cruel, and spiteful, and rightfully hateful towards me but... she *is* smart. And I *have* made effort! Good progress! I can allow myself that much. I mean- look at you! You're quite the development and I think- I think I called you here. That's what makes this- *us*... special. You're here and I'm here and she doesn't get to butt in. Not yet. You're still all mine and as long as I'm the only one who knows you're down here, then I get to be all yours! Just as you are mine, I am yours. You can't open yourself- *really* open yourself to someone on a one-way street. Love needs a balanced flow or it will shrivel and die at the root. Do you understand?

Beat

You don't talk much, do you? Is that the rule? Silence? I'm not passing judgement either way. Shit- I'd take you as a blaring symphony or a silent spectator- whichever you prefer. Just- God please let you be real. Because if you aren't, I'm just a crazy person talking to the wall. And, if I may, I'm so fucking sick and tired of seeing things that aren't there. Hearing things too. It's exhausting. Sera says that auditory hallucinations are a sign the process is opening itself up to me. And I've had plenty of those. I mean- I hear things sometimes. That's been pretty constant. Sometimes it's my own voice, sometimes it's David's. I prefer the latter by far. She hasn't mentioned anything about visual hallucinations, though. Nope. Not a word on mirages. Nothing to prepare me for you.

Beat

You know what? I'm making a decision. This second- you are real. Real enough for me. Not as corporal as Sera, granted. Or David. Then again- nothing felt realer than David. He was- not was- *is*. David *is* singular in that way. And so, dear compatriot, don't beat

yourself up. You're following a tough act. After I saw David for the first time, the sun looked like a ruddy smear against the sky. After I touched him for the first time, food tasted like ash. And after *he* touched *me*... I mean-

The lights flick on and SERAPHINE reappears at the top of the stairs. She descends, carrying the same metal tray from before bearing a single apple. MICHAEL snaps around to face her.

MICHAEL

Whoa- pudding *and* a whole apple? My cup runneth over.

SERAPHINE

Don't be a brat. I... I'm sorry for snapping at you. I thought this might help.

SERAPHINE holds out the apple to MICHAEL. When he reaches for it, she holds it back.

SERAPHINE

I could be starving you cold turkey. Greater Conduits have managed more. This is a privilege...

SERAPHINE finally gives MICHAEL the apple. He inhales the fruit. Between mouthfuls:

MICHAEL

It's nighttime then?

SERAPHINE

Late twilight.

MICHAEL

What does the sky look like?

SERAPHINE

Beg pardon?

MICHAEL

The sky- what colors tonight?

SERAPHINE

That doesn't concern you.

MICHAEL

Oh, come on-

SERAPHINE

No deal. Imagining the outside counts as a distraction.

MICHAEL stands in a huff.

MICHAEL

Never mind me, then. *Thank you* for going to the trouble of grabbing one apple and walking the colossal five feet from your backdoor. What *ever* would I do without your warm help and guidance-

SERAPHINE holds her right hand aloft as though sifting through the air for an invisible drawstring. She finds one, winds it around her fingers, and pulls tight. MICHAEL's voice cuts off suddenly. He flounders for a moment, clutching at his throat, his eyes bugging out of his head, his face slowly turning blue. SERAPHINE releases the invisible string and MICHAEL can breathe again.

MICHAEL

(Through gasps) What... the FUCK... was that...

SERAPHINE

A reminder of who's in charge of whom. You willful, ungrateful, naive little wart. Now, if you're done giving guff, I'll take your leavings.

SERAPHINE goes to the space behind the stairs and stops short. She approaches the larger of the two plastic buckets, her face hardening.

SERAPHINE

You're dehydrated.

SERAPHINE snatches up the bucket and sloshes around the meager contents.

SERAPHINE

What did I say about maintaining your strength? Did you even finish your tea?

MICHAEL

I had a no-thank-you sip.

SERAPHINE

Excuse you?

MICHAEL

I said I had a no-thank-you sip. Then I poured the rest out and watched it evaporate to pass the time.

SERAPHINE

Alright. The hard way, then.

SERAPHINE takes up the hose and screws it into the water spigot.

MICHAEL

No, I'm sorry- don't- I'm only tired. I'll drink more I swear I-

She presents the mouth of the hose to MICHAEL.

SERAPHINE

You'll drink now.

MICHAEL stays rooted to the spot.

SERAPHINE

You may drink freely or I can force the hose down your throat and turn the water on full blast. What'll it be?

MICHAEL considers this, then accepts the hose.

SERAPHINE turns the water on low and MICHAEL drinks.

SERAPHINE

There, see? Not so awful... you're no good to me as a husk.

MICHAEL

I thought that was the point. Why am I fasting, then?

SERAPHINE

Fasting is not wasting away. There *is* a difference. If the approach is informed, as mine is, there is no danger. But my approach says drink your tea when I give it to you. Without those nutrients, you will crash. A true ascetic deprives themselves gradually. The body can't live on thought alone.

MICHAEL

Is that what I am? An... I'm sorry- *aesthete*?

SERAPHINE

Ascetic. One who abstains from all forms of indulgence. It's a Buddhist practice in origin. The most devout and committed monks achieved Nirvana through bodily deprivation and solitary meditation.

MICHAEL

So... self-starvation.

SERAPHINE

With clarity of intent. Suffering for suffering's sake does us no good.

MICHAEL

Well- I'm still waiting on Nirvana. When does the cosmic enlightenment hit?

SERAPHINE

We aren't after Nirvana... when you're ready we'll call upon something much better. Deeper and more infinite.

MICHAEL

David?

SERAPHINE's face hardens.

MICHAEL

You still hate the sound of his name in my mouth. That's okay... I can't exactly blame you...

SERAPHINE

David... my son is the most precious thing I've ever created. He is my miracle and I want him back. I won't fault him for his... involvement with you. He was a slave to his desires. As are we all.

MICHAEL

He *did* love me-

SERAPHINE

Enough... please.

MICHAEL

We're going to have to talk about him eventually.

SERAPHINE

Not tonight. Just... drink the tea next time. The apple should do you fine until morning. I meant it when I said I wasn't poisoning you. I could have turned you into the police the night you came to me. Soaked to the bone and crying like a lost puppy.

MICHAEL

But you didn't.

SERAPHINE

No- because I am a charitable soul and a good mother. I bless you with the miraculous chance to right your wrongs. How many get such an opportunity? Your... shared connection with my son- whatever you want to call it-

MICHAEL

I would call it love-

SERAPHINE

Whatever. The bond you shared while he lived may be just what we need. I make no guarantees but maybe...

MICHAEL

And... what exactly tells us it's time to move on? What sign are you waiting for?

Beat

SERAPHINE

It's called a Witness. You'll know it when you see it. *Then* we can get this show on the road.

MICHAEL

...right.

SERAPHINE

You're certain you've only spoken with yourself? I keep hearing at the door-

MICHAEL

I'm sure. May I ask one more question?

SERAPHINE

Perhaps...

MICHAEL

How long have I been down here?

SERAPHINE

Seventy three days, I think. Nearly a full season. Will that be all?

MICHAEL

...Yes.

SERAPHINE disappears up the stairs, turns off the lights, and shuts the door. MICHAEL waits for her footsteps to fade, then crawls up the steps and presses his nose to the underside of the door.

MICHAEL

I can smell trees. *Jesus*... and earth. It just rained. Can't you smell it? I love ozone-

SERAPHINE's footsteps return. MICHAEL scrambles back to his place. SERA returns with a second mug of tea. This time, the tea comes in a recognizable bag, the kind with a vague proverb on the tag. She offers the drink wordlessly, MICHAEL accepts.

SERAPHINE

Just chamomile and lavender... with a splash of honey. On David's life.

MICHAEL

Okay...

MICHAEL inspects the tag.

MICHAEL

"Never underestimate the help of a kind stranger." Huh.

SERAPHINE

Just drink. If it would make you more comfortable, I'll only use store-bought from now on. No more garden variety mystery mix.

MICHAEL

Well... thank you. I appreciate that.

SERAPHINE

You're welcome. Please stay strong. As resolved as possible. Where we're going, every ounce of strength counts.

MICHAEL

I will... I swear.

SERAPHINE

That's more like it. Now take your rest- you'll thank me later.

SERAPHINE turns to leave.

MICHAEL

I- I think we're getting close to something. I feel it in my bones.

SERAPHINE

(Turning) Oh?

MICHAEL

I mean- I can't be sure but... soon. I think.

SERAPHINE

Have your auditory hallucinations made the jump to visual?

MICHAEL

...not yet.

Beat

SERAPHINE

I'll come back at dawn. Keep an eye out. My Witness took months to manifest. You can never know when... you can only be ready when it comes. When the time comes, greet yours with glad tidings and thankful deference. It is a blessing to be visited.

SERAPHINE departs. MICHAEL sips his tea.

LIGHTS DIM.

LATER THAT NIGHT.

MICHAEL lays in his cot under the stairs.

BECCA (OFF)

Hey killer...

MICHAEL stirs.

BECCA (OFF)

Wakey-wakey... Miiichael...

BECCA appears. Her face is devoid of blood and her wet entrails dangle about her knees, swaying with each step. She watches Michael dozing for a time, then slowly approaches the head of the cot. She leans down to whisper in his ear.

BECCA

Morning, sunshine.

MICHAEL starts awake, takes in his guest, and rolls over.

MICHAEL

Go. The fuck. Away.

BECCA

We need to talk.

MICHAEL

(I guess we're doing this) What do you want, Becs? You're not supposed to be here.

BECCA

And yet... *(she twirls on the spot)*... here I am.

MICHAEL

No- you're nowhere. Dead people are nowhere.

BECCA

If I'm nowhere, you're right there with me. Is this nowhere?

MICHAEL

No- this my home and you are / an intruder-

BECCA notices the WITNESS.

Oh! You're entertaining.

MICHAEL

Wait- you can see them?

BECCA

I mean... it's kind of impossible to miss them.

MICHAEL

What do they look like to you?

BECCA

Like... you know those photographs of crocodile congregations at night? All those glowing eyes hovering along the water... kinda like that.

MICHAEL

Right.

BECCA

Aren't you going to introduce me?

MICHAEL

Sera can't see them. How can you?

BECCA

Just special like that, I guess. *(To WITNESS) Hiiii-*

MICHAEL

They're not here for you.

BECCA

Don't be rude. It's important to allow them to form their own first impressions. That's key in a healthy and balanced- oh for FUCK'S SAKE eyes up here.

MICHAEL

Sorry! I'm sorry- it's just... your insides are-

BECCA

It's just guts, Michael. You've got em too. Get over it. And you *really* don't need to remind me what I look like.

MICHAEL

Doesn't it hurt?

BECCA

What do you think? What I feel now- it never stops. Pain doesn't go away when we die. You just get better at managing it. Am I really so awful to behold?

MICHAEL

Yes.

BECCA

Ouch...

MICHAEL

How do you keep getting in?

BECCA

I came down the chimney, killer- Ho... ho... ho.

MICHAEL

That's not funny.

BECCA

The Santa bit? I don't know I thought it was / kinda-

MICHAEL

I mean stop calling me killer. It's unfair-

BECCA

Am I wrong?

MICHAEL

No- you don't understand. There is so much you don't understand- that *I* don't understand! You were an accident- that much I'm sure of.

BECCA

I don't know- felt pretty intentional to me. By the by, I never got an apology from you. I thought that was your specialty. There's the initial wronging, of course, but you've always *excelled* at repentance. You give good reformed sinner-

MICHAEL

I did say I was sorry you were just- well...

BECCA

Too dead to hear it?

MICHAEL

I- I suppose yes.

BECCA

I'm listening now...

MICHAEL

Well... I'm sorry! Happy? Appeased? Ready to float into the light?

BECCA

That was a shit apology. Come on- I thought we'd already learned this- a good apology consists of three parts: an admittance of fault, the words "*I'm sorry*," and a commitment to change. So... why are you sorry?

MICHAEL is silent.

BECCA

What did you do to me?

MICHAEL

It was an accident-

BECCA

Denial! Textbook! (*Lightbulb*) I know! I have just the thing to jog your memory. Stay there... don't move a muscle.

MICHAEL

No! No- leave it!

BECCA disappears into the darkness and returns dragging the plastic bag behind her.

BECCA

You keep kicking me into the corner. Why?

MICHAEL

Because I don't like to look at y- *at it*. Please- it stinks.

BECCA

Oh no! Does my corpse smell like a corpse? Is that hard for you?

MICHAEL

It is, actually! It's a distraction. Why are you here, Beccs?

BECCA

Just my way, I guess. You dig yourself a nice deep hole to get stuck in and then I arrive on cue to fish you out. Except for when I get stuck with you. I'm beginning to think you have a death wish.

MICHAEL

The work I'm doing here is the farthest thing from death. This is a life-giving place- this is where we restore- where we amend. I'm trying to grant new life.

BECCA

Just not mine.

MICHAEL

I am trying to make things right here! But I can't do that if you keep showing up and ruining my sleep. Sera says I need my strength-

BECCA

Oh! Maybe I'm your Marley!

MICHAEL

My what?

BECCA

You know! Jacob Marley! The first spirit to come calling. I show up, rattle my chains, tell you to change your ways... then fuck off from whence I came.

MICHAEL

No- no- nope. Marley didn't pay repeat visits. Whatever metaphor you're driving at, I reject it.

MICHAEL flops back and smothers his face in his pillow.

BECCA

Scared of the Big Three?

MICHAEL

Please let me sleep.

BECCA

No... no, I think I'm onto something here. See- I never finished the book proper... but there are plenty of movies. Marley is the scout. The harbinger, if you will. You still have Christmas Past, Present, and Future on the way, killer.

MICHAEL chucks his pillow at BECCA.

MICHAEL

Stop calling me that!

Beat

BECCA

I wish I could even try to hide the disgust I feel when I look at you. It's the kind of loathing that only comes from knowing someone at their best, only to have them turn around and serve you a steaming pile of their worst. *(She sits at the foot of the cot).* You know what always bothered me about Marley?

MICHAEL

I have no fucking idea but I have a feeling you're about to / tell m-

BECCA

So Scrooge gets this big redemptive arc, right? He learns the error of his ways and gets to live out the rest of his days this happy, jolly, generous man. He's completely forgiven. Reformed and beloved by all. Scrooge gets to be happy. What about Marley? What's his reward for jumpstarting the whole process? *Nothing.* Marley gets fucked. As far as I'm concerned, Charles Dickens is a sadist.

MICHAEL

See- but Marley already committed his crimes. He was being punished for his wrongs.

BECCA

And what crime did I commit?

Beat

BECCA

Yeah. That's what I thought.

BECCA rises and moves to the bloody sack.

BECCA

In the meantime... here's a token of our undying friendship. *(She kicks the sack forward.)* Like it?

MICHAEL

Becca... if I could take it all away... I swear I-

BECCA

Sounds like a you problem. *(Indicating the bag)* It's all yours to look after now... *(As she leaves, to the WITNESS).* Be seeing you-

MICHAEL

DON'T TALK TO THEM.

Beat

MICHAEL

I'm... I think I'm preparing for something big. Or *being* prepared and they're part of it.

BECCA

Does Sera know yet?

MICHAEL

I'm going to tell her soon... I think. Right after I get rid of this-

The instant MICHAEL touches the sack, it screams bloody murder and thrashes against the floor. MICHAEL stumbles back as BECCA fades away.

BECCA (OFF)

Rest up, killer...

LIGHTS OUT.

AT RISE:

MICHAEL wakes gasping. He is back in his cot shivering with cold sweat. BECCA is gone, but the bloody bag is exactly where she left it.

MICHAEL

(To WITNESS) Fuck- bad dream. That was Becca... and that- *(Indicating the bloody sack)* -is an eyesore. I'm so sorry- I should have warned you. You didn't sign up for that. Just a tick-

MICHAEL edges towards the bag. When he touches it this time, it doesn't scream.

MICHAEL

-oh thank fuck.

He replaces the bag behind the wall-mounted cage. Tucked as out of sight as he can manage. As he walks back to the cot, the bag begins to whimper and shake. MICHAEL plugs his ears.

MICHAEL

No! Lalalalalalalalala! Can't hear a thing, Beccs! Scream all you want, I'm not listening!

The bag falls silent.

There- that's better. Just a little willpower's all it takes. Applied pressure. Again- just so sorry you had to see that. I was hoping she'd stop appearing after you came. Apparently not... so now you've met Becca! Isn't that just fantastic. I can't keep anything to myself, can I? But maybe that's the blessing of you. You're here to challenge me in that way. All right... I can see the value in that. I can be challenged. Let's have it all out.

Beat

Becca was the greatest person I ever knew. She saved my life just by virtue of being in it. Do you know anyone like that? Someone who holds you together without even knowing it? She started paying me nightly visits after I ripped her guts out with my bare hands.

Beat

Marley stays in Hell... I think that's what she meant. (*Stomach churns*) Fuck- I'm gonna be sick.

MICHAEL rushes to his buckets and dry heaves. Slowly, he regains his composure, is suddenly struck with a wonderful idea, and rushes back to the cot.

Hey- it's okay... I'd never hurt you. You know that, right? Can I share something big? It's what I do when I'm feeling down. Becca gets to smear herself across the floor every night but I've got an ace up my sleeve. Here-

MICHAEL searches the inside of his pillow case, and fishes out an crumpled envelope.

MICHAEL

David wrote this to me the night we broke up... the first time. He left it on my windowsill. Isn't that sweet? He's so thoughtful that way. Okay-

MICHAEL opens the envelope and reads aloud from a well-worn scrap of paper.

Michael,

I don't know if I'll ever be able to describe what I feel for you. How I feel for you. It's like a current in me I never knew I had. When I lay in bed at night, I think of you and feel this charge run through me that alleviates all doubt, questioning, and fear. There is so much love in me- I just don't know quite how to give it away yet. How to give it to you. I am so so so sorry for today. Know that my intention was not to hurt or to scare you. I could not harm you if I were ordered to do so at gunpoint. You are so precious to me. I want to die when I think of how you must hate me. How you must fear me.

I'll be waiting all day at our place tomorrow. No more baptism talk. On my life. If I could just explain, I think this could be something we laugh about really soon.

I love you... I know I don't say it as often as you want or deserve, but I love you I love you I love you. Please don't give up on this. I can't.

All my heart,

-David

MICHAEL refolds the letter.

MICHAEL

There, you see? Sweet. Kind. Remorseful. David was all of the good stuff in spades. An unreasonable amount of decency crammed into one body- it's a wonder he didn't burst out of his skin with the stuff.

MICHAEL returns the letter to its' hiding spot.

MICHAEL

I want- or at least I think I want you to meet him. So badly- I think. It's the only way to properly understand. His words come out of my mouth all wrong and I just know I will come up short every time if I try to tell it all myself. But if you met him... if you knew him... would you like that? If you promise not to leave me partway through, I think I can bring you miracles. The only snare is I'm afraid your anonymity is out. I wanted to protect you from her but I get the sense she'd be thrilled to know about you! You're necessary. Not only that- I think you're the active ingredient. She won't hurt you. I'd never let that happen. But mostly, to be frank, I'm sick of sitting still.

Beat

Thank you for this one on one time. Or- one on many, rather. It means more than you can ever or will ever know. But I'm ready to get on with things now.

MICHAEL goes to the wall and pulls the bell cord.
Above the greenhouse floorboards, a bell rings.
MICHAEL rings the bell a few more times for good measure then readies himself on the cot criss-cross applesauce.

MICHAEL

Okay. Here we go. If anything bad happens from here on out, it's my head- not yours. All of it. Every last piece of it is on me. I absolve you of any blame, and afford you all deniability. Just... please don't leave me now. Don't... evaporate or anything.

Footsteps from above. The florescent lights flare on, the cellar door opens, and SERAPHINE descends. She is barefoot and wearing a white night gown. Her hair hangs loose down her back.

SERAPHINE

What's happened?

MICHAEL points at the wall. SERAPHINE understands.

SERAPHINE

It's come?

MICHAEL

They... it's a they.

SERAPHINE

They? You called in- I'm... one moment-

SERAPHINE moves to the fourth wall. To her- a barren slab of concrete.

SERAPHINE

Here?

MICHAEL

Yes.

SERAPHINE

(Indicating another spot) And here?

MICHAEL

There. And there. Also there.

SERAPHINE

Well...

SERAPHINE slumps down onto the cot.

MICHAEL

Is that bad?

SERAPHINE

Bad? I would have gladly taken a wisp of a sign at the rate you were progressing but *this...* (*She pulls MICHAEL close, holding him by the shoulders.*) A multitudinous presence, or *Legion*, is a vastly rare and beautiful thing. They are once-a-century occurrences and a Conduit of your pedigree has no business being able to call one in. Michael. If you are lying to me on *any* front; about your history with my son, your experience with this line of work... any of it. Now is the time to come clean.

MICHAEL

No- Sera I swear. I'm not lying- I don't know what's happening. Please- I don't understand-

SERAPHINE seizes MICHAEL by the throat and pulls his face to hers. She searches his eyes... and doesn't find what she wants.

SERAPHINE

You... (*Releasing him*) in that case, have either the greatest beginner's luck in the history of mankind or...

MICHAEL

Or?

SERAPHINE

Or my son misses you very *very* dearly.

MICHAEL

What?

SERAPHINE snaps back to the wall.

SERAPHINE

How large? Can you tell?

MICHAEL

Many. I think. Their eyes are the brightest parts and... and I see many eyes.

SERAPHINE

Miraculous...

SERAPHINE embraces MICHAEL as though he were her own. He does not reciprocate. She pulls away and returns to inspecting the fourth wall.

SERAPHINE

Incredible... exceedingly so... OH! But this changes the whole approach. It changes everything.

MICHAEL

This is definitely a stupid question but-

SERAPHINE

No- I cannot see them.

MICHAEL

Why?

SERAPHINE

They aren't mine to see. Do you understand what you've pulled off here? *This...* this is Old Testament. To summon a Legion- a whole *Host* on your first try... as a male attempting a traditionally female rite. Jiminy Christmas, Michael. It seems you've some mettle after all.

MICHAEL

So... what is does a Witness typically look like?

SERAPHINE

Customarily, they are singular. Mine was.

MICHAEL

What did it look like?

SERAPHINE

My Witness presented itself in feminine form. Eyes like lamps guiding me down.

MICHAEL

But why singular? What makes the difference?

SERAPHINE

We do not control such matters. The role of the Conduit is to drive their body and soul into scant starvation to the point of death rattles. The call is heard, and what comes comes. The last recorded instance of a Legion manifestation was over one hundred and thirty two years ago.

MICHAEL

That's... whoa... *(He slumps to the ground, cradling his head)* That's a lot.

SERAPHINE

Ready for more?

MICHAEL

Not even remotely-

SERAPHINE

If they are truly here then we are fated to succeed. David's as good as ours already-come... come.

SERAPHINE kneels beside MICHAEL and takes his head in her lap.

SERAPHINE

The next step can't wait. Alright, Michael? We must press on. You will learn the incantations. Draw the seals. My... we really are doing this.

MICHAEL

Incantations? It's a ritual then! Or- some sort of / spell?

SERAPHINE

-Soon! I promise. But first- do you reaffirm that whatever I ask of you moving forward, you will obey without question or hesitation?

MICHAEL

Yes.

SERAPHINE

No matter what you see, hear, smell, taste, or touch, you will not leave this place until our work is done?

MICHAEL

Of course. Anything.

SERAPHINE

Swear it.

MICHAEL

On my life-

SERAPHINE

Your life is forfeit from here on in and holds little potency. Swear on his.

MICHAEL

On David's life. I swear it.

SERAPHINE

That's the ticket.

SERAPHINE extends her hand. MICHAEL shakes it. A silence.

MICHAEL

So... we have an excess of Witness. I'm seeing things, hearing things, and I don't quite believe anything is real anymore... what next?

SERAPHINE stands and moves to the cot. MICHAEL crawls along behind.

SERAPHINE

As we move deeper down, understand this: it will be agony before it becomes transcendent. Thankfully, agony is bodily in nature and can be dealt with. The real friction will be deeper down. Pain, elation, loss, heartache, all of it is a deeply fallible mixture of chemicals your body shoots itself up with to conceptualize the waking hallucination that is what you know as reality. Let it go. All of it. We work in numbness here. Free yourself of your name, your identity, your body, your sex, your spirit. Where we go, only vacant vessels leave unscathed. Close your eyes.

MICHAEL does so.

SERAPHINE

Do you know what you want?

MICHAEL

...yes.

SERAPHINE

Speak it aloud...

MICHAEL

David... I want him back.

SERAPHINE

Good... our rite will only open to a singular, focused wish. Hold David in your mind's eye.

When we begin, your spirit will sense danger, recoil from the source, and turn inward. We must not allow this to happen. More experienced Conduits than you or I have entered the Circles with unsure hearts and been torn to pieces... do you doubt me?

MICHAEL

No Ma'am.

SERAPHINE

Good. Still thinking of him?

MICHAEL

Yes.

SERAPHINE

Make him as real as possible. Retrace every line of his face. His body. Recall the sound of his voice... his smell... his touch...

MICHAEL concentrates, his face softening as he remembers.

SERAPHINE

As you near him, notice what holds you back. Your name... your memories... your bloodline... let it all pass like weather. Your friends, your father, your mother... watch them fade to nothing.

MICHAEL strains against these instructions and opens his eyes.

MICHAEL

Wait- what do my parents have to do with any of / this-

SERAPHINE

In this line of work, attachments get you killed.

MICHAEL

I only have one memory of her as it is... one image.

SERAPHINE

No one's taking anything from you, Michael. You're giving freely. It all has to go. Like it or lump it, she's taking up space we need.

MICHAEL

But... she wasn't even there to begin with! Not really. What danger does that pose? There aren't any attachments... nothing real, anyways.

SERAPHINE

How do you mean?

Beat

She passed. Didn't she.

MICHAEL

Good guess.

SERAPHINE

(Shrugging) Had a feeling. How did she die?

MICHAEL

She... er... I'm sorry- is this really necessary?

SERAPHINE

You signed a blood oath.

MICHAEL

Well, she- um... yeah. She died giving birth to me.

Beat

SERAPHINE

I see. How did you find out?

MICHAEL

Dad told me when I was twelve. The company line *had* been she died in a car crash. Not so, turns out.

SERAPHINE

Childbirth is no small feat. It's no one's fault, you know.

MICHAEL

It was me-

SERAPHINE

That's a false equivalence. Tell me more... about the pregnancy, if you can.

Beat

MICHAEL

Well... she had difficulties. They both did. Dad told me that bit when I turned seventeen... the night we started drinking together, incidentally. He said they tried for years... IVF, hormone treatment. But nothing worked until me. Dad told me that the moment I was born she held me up high so she could see all of me at once. Said she laughed when she saw my face... cried when she heard my voice. She called me her miracle.

SERAPHINE

You made her very happy.

MICHAEL

I ripped her in half. I'm sorry- can we talk about something else? I'm still not seeing how this helps-

SERAPHINE

It's profoundly illuminating, actually. And it does explain your beginner's luck- if only in part. You took root in seemingly barren soil-

MICHAEL

Excuse / you?

SERAPHINE

-Let me finish. You were borne of a deficient womb-

MICHAEL

Stop it-

SERAPHINE

I will not. Bearing a life through pain- through violence... it's phenomenally potent. All that power, all that *love* has to go somewhere. Your mother's dying moments were gazing upon her first-borne. That current does not dissipate, Michael.

MICHAEL

I'm done having this conversation-

SERAPHINE

Such a messy beginning to a new life. I wonder how it felt-

MICHAEL

I SAID STOP-

SERAPHINE

INTERRUPTING. I meant how it felt for *you*- not for her. Don't be macabre.

MICHAEL

So... what? My dead mom makes me magic? How does that help us?

SERAPHINE

Because... with considerable strain... we are going to enact a rite of fertility.

MICHAEL

...Pardon?

SERAPHINE

It is an ancient rite of tremendous power... so old it's original name was lost generations before us. I first encountered it tending to my mother while she made her second attempt. Her mistake. I was very small and shielded from the worst of it, thankfully, but I fell asleep outside her locked door to the sound of her screaming every night for two months straight. Give or take a week. That second attempt killed her, but I've learned a great deal from the notes she left behind. We will not make her mistakes.

MICHAEL

And... what is the express purpose of- of this... this...

SERAPHINE

Ritual, if you like. And... well, this is where we greet the unknown together. The magic is, traditionally speaking, and, in accordance with every last scrap of first-hand knowledge I could dig up from my old crowd, a distinctly feminine magic. Your male body and spirit introduce a number of variables. Not unmanageable, but enough to mark this little venture of ours as historic in every sense of the word. When the rite is completed as prescribed by a female conduit, the result is new life. The first time my mother enacted the ritual, it was to conceive me.

MICHAEL

Oh... wait- *wh-*

SERAPHINE

She struggled to bear as yours did. But she was a steely woman... hard-edged and not one to be told no, even by her own body. She was guided by her mother and, with some essential ingredients from my father, enacted the very process we are going to attempt now. She was successful once, hence my being here to guide you.

MICHAEL

And... what went wrong the second time... you said you tended her while-

SERAPHINE

She got greedy and paid the due price.

MICHAEL

Okay... so... is this the part where we light a bonfire and dance naked for the devil?

SERAPHINE

Heavens no- you're thinking of a Sabbath. Fertility invocations are a whole different puzzle. Now come- I can't move this on my own.

SERAPHINE guides MICHAEL to the bathtub under the stairs, which they drag centerstage together. MICHAEL watches as SERAPHINE busies herself hooking the hose up to the water spigot.

MICHAEL

I stink.

SERAPHINE

Of course you do. But it's not that kind of bath.

SERAPHINE turns on the water and begins to fill the tub.

SERAPHINE

Alright. In.

MICHAEL

Why?

SERAPHINE

Water acts as a natural amplifier and insulating shield. Now- in you hop. Spit-spot.

MICHAEL removes his shirt and pants. He stands in his underwear, his arms wrapped around himself. As he turns to step into the tub, the WITNESS can see his naked back for the first time. It is a patchwork of purple-black welts and lacerations. MICHAEL dips a toe into the water, shivers, then sits down. Through chattering teeth:

MICHAEL

Holy sh- I mean- wow-

SERAPHINE

Not a word about my water- I witched it myself. David helped me dig the well, actually. Just let yourself acclimate. The first thirty seconds are the toughest.

They wait in silence.

MICHAEL

(To WITNESS) Don't look so smug.

SERAPHINE

Excuse me?

MICHAEL

Sorry- not you. Them. Won't happen again.

SERAPHINE

No- chatter away. Your Witness is your Witness. It's partly why they're there anyways.

MICHAEL

How did yours come? Your Witness, I mean.

SERAPHINE

She appeared to me in dreams for weeks before materializing. Scared me half to death... but only for a moment. She was kind. She comforted me through the whole ordeal.

MICHAEL

Would she speak with you?

SERAPHINE

Not with words. Not exactly. What about yours?

MICHAEL

Pretty tight-lipped thus far... I hope that isn't bad...

SERAPHINE

I'd call it a great blessing. Legions are a whole other enchilada. If they all tried to speak at once, you'd go mad in seconds.

MICHAEL

Got it... great. *(He pantomime shh's the WITNESS.)* So... Witnesses don't stick around? You said you miss yours...

SERAPHINE

They remain until their purpose is fulfilled. Then, as all things must, they end. Alright- that should be enough.

SERAPHINE turns off the water, helps MICHAEL out of the tub, and offers him a towel.

SERAPHINE

You can put your clothes back on.

MICHAEL does as he's told. SERAPHINE sits in the center of the floor. When MICHAEL finishes changing, he joins her.

SERAPHINE

In order to call on David's spirit from such a distance, we're going to need noise. We'll need to raise a racket to harrow Hell itself, understand?

MICHAEL

Sure... wait- is David in Hell?

SERAPHINE

I doubt he knows it by that name but for our purposes, yes. Hell. The Great Beyond and Underneath. Tartarus, Hades, Abaddon; whatever you'd prefer.

MICHAEL

Okay... so how do we make noise? Trumpets?

SERAPHINE

Not that kind of noise. Think of it like this: David's natural inclination towards you in life makes you a viable lure for his spirit. That's my hope, at least. We're going to cover your spirit in bells and cymbals, cast you into the liminal ether on the longest fishing line we can string, and cross our fingers. If he wants to find you, which I suspect he does, he will be waiting for you inside.

MICHAEL

And... I'll be able to see him again?

Beat

SERAPHINE

Let's cross that bridge when we get there. *If* we get there. For now- take this.

SERAPHINE produces a blunt stick of chalk out of her overall pocket and hands it to MICHAEL.

SERAPHINE

Draw three concentric circles on the floor. Allow for space in between each ring. Enough for you to freely lie down inside each. Think bullseye.

MICHAEL takes the chalk and draws three concentric circles on the floor.

While he works, SERAPHINE produces a ring of keys from her pocket and opens the cage in the corner. MICHAEL cannot help but crane around her to catch a glimpse inside. Inside the cage, SERAPHINE selects a worn leather book and reemerges. Once MICHAEL completes the Circles:

MICHAEL

Okay so... now what?

SERAPHINE inspects MICHAEL'S work, and gives a gruff nod.

SERAPHINE

Listen well. I'm only explaining this once...

SERAPHINE stands at the edge of the outer-most circle, moving inwards as she speaks.

SERAPHINE

The Rite of the Circles, in short and as simply as possible, unlocks memory. Memory, in turn, unlocks time. Three Circles. Three trials. Three gates to unlock. Three paths to connect and join within yourself. The Circle of Fear-

SERAPHINE steps into the first Circle.

MICHAEL

Cool. Fear... not daunting at all.

SERAPHINE

The Circle of Delight...

SERAPHINE steps into the second Circle.

MICHAEL

Oh... well that one doesn't sound so bad-

SERAPHINE

And finally, Wrath.

SERAPHINE steps into the third and smallest Circle.

MICHAEL

Oh, of course. Okay... Fear, Delight, Wrath...

SERAPHINE

One, two, three...

MICHAEL

What happens when I step inside? Like- when it starts.

SERAPHINE

Until we activate the Circles, nothing.

MICHAEL

And how will we know when the Circles are activated?

SERAPHINE

You will know. They love to make an entrance. Alright- kindly step back, please. Watch and listen closely. I will light the way this one time. Next time, it'll be your turn... if you survive that long, that is.

MICHAEL

You should be a nurse- you're so caring.

SERAPHINE

Hush- I need to concentrate.

SERAPHINE lowers her head begins rocking herself on the floor. A fugue state takes hold of her. Somewhere between a trance and a nightmare. The sound of rushing water gurgling up from very far below whispers through the bunker. SERAPHINE shudders, bowing to an invisible force, then speaks with a voice that is not entirely her own.

SERAPHINE

I bleed that I may be emptied. I am emptied that I may be filled anew. I bleed that I may be emptied. I am emptied that I may be filled anew. Avage ayer Dantalion on ca... Avage ayer Dantalion on ca... Avage ayer Dantalion on ca...

The sound of rushing water comes closer. Like an aquifer rupturing and making it's first desperate surges for the surface. SERAPHINE keels forward and persists:

SERAPHINE

AVAGE AYER DANTALION ON CA AVAGE AYER DANTALION-

The circles begin to shimmer. MICHAEL staggers back as SERAPHINE smiles to herself. A bright light, pulsing with the rhythm of MICHAEL's elevated heart rate colors the air inside the circles. The thrumming light gathers itself, then, with force enough to knock SERAPHINE and MICHAEL on their backs, explodes upwards and outwards. The Circles now present themselves in full, ringed by a circular curtain of iridescence flowing down from above and up from below all at once.

MICHAEL

Wow...

SERAPHINE crawls to the outermost edge of the Circles and bows.

SERAPHINE

He's near! Can you feel it? Come closer- you'll see.

MICHAEL approaches. He reaches out to the light as though magnetized. SERAPHINE seizes his hand.

SERAPHINE

No! Do not tease the edges until you are ready to be swallowed whole.

MICHAEL

(To WITNESS) We're all seeing this, right?

SERAPHINE

The Circles represent an in-between space. Each is a gateway into the mind of whomsoever ventures inside. When David arrives, *if* he arrives, your mind, body, and soul must be severed of all ties binding you to this plane. That means your Mother. You said you've only one memory of her?

MICHAEL

Yeah... just an image. But there's other stuff. My dad, my house, my bedroom... the woods leading up to the river. School... birthday parties...

SERAPHINE

Good. Prepare to lose more. Learn to love the feeling of being ripped to pieces because that is the only way I can think to describe what I felt the first time I accessed the Circles.

Like iron talons shredding through rice paper. Agony... building to ecstasy... cresting into divine release.

MICHAEL is silent.

MICHAEL

I don't know, Sera...

SERAPHINE

Losing your nerve?

MICHAEL

I... I don't know- what about David's body? How will he-

SERAPHINE

Never mind the organic matter- we'll have time enough for that later. I will not force you. You can still turn around now. In fact, if there is any remaining piece of you that is not prepared to be wholly consumed, leave now. Go back to your house... to your little life as you left it. Remind yourself what the world looks like again. See the sky. Move on. Forget him. And then wait for the police to find you and shut you away in some concrete box where you will languish for the rest of your days. You may retain your precious memories but you will die wondering what could have been if you'd stayed. *Or*. Perhaps you are capable of all this and so much more.

MICHAEL looks up to the open cellar door, perhaps beyond the glass ceiling of the greenhouse to the night sky. Then he stares down the column of light that is the Circles.

MICHAEL

No. Leaving him isn't an option. I'm ready- but... can I say something stupid? Before?

SERAPHINE

By all means.

MICHAEL

I didn't understand how sick of living I was until I met your son. I know you don't want to hear about him- especially from me but- but he was so *good* to me, Sera. And kind and... and *open*. To everything. He taught me how asleep I'd always been and, in a way, I think this is how it's all meant to be. How it's always been meant to be. This... whatever it is... I was born for it. I'm the Conduit... and I'm still in love. I'm in love and this is how I prove it. I can do this. (*To WITNESS*). I *can* do this. I can do this I can do this / I can do this I can do this I can do this I can-

SERAPHINE

Straight in, Michael. Think on David and keep your breath about you. Whatever happens, I'm right beside you. Now.

MICHAEL takes a running start at the veil of light, passes the threshold, and drops like a brick. The Circles sense an intruder, shudder, and begin to exert their own gravity. SERAPHINE watches on as MICHAEL begins to twitch, squirm, then writhe with agony. An inhuman wail escapes his mouth.

SERAPHINE

That's it, Michael! Stop resisting... let go... it's all passing over like weather, that's all. Just weather...

The sound of rushing water builds, magnifying and transforming into the roar of tectonic plates colliding. MICHAEL screams once more and darkness consumes all.

END OF ACT I