

My family often overlooks it, but there is a lot of meaning that goes into the wick of an exorcism candle. Coming from a long line of exorcists, I know firsthand the thought that goes into such a performance, from the words you chant to the texture of chalk you use. Yet they still overlook the wick material and the consistency of the candle wax. If I weren't such a gifted exorcist, they'd likely taunt me for specializing in incense.

I gazed up at the palace, standing proud at the kingdom's center. Domed towers made of shining bronze and a large expanse of royal gardens, it was quite the sight, even for someone who'd grown up there. Some airships flew by overhead, their sails made up of a patchwork of woven fabric, often depicting scenes or tales. At a first glance, the city seems beautiful and peaceful, and years ago, that's all it was. At least until the middle prince was born.

I clutched the parcel of candle supplies closer to my chest as a lanky spirit of shadow loomed to my right. The bad spirits wouldn't dare mess with me, knowing I'm one of the kingdom's royal exorcists, but the sight was still unnerving. Sure, there were good spirits and demons too, but the rest accounted for most of the kingdom's criminal population. I sighed, hoping Vincent wouldn't still be sulking in his room by the time I got back. Everyone was fretting the night to come.

It was four in the afternoon by the time I returned to the palace and found my way to the kitchen. As I prepared a pot to melt the wax, my thoughts wandered back to the plan, and why I was performing such a large exorcism in the first place.

17 years ago, the middle prince had been born. Prince Vincent. He was from a family of royals; I was from a family of protectors. I'd always been his guard since birth, and

we'd always been close friends. Normally, a royal wouldn't need a specialized exorcist guard, but Vincent was Vincent. The guy had been a demon magnet since he was born. No one in the kingdom knew why, but he carried something within him, something that brought the spirits in by the dozen. Before we all knew it, the city had gone from a capital of luck to an oversized haunted house. Needless to say, Vincent was not a very well-liked prince. The citizens all blamed him for luring the paranormal in. Many were docile, but it got to the point where I was called upon to put an end to it all. To create a seal that would engulf the whole kingdom and banish all evil.

I tried to stop my hands from shaking as I put the candle tins aside and made my way up to Vincent's room. Wiping my hands on my cloak, I pushed open the door, not bothering to warn him.

The prince was leaning against the rail of his balcony, looking out over his homeland. Though was it really a home if he wasn't welcome?

"Robin," He didn't turn to face me. "I'd assumed you were busy."

I shook my head, coming to stand at his side. "The whole palace is involved. There's plenty of sets of hands helping to prepare festivities and supplies. Aside from making my own candles, I'm not needed until it's showtime."

"*Showtime.*" He mumbled, running a hand through his curly hair. "It doesn't feel right making such a big production out of this and burdening everyone."

Classic Vincent. He never wanted to be seen as a burden. I glanced behind me at his bedroom, his desk stacked with textbooks, swords hung on his wall. He wanted to be a

good prince, it was obvious. His father, the king, always went on about how the princes must bring honor to the kingdom, bring faith to the people. Vincent tried and tried, yet he could never compare to that of his brothers.

“It is a big production. The spirits have plagued the land for almost two decades, and we’re banishing them tonight, once and for all.” I noticed him flinch when I said ‘plagued.’ Truth is, neither of us could imagine a Vincent that didn’t attract spirits. That didn’t attract bad luck, didn’t stumble, didn’t fall short. What if sealing off that part of him changed him completely?

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. A servant poked her head in, swallowing nervously. “Your highness,” She began. “We’ve caught word that some demons have found out about the exorcism tonight and are reeking havoc on the west ports of the city. The king advises we make haste with the ritual.”

Vincent and I shared a look, then I turned on my heel and hurried towards the tower where the exorcism would take place. By now, the sun was starting to dip below the horizon, filtering through the tall glass windows and bathing the top of the tower in a golden glow. I dug up a decent piece of chalk from my pouch and began sketching out a circle on the floor, adding symbols and characters as I did. We’d be the only two up here. The rest of the royal family would be feasting in the throne room, sending prayers that all went well and beginning celebrations early. There would finally be an end to the destructive spirits, though part of me couldn’t help but feel sentimental. I could hear some of the mischievous ghosts at the base of the tower, swooping through pantries and corridors. These were the

creatures that I'd grown up seeing every day of my life. Not all spirits were bad, but the seal I'd be casting today had no exceptions for good or evil, and the king demanded I go through with it.

It had just turned to dusk when Vincent stumbled up the last step, out of breath. I had to remind myself that we were doing this for the common good. He'd looked so conflicted in the days approaching the ritual, knowing that he'd have to bid goodbye to such a huge part of himself. The demons were his friends, but the kingdom was his family. He was a man with such a pure heart, I could tell he had been torn with going through with this. Alas, in the end, it was clear he wanted nothing more than to be a good prince and a savior to the kingdom.

"You ready?" I asked, as he went to stand in the middle of my drawn circle.

He nodded, pausing one last time to hear the beings that had come to live with us all so closely.

I lit several candles around the circle, beginning to recite the mantra I'd memorized the night before. For once, I was anxious. This had to work. I noticed light starting to seep from the circle, but right as it was about to burst, the room went dim again. That wasn't good.

"The possessed needs to be at peace with themselves, Vincent." I stopped.

"I know- I-" He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Right. Continue."

I really hoped he was trying. Everyone know it'd be hard on the cursed prince, but it had to be done. I continued chanting and watched as the light continued building up at the edges of the chalky strokes. Vincent remained still. Closing my eyes, I could only wait.

The light burst forth from the circle and refracted through the windowpanes. Before I knew it, the whole city had been engulfed in a blinding light that vanished just as fast as it appeared.

I didn't get the time to check if it had worked before the prince collapsed to his knees, shaking. "It feels like my heart's been ripped from my body-" He gasped.

I hadn't realized this could take such a physical toll on him too. "Can you stand? Will you be okay?" I panicked, running to his side.

"Yeah, yeah- just..." He trailed off.

We waited there in silence. Wait, silence? I straightened, and realized for the first time ever, the palace was in complete silence. The violence in the distance had ceased, the chattering of kitchen ghosts was nowhere to be found.

I slowly helped him to his feet, letting him wipe his eyes with his sleeve. "Let's go find your parents. I'm sure they'll be delighted."

When we made it to the throne room, the king stood up, coming over and clapping Vincent on the back. "We did it! How does it feel to no longer be the cursed child?"

Vincent said nothing, shrugging off his father's arm. He was acting strange in contrast to his family's excitement. I watched helplessly as he walked out the door and towards his room.

In the following days, I brought meals to his door. He always told me to leave them outside, and they were never finished. I'd come to notice how empty the city felt without the demons. Sometimes they'd come to the school gates to play with the school children. There had been some who'd scare off crows in the fields. The city felt wrong, somehow, and I'd wished there was something I could do. Of course, there was no way to bring them back without the destruction returning too, but maybe...

One morning, I knocked on his door as usual. This time, though, I carried my exorcism pouch rather than a tray of food.

"Hey, can I come in this time? I have something to show you."

There was a pause, then the door opened, revealing a very tired Vincent. I sat on his bed and dumped out the equipment.

"I was thinking..." I began. "Not all great exorcists come from my family. Maybe I could... teach *you* some summoning spells? You've clearly been born with a spiritual gift."

He was more than a prince. The kingdom could hate him all they wanted for his curse, but if he learned to control it, he'd be more than they ever thought of him, a person of blessing. Deep down, he had a heart of gold, and that's all that really matters.

He looked down at the items I'd dumped on his bed. He picked up a piece of spirit chalk, feeling its weight in his hands.

I watched as for the first time in a while, he truly smiled.