



A blanket of warmth and blinding sunlight envelopes him as he steps into a dense crowd on the top deck of the palace, deafened by the rhythm and blaring elations of lively people sprawled in every direction around him.

Above the throng of writhing bodies raised on an elevated stage, an unbridled gaggle of musicians unleash their melodic carnage, as to their sides suspended catwalks are packed with the gyrating forms of choreographed dancers. Fused with the feral beating of drums, vivid, flashing lights strobe and pulse with the rapid euphoria of electric jazz swing. Thrilled whoops and screams fill the air as men dance and move in a frenzied fervor entangled with angelic women dressed in colored silks and flowing fabrics. Sweat and elixir flow as one, and as its raw perfume permeates the thick muggy air, it swells with the energy of the salacious ritual. Stunned by the cacophony, he watches the mass of moving bodies in awe, and marvels at its splendor.

A sudden bloom of beauty startles him as the form of a woman bursts from the crowd like a magician's bouquet. Her dark eyes locked on his, his heart skips a beat as she floats toward him, as taking one hand in hers, she pushes a large icy glass of a rainbow colored drink into his other. The heaving crowd parting instinctively in her presence, he follows her fluttering lashes and sultry smile as she leads him up a small flight of thin metal stairs and onto a crowded walkway. Stopping short as they are jostled by the swaying throng, their bodies collide, and as she turns surprised, his drink spills and drips down her front. Shocked, she looks down at the wet stain, but giving a cheeky smile, she flicks her soft eyes

onto his and pushes the drink up to his lips, forcibly tipping it for him to gulp down.

He didn't realize how thirsty he was or how good the drink was going to be. Bitter, sweet, and everything in between. It's delightfully cold in contrast to the stifling heat, and so relieving as he feels it running inside his chest it settles like a cool oasis in his stomach. Her gentle warmth gripping tightly onto him swaying with the feverish beat, she grabs his hips and grinds into him as the rhythm of the blaring music changes tune.

"What are you. . . ?!" His words are lost in the volume of the band as he pulls away, but springing free from her grasp with such force, he bumps hard into the railings behind him and his empty glass flies out of his hand into the crowd beneath. The faint smash below confirming its landing, he lunges horrified over the edge as an anguished cry shrieks from the thunderous melody. Staring down on the mire his stomach knots as he sees a girl and hears her howls, and as the feverish rabble heaves around her a torrent of shimmering blood pours down her face.

Speechless, he stands frozen. But before he's even moved, he feels hands on his waist as the woman behind him grabs him again, pulling him eagerly away from the railings into the fray of surging dancers as she laughs at his sickened disbelief.

"Get off of me!" he yells, shoving her away as the simmering of anger heats in his belly. "Did you not see?! I've got to go help!!"

Stumbling backward, she stops, surprised as she's caught on either side by two burly men in crisp white trousers and matching maritime shirts who appear up the steps behind her. But as she turns to look, her sensual joy fades. With a sudden glimmer of recognition, her slender body goes limp, and as a black cloth bag is wrenched over her head and cinched tight on her delicate neck, she's dragged backward down the stairs. Seized by a surge of adrenaline, Will stands still as if spellbound by the multitude's

gaping stare. Captured by the multitude of indifferent eyes as they dance, he's frozen. And as he watches her vanish into the sea of bodies, they continue the copulation of their primal frolic.

"Laaaaaaaadies and Gentlemen!!" Interrupted by a booming announcement, the music stops as all eyes look to the stage. "It is time to break the enthrallment that immerses you to give a warm welcome to our generous host! The man who needs no introduction! The amuser! The charmer! The great distracter and the master of comfort and entertainment. It is the one! The only! The great Triboulet!!!!"

In whoops of joy at his name, the crowd erupts as it chants in bated anticipation, "Tri-bou-let! Tri-bou-let!!!" With heavy concurrence, the drums from the band join the hammering rhythm, filling the air until the sound roars like the ocean.

"Beautiful people of the world!" A shrill voice rips through the air from the speakers as the collective mantra comes to a sudden stop, and a deathly silence lingers in bated anticipation. "Good day to you all!"

Exploding from the stage, a sharp blast rings out, ejecting a billowing cloud of white smoke, and within it, the silhouette of a tall and slender man held rigid in a theatrical pose. As the smoke clears, his long narrow form is revealed.

"It is I . . ." he continues in his piercing voice. "Your humble entertainer!"

His appearance is bizarre. Wrapped in a shiny black ensemble that stretches tight over his oddly long figure, a collar that continues up high under his chin cradles the back of his pale and hairless head. A thin crooked nose and a twisted smile bend across his emaciated complexion, and as he theatrically bows to the crowd, his dark beady eyes dart about like a ravenous bird's.

The crowd cheering, he raises his bony hands for silence.

“Shh, shh, shh. . . Calm yourselves my loves. . . Contain yourselves!” he quietens them in a dramatic whisper. “Now. You may, or may not, have noticed. . .” he says, fanning the remnants of the white smoke from the air with playful strokes. “But it would seem, that during the almighty blast that heralded my grand entrance in this snowy cloud. . .” With a sharp flick of his wrists, he points to the glaring baldness of an absent brow over his eye, that has added to the already strange features of his face. “One of my eyebrows has been blown clean off, and sent yonder, into your midst!” Waving his arm in a sweeping motion toward them, stifled laughs and hollow coughs run through the uncomfortable silence of the crowd. “So, as a gesture of good faith, and to save one of my most loveliest pairs of brows. Ten thousand pieces of silver, to the one who returns it!”

With a cheer the crowd shuffles with excitement as people begin to frantically look around their feet. Then a few muffled shouts from up front close to the stage, and then another, and then a scream as the sounds of arguing and fighting breaks out. Breaking free from the throng, a man with a bloodied nose rushes up the steps to the stage. But after only a few short steps he’s leapt on by another, who hits him hard, repeatedly smashing his head off the metal railings before dropping him like a broken toy off the edge and onto the deck.

“Oooh a winner!” Triboulet exclaims as he claps his hands together in excitement as the man holds the eyebrow up proudly in his bloodstained hand. “Get it and clean it up! Go!” he continues, flapping impatiently towards his aides waiting behind him before turning back to his audience. “And get this man his prize! Bravo!! Well done my friends!! — Now? Where was I? Oh yes. . . It is I! Triboulet!! Ladies and gentlemen! I trust you are all in pure comfort, good spirits and lacking nothing?!” Pausing, he waits as the crowd cheers in response to his words.

“Good, good! Well. Today I have for you, good news! The offering of a new volunteer!! Come up here and say hello to your fellow entertainers, my beautiful man!”

The crowd erupting into applause, Will winces and shades his eyes as he’s blinded by the beaming glare of a spotlight. Bewildered by the proceedings and hustled to the stage by two more white uniformed men that appear in the crowd, he’s stopped in front of a looming Triboulet.

“So, go on then lovely man,” Triboulet asks, gazing at Will expectantly. “Tell the people your lovely name!”

Will hesitates, overwhelmed by a confusing mix of shock and stage fright, and looks up at the cadaverous giant’s features. Whatever makeup was used to smooth over the imperfections of his skin has begun to mix and drip with his sweat under the heat of the desert sun, adding to his unsettling appearance.

“Will,” Will replies, barely audible as the amplified echo squeals over the speakers.

“A quiet one,” Triboulet remarks. “Well Will—ooooh, that’s fun to say!—Well, Will. Well will. Wellwill, wellwll, wllwll,wlwl. . .” Mumbling to himself he trails off before snapping out of his self hypnotic trance and carrying on. “Oh boy, that’s really something! Well—Will. . .” he grins and winks at Will. “Welcome! To the Palace, of Wish!” The crowd rolls with cheers again and the band breaks into music, accompanied by a lively drum beat as he continues. “So until you take the plunge over the edge to the arena—this Sunday morning at ten A.M. sharp,” he exclaims exuberantly over the fervor, pointing to the shadowed chasm over the edge of the boat sandwiched between the port side and the towering wall of Zeno. “Your wishes, are our job! Good food, strong drink, heavy drugs! Good women, bad women, big women, dead women!” He grimaces comically and shrugs his shoulders, perplexed at where his rhyming led him. “And most of all, a non—

stop-party! Whatever floats your boat! So strap yourself in, and above all else. . ." his voice rises to a shrill crescendo as the pounding of the drum beat barrels in unison as the crowd joins in; "Be free! Be happy! And be. . . Yourself!!!!!!!" Fireworks shooting into the air above them as the acclamation explodes into its climax, the music strikes up with a renewed enthusiasm as the crowd resumes their wild dancing.

With a big grin, Triboulet leans down to Will and speaks with a hushed tone, "Now mister man, come with me and I'll set you up in a room!"

Putting his gigantic hand onto Will's back as they turn, he guides him off the stage through a curtain in the back, where they are joined by a small entourage of his white clad aides, and leaving the blaring music behind, they set off down a long hallway.

"Ok, well done everybody, seamless as always! Do we have a room for—what was it again? Will, right?" He glances down at Will, who nods in response.

"Yes sir," his head aide replies from up front of the troupe, handing a silver keycard back to Triboulet as the group struts purposefully down the corridor. "We got 12514 all ready to go."

Triboulet passes the keycard to Will, "So use this little fella to get stuff to work, and if it doesn't work on something, it means that something's not for you—make sense? Here, give it a try on the elevator." He gestures to the gold trimmed doors sliding open ahead of them and they enter it. "Just hold it close to the boxy thing there." A chime rings out as Will presses the card up against it. "See? Easy. You're deck twelve—first two numbers on your card there if you forget."

As the doors slide closed, a sudden flash of anger twists his features as he scowls down at his aides. "Who's got my eyebrow anyway?" he growls, "Is it gonna be ok?!"

“It’s up in hair and makeup now sir,” the head aide replies in a somber tone. “They’ve got their best guy on it.”

“I never should have taken them off the mantle,” he grumbles to himself. “Some things are just too special. . . I just knew it—Oh, and before I forget; the guy that does the booms and the bangs and so on, you know, the pyrowhatsits; Can you bring him to me for a little chin waggle?”

His aide pauses. “We threw him overboard sir, he tried to make a break for it right after the—”

“What?!” Triboulet shrieks. “Who told you to do that?!”

“You did sir.”

“I did no such thing!”

“I’m sorry sir, but, after the a . . . eh, seat, of your pants gave way at the debutante ball—a few weeks back sir. You said not to wait for the order but to use our common sense — If such things were to happen again, Sir.”

Triboulet inhales, about to snap back. But momentarily lost in thought, he rests his long bony fingers on his chin, before replying in a calmer manner. “Did you at least whip him, or burn him first, or something? You know, a little peepee smack? Cause if you didn’t, maybe we could—like, I dunno—like, add that to our repertoire for next time? What do you think?”

“Absolutely sir, great idea!” the aide replies, in enthusiastic relief of the giant man’s tempered response. “I’ll draw up the paperwork and have it implemented throughout the palace right away.”

Confronted by a bold black and white sign that simply reads; ‘SMILE’ as the elevator opens, they step out onto a patterned tile floor of a wide hallway lined with door after door of private cabins.

“You’re just up here on the right,” Triboulet says, glancing back to Will as he leads the way. “And some advice if I may—it’s

the decent thing to do anyway, I'm not just a pretty face!" He grimaces with an exaggerated grin and flutters his long eyelashes. "If you are to have any chance of making it during the trials, try not to get in a fight before it starts and be sure to follow any instructions on signs—two good ways to get yourself tossed overboard! And as they saying goes; it's better to have a human shield and not need one, than need one and not have one, so even if you don't like them—maybe even especially if you don't like them—making a friend before the big day can go a long way, and. . ." he looks to his aide in quizzical contemplation, "I think that's about it, right?"

The numbers 12514 carved delicately into its face in floral lettering, they stop in front of a cabin door.

"Well Will, this is you. It has been a pleasure. I'll see you on Sunday morning for the trials! I'll wave you from the booth! But in the meantime—feel free to feel free!" He winks to acknowledge his pun. "And if you need anything—and I do mean anything," he growls in a sudden whispered grin, lowering his face so close to Will's that his putrid breath thickens the air, before his tone snaps back to its usual melodic pitch, "just pick up a phone and someone will help! Ok?"