

## The Candles in the Room

The locomotive announced its arrival with the screech of chafing metal, and in its hurry almost missed the stop. When it halted, the mechanical beast panted clouds of steam, puffing these in quantities that engulfed the backdrop. The engine pulsed some time longer until the noise died down, and then the doors finally slid apart.

A young man dressed in a ragged wool overcoat and a trapper hat stepped onto the platform. He had a suitcase in one hand and a crumpled letter in the other. Around him, families greeted each other with that fabled pre-Christmas timbre: heartfelt hugs, litanies of mundane happenings, doors snapping shut and vehicles driving away with passengers rejoicing in the embrace of warmth.

But nobody came to greet Daniel.

One by one, the crowd dispersed. The comfort of departing company was replaced by an irrational sense of vulnerability.

He felt like a fox in early November.

Somebody should have been here to pick him up already.

*I can't be late for this*, he worried.

The job had been easy to get; after all, winter was a brute to fickle antiques. The advert, a tiny little box at the end of the obituary section, had called for a seasonal handyman for “Mr. Perilsangue’s lodgings”. Daniel was no carpenter, but he was good at solving puzzles. And desperate for money.

There was no proper interview. No red tape. Just a phone call to the number at the bottom of the ad, and after a short conversation with a voice of ambivalent persuasion, Daniel was hired.

A few days later the letter arrived, along with the train tickets.

During the ride he met an old man who claimed to know S. Anguinare Perilsangue personally.

*'He's a retired historian,' the man said. 'Lives in a restored Medieval fortress, he does. Fixed it up himself. Rich to the boot. Colleagues praised his discoveries, bankers celebrated his investments!'* The old man said he had never been to the place himself, but it was rumored to be bigger from inside than the outside. *'I don't see how that's possible, but there you go. I don't know what to think of it, but rumors have to start from some sort of truth, I suppose.'*

The man became increasingly concerned that Perilsangue had not enquired about Daniel. *'One should always turn a stranger into an acquaintance before inviting them home.'*

Daniel had no answer for this. Instead, he asked, *'Do you know how long the last handyman's contract lasted?'*

This is when the old man's expression changed. His eyebrows furrowed and he dropped his voice. *'Not long. That is why the vacancy is always free— the same worker is never hired twice.'*

The train doors snapped shut and the locomotive hauled forward with the same cacophony of its arrival. Daniel looked across the parking lot. And then, in between the blizzard, he finally caught a glimpse of a shadow. A white Rolls Royce. The car was veiled by the scenery but the man reclining against the hood wore a black trench coat.

He straightened up and signaled Daniel to hurry.

*'Monsieur Taliguierre? You are late. Please, step inside.'*

Daniel reclined his seat but despite the adjustments the leather felt rigid and uncomfortable. The snowflakes on his coat remained frozen and his face was still numb. "Is it normally this cold during this time of year?"

*'Non.'* The Chauffeur turned the keys and the engine purred.

‘But surely, such blizzards are not the norm. They can’t be, otherwise I would expect to see sleds all around. Mushing has to be popular here?’

The Chauffeur did not bother answering.

For the first ten minutes the drive was very quiet, stillness affixed with an elemental serenity, a silence so soft that even behind glass one could still hear the symphonies of chiming stalactites. The turns were initially sharp, but once they entered the countryside they smoothed down.

‘Mademoiselle Archaïque will be waiting to show you around. It is vital that you know the residence as soon as possible, since Master Perilsangue will expect you to start first thing in the morning.’

Daniel wiped the fog off the window. A flock of ravens skipped across a field. He thought they stained the snow like pepper. ‘It’s so...peaceful. Isn’t it?’

The Chauffeur looked back with a vacant expression, but then, a grin slowly formed at the corner of his mouth. As they turned the corner, he slowed the car down.

The birds’ previous portraiture was now a cluster of tar. They were gathered around a dead fox, and in their ritual they became dancers in a ballet of the macabre. They poked and pecked at the eyes. One was determined to rip the meat from the cadaver, stretching tendons and veins in a ferocious tug of war. The carrion eventually gave way, but the scavenger’s victory was short lived—a hungry rival had been watching. They jumped at each other, soaring and swirling like courtyard children. And others joined, too. Everybody wanted a piece, but nobody was willing to get it themselves.

‘I wholeheartedly agree, Monsieur. Nature is peaceful.’

Daniel felt uneasy. He turned away from the window and straightened his seat. The car sped up, and it was a long time before either of them spoke again.

They took another turn leading them onto a road that gripped a twisted claw around the mountain, spiraling and turning upwards. The higher they drove, the more obstructed the view became. It was not an aggressive blizzard, but one with a certain air of.... subversion. And then, finally, out of the midwinter fog, *it* appeared: the Perilsangue Fortress.

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She stood proud and stalwart with her towers raised high above the ground, her gates protected by three beasts carved in stone. Underneath the middle one was an inscription, but they drove by too fast for Daniel to read it.

At the entrance, an older-looking woman waited, clutching a pocket-watch and following the car with her eyes.

Mademoiselle Archaique took a step forward as they pulled up.

The Chauffeur suddenly gripped Daniel's shoulder. 'Don't be tempted to enter the rooms which are not assigned to you,' he whispered. 'The reward of curiosity is not worth it.'

Before he could clarify, Mademoiselle Archaique opened the door and hurried the guest out. The Chauffeur lowered his gaze, nodded once, and then drove away. She turned to Daniel.

She didn't smile.

'Monsieur Taliguiere?'

He extended a hand. She stared at it, but then shook it with a strong grip. Once up, once down.

'You are late.'

He apologized. 'My trai—'

'Follow me, Monsieur is waiting.'

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The wooden doors shut behind them with echoes that chanted across the corridors like disoriented ghosts. Occasionally another member of staff intersected them, but nobody would make eye contact. Likewise, Mademoiselle Archaïque would not stop for vain conversation. When they reached the end of the Great Hall they climbed up a spiral staircase that led into a narrow corridor. She stopped in front of a large door and knocked lightly, opening it soon after but not entering herself.

‘Monsieur will see you soon,’ she announced.

Daniel stepped into the heat of a grand fireplace. He was alone with the dimness and reverberations of the crackling fire. Ahead, a window exposed the courtyard: bushes cut into patterns and shapes, dead and powdered with snow. Up in the sky, the clouds were a swirl of grey and black.

‘You are Monsieur Taliguierre?’

Daniel recognized the voice at once. It was the one he had spoken to on the phone. Perilsangue stepped out of the shadows with the aid of a cane. He wore small silver-rimmed glasses, and as he approached Daniel saw that half his face was covered in deep burn scars. They shook hands. ‘It is a pleasure to meet you. Please, take a seat near the fire. You must be freezing. We have not had a blizzard like this in years.’

‘You have a remarkable home, Miste—Monsieur. I feel very privileged to be here.’

Perilsangue smiled and took out a folder. As he searched through the papers a maid arrived with tea and pastries. ‘Please,’ he smiled, ‘help yourself. Now, what was it I— aha! here we are.’ He handed out a list of rooms and under each, a handmade drawing of their locations.

‘The fortress was built in 1435, originally intended as an arsenal. The first owner was very devoted to the protection of his monarchs. We believe he was storing weapons in case of an attack against the crown. You see, back then the only way to get to the city was by crossing these mountains.’

He grabbed a pastry and began to fiddle with the crust.

‘Nevertheless, he died early on into the construction. His sons took over, and after these, their sons. Each making their own alterations.’ He pointed at the blueprints.

‘Construction was never fully finished. Over the years each owner kept adding more rooms, removing bridges, rebuilding towers. At first the intention seemed to be to turn it into a residence...but then ownership was granted to a such... Viscount of Ceanz.’

Perilsangue paused and looked into the fire. Crumbs flaked to the ground, the pastry disintegrating in his hands. Suddenly, he stood up.

‘Well, it was a pleasure meeting you. Please accustom yourself with the premises as soon as you can. I am sure we will cross paths one again.’ He placed both his hands over Daniel’s and shook them lightly.

‘I thought Mademoiselle Archaïque would show me around?’

The old man looked up sharply. ‘She will, but you will never remember where the rooms are without the blueprints.’

‘I understand, but I thought the job—’

‘You oughtn’t to question everything! The map doesn’t only tell you what room to go to, but also those you *shouldn’t*. Understood?’

Daniel was taken back by the sudden aggressiveness. He recognized privacy, but thought Perilsangue had no reason to feel threatened. ‘I understand,’ he replied, and folded the papers into his pocket. After a short pause, Perilsangue spoke again. This time, his voice was calmer. ‘I give all my staff the same advice. That includes not going into certain rooms.’

It is a matter of trust, you understand? I've put all my savings into building this, this *sanctuary*. I need people I can trust, and tempting them with curiosity is the best I can do to gain that trust. Words are wonderful. They're exquisite. They can pierce through the toughest of structures: the mind.'

Perilsangue put another log into the already blazing fire. He kneeled beside it and rubbed his hands.

'Are you cold?' he asked, but didn't seem to be addressing Daniel in particular. 'The heating breaks down often.'

'That's a lovely pocket-watch,' Daniel pointed to the chain around Perilsangue's hand.

'It works, too, although I'd still keep it if it didn't. Functionality doesn't always have to be physical.' He paused. 'Time is important because it reminds me of reality. In my own world, time doesn't exist. Without it, there is no stress in living or dying. No deadlines to reach. It is a certain... organized chaos. Is that strange to think?'

Daniel shook his head.

'I am doing my best to create that world. I realize now that I'm retired, I can finally start working. Life is full of horribly beautiful paradoxes; one has only to look. I'm aware I can't always live in my imagination, and so I must come back to reality from...time...to time.' He tapped the watch and smiled.

Perilsangue stood up and extended his hand one last time. "I do wish you all the best in this job; you will be of great help. Just don't wander away from what I told you."

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Outside, Mademoiselle Archaïque was propped up on a chair. She got up and straightened her dress.

They walked through the whole castle in a hurry, every room seeming bigger and every corridor longer than the last. Daniel was begging to understand what the old man had said about how rumors had to start from truths.

At last, they stopped in front of a small door. “This will be your room. This—” she dangled a piece of metal from a bundle of others, “—is the key. It is too late for dinner, but breakfast is served at six. On the clock.” She gave him the keys and opened her mouth to say something else, but in the end restrained herself.

“Goodnight...Monsieur.”

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The nightingales were still slumbering when the castle awoke. The kitchen stirred with workers and the air was heavy with the smells of baked bread. Daniel hurried through breakfast and then tried to find the location of his first task, but the map was as useful as a broken compass. He turned it upside down and in all possible directions but could not find his way. Troubled by failing before starting, he was too busy to notice where he was walking when he knocked into her.

She didn't say anything, but stared back in astonishment. Her eyes were a metallic green and her lips plump and palely tinted. The dress, pressed tightly against her body, a detail that surely could not have made work comfortable, was a worn and faded pink. It was like looking at an influx of frost on prairies of poppies. There was something about her coldness that Daniel could not place.

“I'm so sorry,” he muttered, and walked past her before either could speak again.

She was not the only one he would cross paths with, and not the only one he would ignore. Over the days, the distances from room to room grew larger, the days longer. He never saw the girl again, but the memory still lingered in Daniel's mind, not matter how much he tried to forget her image. She, like all unexpected things in life, was a distraction he didn't need.

Every night he returned to bed exhausted. His clothes became loose and his mood sharp. He began to keep to himself more and more, trying to get on with the tasks just so he could go back to bed to repeat it all again the next day.

Sometimes he wondered if the girl felt the same way.

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That Christmas Eve afternoon was an unfriendly one. Though it stopped snowing, the temperatures had iced the ground. Daniel made his way across the path towards the chapel, sometimes waving away at those who wished him merry holidays.

To either side people chatted hastily, exchanging stories and occasionally singing. Some even wore sleigh bells that jingled every time they stroke the frozen pavement. These were not holiday sounds, they were rackets of labor, each gentle swing a slash of the scythe, every jingling bell a resonance of a hundred roaring cymbals, all fracturing of ice an symphony of crashed mirrors. Daniel rubbed his temples, closed his eyes. He was tired of being tired. Every step was a further chore. This place was so big sometimes he was convinced it needed more than reparations to stay alive.

A gust of wind blew and something plunked on the ice. It was a crow, a young one. It landed on its side, the beak partially buried and the wings flapping in slow motion, like a broken seesaw. Nobody else took notice.

Daniel picked it up and cradled it to his chest.

‘Earlier today I found three of them, frozen in the same place.’ It was the green-eyed girl. She was holding an ice chipper and stood like a soldier.

‘It’s all this wind,’ Daniel replied. ‘It swerves them into the walls. I think this one didn’t hit it so hard, though. I’ll nurse it to health.’

‘It’ll die.’

The bird was panting softly, eyes registering. Though it didn’t struggle, Daniel could feel it fighting back. ‘I’ve healed many birds before,’ he said a little more defiantly. ‘I’ll take care of thi—’

‘It doesn’t matter if you’ve healed a thousand. He’ll die. If he would have hit any other tower, there might have been chance, but he hit *that* one.’

Her eyes switched to the tower the bird had collided with, and then she walked away.

‘So *that* is the haunted tower? It was about time. I was afraid they had cheated me of the ghost stories.’

She stopped but did not turn around. ‘I’m not saying it’s haunted. I’m just telling you it’s the only room nobody has ever been to. It’s been locked for a long, long time.’

‘Do the keys not work?’

She gave him a blank stare. ‘There *is* a key. But the Master keeps it.’ Her hair waved from underneath the cape. ‘They found the weapons there. The Viscount wanted them stored away. Locked in an iron cage. And forged. From the inside, with the rest of them, too. They thought they could escape but in the end they were trapped.’

‘Escape who? Trapped from what?’

The skin under her eyes was colored with the dark hues of insomnia. When she had enough, she turned and walked away again.

Daniel stared at her, back at the tower, and then back at her.

‘Wait! Your name, what is your name?’

Just when he thought she would not reply, in the distance she answered.

‘Beatrice...’ he mumbled.

In his hand, the crow let out its last breath.

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*Sometimes the most visited places whose corners you can turn with eyes closed, can inadvertently become...strange. When the power shuts off and you are left to walk in torchlight, you start to spot the fine details, those which you so often take for granted. So next time, look closer. Much closer. Ask yourself: was that silhouette always there? Or, perhaps most importantly, why is it suddenly not?*

*Go into the next room. Notice it is colder. Or was the previous one unnaturally warm? Look up at the ceiling, but don't stare for too long— remember, in the darkness shadows camouflage better. Shhh, walk slower, don't make a sound. But don't stall, either. Move faster, just don't trip. If you hear a noise, don't look back. But don't ignore it. Listen: silence. Should it be so still?*

*Never assume you know something or someone just because you think you do. Your own mind plays the cruelest of tricks, and it is an infamous winner.*

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It was near midnight when Perilsangue's guests began to arrive, and when Daniel was finished with the last room. He went to his chamber and just before opening the door, he found a small white envelope leaning on the side.

In it was a note...

*Only curiosity can satisfy the senses.*

*Merry Christmas,*

*Beatrice*

...and behind it, a key and a white, slim candle. The candle had been thinned down, the wick black and curved. Even with care, it would burn for no more than an hour. What was her intention? Did she want him to go because she understood his curiosity, or because she was curious herself? In some way or another, here was a half-finished story nobody wanted to continue.

*Words are wonderful. They're exquisite. They can pierce through the toughest of structures.*

In less than a week, Christmas would be over and he would get out. Go back to his existence as whatever the economy dictated next. Back to city life. In less than a week he would leave this tormented state of limbo, but in order to depart satisfied, he had to do one last thing.

He had to finish the story.

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She had drawn a map, but it was vastly different to Perilsangue's blueprints. The measurements were off, the lines crooked and the calligraphy almost unreadable. Some parts had been scribbled out and others rewritten. The instructions were equally confusing, commanding him to pass through hidden doors and passageways, forcing him to make his way through cobwebs and heavy dust for drawn-out minutes. The candle was small, but it glowed fiercely.

Daniel reached the last instruction and found himself in front of a stack of wine barrels. With great care, he pushed these aside to reveal a small trap door on the wall. It had a lockless hinge and was just big enough for a thin person to crawl through.

The wall around it had been closed up. Somebody wanted to shut that part of the castle out. But why, then, keep the trapdoor?

'Curiosity,' he murmured, pushing the door gently. With patience and tender ramming, Daniel crawled through, bit by bit by bit. What was on the other side was not a room, but a narrow spiral staircase.

He had reached the tower base.

The staircase had windows every so often, and the moonlight was bright enough to illuminate every other step. His own light source had melted down to the size of a thumb, so he blew it out and placed it in his pocket.

One delicate step at a time he made his way upstairs. Somewhere, an incessant drop of water broke the silence. The air felt heavy and suffocating. He continued until the next window and then stopped to rest—the darkness in between made him feel ...uneasy.

‘How did they manage this before?’ He wiped the sweat off his brow and looked out only to realize he was *very* high above the ground now, a strange find for such a slow climb.

Four windows later he arrived at a door. He didn’t stop to contemplate. With an impulse that did not feel fully his own, he inserted the key, turned it, and pressed on the handle.

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Ahead was complete darkness—except for four burning candles of different sizes, all which stood on pillars in the middle of the room.

But something was not right. The dimensions did not make sense: the room was so big that even amidst the glows he could not see walls, and surely no tower could possess such magnitude. This seemed bigger than the great hall!

One of the candles stood directly in front of him. It was as thick as his wrists, cream colored and its flame a warm, vibrant red.

The next one was positioned to the left. It was thicker, with a violet glow, and one large, plump wick.

To the right, a thin candle with an orange blaze. And at the very back, so far away it shrunk to the size of a penny, a silver flame. This one evoked superiority above the others, standing in what seemed to be an altar. It was very short and square shaped, but on closer inspection the flame wasn’t exactly silver, but white. White with the faintest tint of blue. Wax spilled over its sides, piled like paralyzed waterfalls.

Daniel backed away respectfully. Who kept the candles lit? Perilsangue?

He was so concentrated that it was a while before he realized the door had shut.

‘Bugger,’ he mumbled, and walked back to the entrance. To his surprise not only was the wall much further away but the door simply *wasn’t there at all*.

‘Simple dimensional miscalculation,’ he muttered, and approached the thinner orange flame to his right. Grabbing the candle by the stand he pulled, but it wouldn’t move. He couldn’t even break it in half. Daniel felt his pocket and tipped his own candle into the fire—but nothing happened. One more try, this time letting it hover for longer, but the cotton was merely disturbed. ‘Maybe it’s the flame. Maybe it’s this color because of whatever it’s made from.’

But all other candles were equally as useless. He wiped his brow and considered the one on the altar. But this one was not welcoming. No, this light was not warm or alluring at all. It was drained of color, drained of life.

‘All right,’ he muttered, ‘no light, then.’ Daniel extended his hand and turned around into the darkness, tracing the stones, one foot in front of the other.

When he looked up, he was near the violet flame again. He frowned and tried a second time, hand to wall, using the altar as a reference point. He gave it all the attention, his eyes never leaving the white flame. When he made a full turn, he realized he forgot if his hand might have grazed the door.

Daniel took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and opened them with the utmost calmness. The third is the charm. *Walk three steps, stop, look, feel. Walk three steps, stop, look, feel. Walk three steps, stop, look, feel.* He was coming back around but had felt no door.

He tried a different reference point, a different candle. He approached what he thought was the center of the room and looked at his watch; he had been searching for almost an hour.

‘This is ridiculous.’ He advanced past the red flame in as much a straight line as he could, but when he reached the wall he felt only stones.

*Don't panic. It's exhaustion, that's what's getting to you. Don't panic.* Daniel rubbed his hands together. He walked to one of the candles, warmed himself up, and began the same procedure, except this time using his *left* hand.

Nothing.

Even with different reference points, nothing.

No door.

By the time he was done, the thin orange-flame had burned down to eye level. With no other thing to do, he called for help.

But of course, nobody replied.

*Beatrice should be wondering.* That wasn't very likely, he knew, but it was a possibility. *Perhaps somebody will go down to get a bottle of wine, and they'll see the moved boxes...*

Only they wouldn't, because he had been careful to make sure nobody did. Wasn't that the whole point of unauthorized adventures?

His throat ached. He sat down under the red-flame, curled his arms around his knees and rested his head on the pillar. Somebody would soon find him.

*Should* soon find him.

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He opened his eyes to faded light. It was the orange-flamed candle; it had burned out.

He walked up to the wick and hovered his finger above it, teasing it, trying to be pricked. *Go on. If you're so tenebrous, prove it.* But he didn't touch it. It's the feeling you get when mother forbids something, and you're about to defy her. So you provoke, but deep down, you always worry about the consequences.

*One less candle. One less distraction....*

And just like that, there it was. A solution. Perhaps not an ingenious one, but a solution nonetheless. The stout candle with the violet light was much more imposing up close. He leaned forward and blew it out with the gentlest touch. Droplets of burning wax splattered over his face.

Daniel screamed.

The compound was like acid. He felt it digging at his skin and quickly wiped it away before it could spread. *“What in the nine hells in this place?”*

A breeze tickled his hair. He swiped but there was nothing—some part of him wished there would have been.

Across the room, the red-flame offered comfort. He ran to its light just to discover that it, too, had been reduced. With his back against the pillar, Daniel faced the darkness, the oily black darkness.

And then, the game began. Monsters as tall as trees, as thin as spikes, with hollow eyes and screams of white noise; hands dressed with red bandages approaching to drag him down, the dead whose lament was still being alive, just a living corpse looting nearby, listening; tips of fingertips caressing his spine one vertebrae at a time, until it reached his neck and snapped it back.

He stared up at the flame. His pupils contracted. He wanted to scream, to plea for help, but now there was a second, bigger fear: that he was not alone, and that any sound could, and *would*, awaken that which was out there. He pressed his back lightly against the pillar, and he found himself remembering some poem he was once forced to read.

*‘First circle: Limbo...’*

*In the castle, nobody would make eye contact or stop to wonder who the newcomer was.*

Ever so slightly, he leaned against the pillar with more force....

‘Second circle: Lust...’

*Her eyes were a frosty green and her lips thin and palely rosed.*

He knew the pillar could not be swayed...

‘Third circle: Gluttony...’

*I realize now that I’m retired, I can finally start working...*

He leaned back with full weight and before he realized, it was too late. The candle fell to the ground and the wax took no remorse for its drowning. A second in darkness was a second too long. Daniel sprinted to the altar but its light was not welcoming. It made his eyes water, yet he had no choice. It was the last safe place.

‘F-fourth circle: Greed... greed...the *artillery*... oh God it was here, this room, locked, here... we’re locked!!!’

Far across, where the red-flame used to burn, he heard an agonized groan followed by a rattling of metal.

‘Fi-fifth...a-an-anger...’

If only he could get out, he’d never tell anybody of this room, he’d lie and tell Beatrice her map was wrong, there was no trapdoor, and then he’d finish his work with Perilsangue and leave, *leave* and never return!

He hugged the altar, but the porcelain was cold. How could a symbol to protection evoke anything but?

*Unless...*

Daniel traced the structure with his fingers and when he got to the top his breath stopped. From far away, it *appeared* as an altar. But the mind is tricky. The light is praised for being a good liar and the Darkness is condemned for truth.

This was a shrine.

‘Six. Heresy...’

He buried his face in his hands and began to cry. He was losing his mind, really losing it. But that hadn’t started with the room, no, that started the minute he stepped into the train on his way here. Daniel staggered up and stared into the candle. It wasn’t a shocking white, it wasn’t a serene white. The ambiguity made him feel uncomfortable. Was it the disguise, perhaps? The notion of decency in untouched skin, an existence encapsulated by purity deemed better than judgment of mistakes. It elicited that a sinner once is a sinner for life. It had nothing to do with religion; it had to do with self-guilt, and the psychology of the fraudulent.

A teardrop fell into the flame and made it quiver. Daniel smiled. “Eighth Circle: Fraud.”

He put his own candle into the flame, and when he took it out, it produced a very faint glow. From a distance, he blew out the giant silver-flame, freezing it forever in his life.

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The grunts were very close now, but he muted them out with his screams. His hands were bleeding from pounding, his throat strained. There was even a point when he walked straight into Them, not caring anymore but not enduring staying in a single place. He tried to look for cracks in the stones, something where he could trace back the gushes of wind, but by now he had given up.

He was slumped against the wall, his eyes staring straight ahead but not really looking. Holding his candle high up in the air, he allowed the wax to drip down his fist, gluing to the skin like a leech.

Suddenly, the wick began to shake. It snapped him out of his frenzy. He cupped his hands around it, shedding it, protecting it. With his lips very close he pleaded: ‘Don’t die, don’t die, don’t *die!* Please don’t...I’m sorry, please don’t....’

It swirled again, and then steadied itself like a toddler taking its first steps.

‘I am an astronaut, and this room is the universe: immense and dark and scary and unknown, and this candle, this is planet earth: small, but alive and highly significant. There had been other planets, also alive, much more *alive*, but they all fell prey to darkness...so I...must protect *you*...’

Nobody would come for him, nobody would look for him, nobody would wonder about him... he was just an insignificant speck in a giant black hole. The days would pass and eventually they’d assume the worst. They’d look for him, but in the wrong places. They’d never find him, of course, because Beatrice would never speak out.

Because ghosts don’t speak.

The months would pass and they’d get another handyman, and after that one they’d hire another, and so on, all the while he was still here.

Alive.

Because if he kept the candle burning, he *would* stay alive.

Daniel began to tremble. ‘Stay alive...’ he mumbled. ‘We must stay alive, both you and I. I help you if you help me...’

‘Alive,’ he muttered, watching the small thing melt away inch by inch.

Daniel looked up what he saw made his eyes widen. Because life is full of horribly beautiful paradoxes; one has only to look.

*Ninth circle: treachery.*

The wax built up, and the last flame extinguished.