[Content Warning: Blood, Mind Control]

Mine is a song that any other would suffer to sing. My rhymes are the sort that one must strain to hear. I prefer things this way.
I am a rare object. I am a whisper of a realm that exists no longer. I am the sum of fifty lives in thirty countries, and here I stand, still as magnificent and monstrous as the night my first life ended.

I do so love these splashes of prose. Unlife is hardly so decadent. No… only in the last half century have I truly begun to enjoy myself.

"On the shores of dreams can you find my only home, oh my only prince, if you'd just pick up the phone…"
My voice carves like a knife through the cabaret aura of Governor McCormick's mansion. Nicolette, my agent, was clear that I was hired to perform *'for the background'* - to be the wallpaper and radio as the rich and powerful converse. The Lady will not have it. The voice behind my eyes is a lilting flower, yet she bristles with thorns when my heart begins to covet. We are too enamoured with the spotlight to ever be a mere *backgro*und again.

"...For I smell fire at the doors, and I hear the mourning bells! But don't mistake me lover, for it won't be my death knell!"
A few more eyes turn my way - and the hollers kiss my ears as I take the ribbons in hand. Bolts of tyrian silk, they shiver in the air above the stage, drawn to a feverish dance. They're just like their owner. I can't stand a passive audience.

"*There'll be no poems anymore!*
No love letters at your feet!
Not a mote of angel's light
For the devil in my seat!
We'll do this dance again in hell
If you only make it down there first!"
My rhythm is not that of a singer, but a scorned lover, shrill and furious. They clamor and hoot for me, but it's no act. I've known love. I've tasted every pleasure and pain a beggar can. Love is a boring pleasure - but oh, an exquisite pain.
"Oh, my Shakespeare prince
If it's your scorn, I have a thirst!"

The applause is always measured, always in good decorum - and yet it is rapturous tonight. I bow deeply and flourish my ribbons like whips, shimmering at my feet. Beneath my jade mask, my symbol, they cannot see my quivering jagged teeth or my fleshless jaws slickened with blood. It is mine and the Lady's little secret. A voice like this isn't natural, no - they have no idea. When I step down at last from the stage, they adore me even more deeply: for what angel is so modest as to walk among mortals? *This* is my love… and as I strain, I hear the whispers of their chatter.

"*First time at a Sphinx gig? I see that face!"*
"God, she's her own genre."
"Didn't think The Sphinx could handle playing background music, glad I was right."

That's it. Though I'm sure the governor might not be totally satisfied, I couldn't care less in the moment. Any one of my next clients stands before me now, emboldened by the proof of my talent, of my mythos. The limelight is almost as sweet as blood.

Almost. The Lady's hungers must be satisfied, too. I owe her that much.

A desert mirage, I slip between throngs of kine as if they are all beneath my notice: a measured recipe of etiquette and mystique. The foyer is too crowded, now that they've served their purpose. A guard opens the private lounge as I approach, and my 'thank you, sir' is both demure and inviting. His face does not so much as shift, and I sigh: duty is too central to this one.
When I traipse within, there are two already inside. I recognise these little lambs. The man, portly and proud, bald of head but majestic in his beard and suit, is Dr. Edwin Douglas - a sort of minor celebrity in dermatology. The girl is a black haired and blacker garbed creature of raucous laughter, face pressed with smile lines, too much energy for such a little thing. Allison DeMaine is a travelling socialite, a critic or something - I don't know what she does.
When I enter, the pair stop their mewling to look at me. A simple sort of reverie touches both their faces.
"The Sphinx herself! What a night."
"Heard your song heat up through the wall. Beautiful! You know, you really gotta record an album. I love your work."

They're nervous. Neither has ever seen me in the flesh before. I linger at the corner of a velvet lounge, my pale fingers, three wrapped in nylon, grazing across the back.
My mask has only carved eyes, and five superfluous breathing vents. When I speak, they must focus to hear.
"You do, from a room away? What was that last song?"
"Uh… well, I never caught the name. All the more reason to go for a label, right?"
The smile on Douglas' face is so… plastic. It's as if I could slip my thumbs in his mouth, pull, and he'd tear into pieces. The chuckle beneath my mask is more malevolent than I intend.
"I never record my work. It is experienced in the moment… not before, or after. Which begs the question… were neither of you interested in my set tonight?"
Douglas and DeMaine both stop to look at each other, both expecting to find assistance in their embarrassment. It's adorable… and it's *pathetic*. I am a beautiful, perfect, ancient thing; a work of art, a paragon of my own design. Displeasure doesn't begin to describe my thoughts.
DeMaine starts. "It was just a little too crowded for us, I mean - and with Ed being a smoker, we wanted a little-"
"You understand how embarrassing this is? There's not a lick of smoke in here. You needn't make excuses if it's not your cup of tea, darlings."
They're quiet again. Eventually, Douglas lets out a nervous laugh.

“We’re just, uhm, having a little chat about some business of ours. Personal business. You’ll have to forgive us this time.”

It’s difficult to contain the anger inside me. I feel an inferno in my stomach, acid burning at my throat - things I know aren’t there. I still see the slums of Rome at midnight, still remember the errands for a half dozen Saxon lords.
Now these frail little things refuse me. I don’t bare my teeth - not yet - but the Lady’s fury spills over, just a little.
"I don't."
"S-sorry?" DeMaine half giggles, half whimpers. We round on her now. "For fuck's sake, it's not as though it isn't embarassing enough playing *background music* for a birthday bash. Now I know half of you aren't even listening!"
"Miss… Sphinx, that's just inappropriate. We're just… we need some space, alright?" Douglas stammers. "I don't want to make a scene."
"Yes, yes… of course you don't." I pause. The Lady eases her grip, and so do I mine. "I'm sorry. It's been a long night, and… the mask chafes sometimes. I wanted to complain, I think."
There's a moment of silence, their sensibilities recoiled from the change… and then DeMaine laughs again. She is more eager than me to put this behind her… more importantly, she sees a moment of weakness, and thinks herself back in control.
"That's okay! Come here, complain with us. McCormick's people getting on your nerves too?"
Douglas isn't enthused. "Allison, I don't think that's exactly-"
"Oh, come on! I know a woman in need when I see one."

Oh darling, you can't imagine how bad.
I slink beside DeMaine with an exaggerated sigh, all the labours of a cruel world too much for little old Sphinx. I pour out my woes like a cherubian fountain, and as with all the best lies, there’s some truth dotted within.
“I barely make ends meet some nights…”
“...Some of the people I work with - ingrates and philistines, honest.”
"Sometimes, if I could just… oh, if I could be a mosquito on McCormick's fat forehead, I'd never go hungry."
DeMaine hangs on every word with the reckless abandon of a gossiping schoolgirl. Douglas' weakness, I learn quickly, is DeMaine: the man cannot stand to watch her laugh, drink and enjoy herself without letting his walls drop beside her. There's an arithmetic to humans, and there's a poetry about them: I play her strings, and *he* makes the sound.
Of course, the moment her glass is empty, she hungers just as I do.

"Oh, boo." DeMaine blows a raspberry at the last wine stains. She considers herself for a moment, oddly silent and robotic as her addled mind thinks on the appropriate response; then the energy is back, and she leaps to her feet, taking Douglas' half finished glass as well. "Oh, we never got you a drink, Sphinx! You wanna glass of something? You'll regret not tasting the Austrian stuff."
Let the mask down, baby. I make a point of pondering, bashfully turning my head away. "Mm, I shouldn't, really… they might want an encore later-"

"Ooh, yeah. We'll catch you this time." She grins. "Sure you can't have just a sip…?"
There's an art in saying yes without saying yes; in begging for permission while keeping your modesty. Humans love these games as much as us. I flutter my dark eyes and do a little scoff, glancing at Douglas for approval… and then, a shot glance at the glasses in her hand, and the ripe, ageing veins in her palm.
"Sure, fine. Just one. And if you tell on me, I don't know you."
"Killer. Gives me an excuse too." DeMaine purrs, wearing that grin again. In a moment, it's just Douglas and I. The few seconds of uncomfortable silence tell me all I need to know.

"You're sweet on her, are you? I'm sorry I stormed in-"
"No, no… it's alright." The stammer is quick and red-faced - well, more purple than red, given the wine. "I thought we'd, uh, gotten you in a bad mood. It's good to meet you. Real good."
"You didn't answer my question, love."
"Well, like…" Douglas trails off again, and the blush won't subside. He squints, makes a face, trying to will it out of his skin: it's adorable. I relent with a giggle and sidle closer, enough to let him see the playful glint in my gaze.
"She's a pretty girl. Energy for days. I can see why you like her."
"I'm married." He says abruptly. The shrug comes naturally to me. "So? Just an observation. It's no crime to have a crush."
"Yeah, guess so…"
So shy. *So charming.* My jaw clenches a little, but my mask conceals the annoyance. We sit together for a while, and it's slow work to prod him about his love, but his body is more honest than his words. So, I pursue the body instead - a little hand-on-hand touch here, an impish giggle there, my short skirted dancing costume clinging to my shape as I recline. I can smell the change before I see it: he breathes more freely, grows quick to laugh, the smell of sweat and drink lingering when he talks.
When DeMaine returns, we're all smiles, and mine is the widest.

"Edwin, you *have* to tell her about old Josef. Come on now!"
"I shouldn't… alright." Douglas sits up, eyes alive with mischief as he retells this one; about the real estate mogul with a blackhead the size of France under his earring. DeMaine hands me a heavy glass of white wine, wearing a cheeky little grin. It strikes me that the last taste of wine I had was two thousand years ago, give or take a few centuries. Human stories are so… base in comparison.
Watching me nursing my glass under the mask, DeMaine seems to catch on. On the other side of her admirer, she leans partway over his lap, as if to lower her voice and gossip. "So, Sphinx, baby… drink for a story? Why the mask?"
Douglas thinks better of it. "I'm sure it's just a performing thing… anonymity is the rage."
"Sure, sure. But no doubt someone at one of these fancy get-togethers has dangled a bunch of money in front of you to take the mask off."
I play into their curiosity, silent, save only for a little chuckle.
"Pretty please, cherries on top? We can keep a secret."
"Mm… you better." I 'relent', casting my gaze past them, wistfully across the room.

In the blink of an eye, I see the sun again, half remembered and sloppily drawn. I see the faces my mind fashioned of my family: Eos, Makarios, and little Laodamia. Athens in twilight, the raucous voices of her markets simmering into silence. The gardens beneath the sky. *The jaws of Cerberus, soaked with blood and bile.*
"...Picture a social butterfly in a house of worker bees, if you like. She's not content with her lot in life: she's beautiful and whip-smart and knows her way around the city better than anyone. Her parents want her to stop playing and settle down, but she has her eyes set on politics."
DeMaine is leaning in, delighted, and Douglas is watching with bated breath.
"Course, politics isn't the domain of women, where she's from. So, she plays politics in another way. This butterfly finds the bees that matter, figures out what they want, and gives them a little push in the right direction. She visits a hundred different hives, and they all know her."
"Gotta do what you gotta do." Douglas nods. I look him in the eye, watching those pretty blue spheres gaze through me, dull and drunk. When my voice finds his brain, it's an iron shackle.
"*Keep quiet and watch.*"

Dominate applies the whip immediately: Douglas is suddenly as quiet and attentive as a stone, glassy eyed as he studies me without cognition.
DeMaine giggles, unaware she's now alone in the room with me. I smile, though she has to imagine it. Casually, I place my glass on the table, raise to my feet, and gracefully slip past our observer to sit on DeMaine's other side.
"You know what I mean. She and you had a lot in common, Allison… 'cept, one night, she came afoul of a wasp. She thought the bees had sent him, but he came alone, envious of her success."
"Oh, god. Honey, I'm sorry." DeMaine covers her mouth with her fingers, then reaches out to try and hold me. I brush her gently off. Playing with food is one thing, being pitied by it is another.
"He gave her a nasty scar… the kind concealer and makeup won't fix, that only a mask can cover up." I whisper, the barest hint of my black brows lifting through the carved eyes, mocking her. "For years, she slaved under wasps like him… until she became one herself, with a wicked sting.
And you wouldn't believe it… but she likes things better this way."

I slowly raise my hands to my mask, reaching for the thick cord straps neatly disguised as designer leather. Suddenly, DeMaine leans forward, gently grabbing my wrists. If not for the layers of plush clothing…
"No, no, it's okay… I shouldn't have pried, oh my god I'm sorry." She practically spits out. "Do you… do you need skin grafting, or something? I mean, Ed is a dermatologist, maybe-"
"Shh. I want to show you." I whisper, truthfully. "Just close your eyes for a moment… and tell me you want it."
"Are you- um, that's a little kinky, I guess… okay. If you're sure." The nervous giggle again. She sits up straight, nursing her glass with both hands. As I lean in closer, Douglas stares on, silent as the grave.
"You have to say it. Don't peek."
"Okay… ehe, okay. I want to see."
"See what?"

"See you. See your face."

My face. *Our face.*

With unblinking eyes, I watch her as the mask comes down and into my lap. With lipless teeth, I let out a soft gasp of satisfaction, the fake warmth in my dead body staining the exposed bone of my jaw and throat. And with fangs unfurled - four grinding out among a jagged maw - the Lady leans in and sinks into DeMaine's exposed neck, sucking deep of her saccharine blood and at last getting drunk ourselves.
My food gasps - though the initial shock gives way to a wave of abject pleasure, even despite my… abnormalities. As she squirms insensate with pleasure, I stare flatly past her, at Douglas beside us. Powerless to move, he does not even understand what he sees: he is little more than a puppet under my voice. On another night, it might take the pleasure out of this kind of depravity, but everything fades before this sweet quenched thirst.
DeMaine grows pale… soon, she stops clinging to my shoulders. Her glass falls to the floor, that inedible filth soaking into the carpet, unwanted. At last, her heart stops beating… though I'm still sucking the life out of her throat for a few minutes more. I don't stop until I taste the final drop.

When I draw my fangs out of her flesh and lick it shut, Douglas is still my obedient gargoyle. Faint tremors rock his hands, and his eyes are stricken red, yet human grief is a toy before the Lady's voice.
"*Throw her body from the third floor balcony on the west wing."* I pause, smiling as our toy springs into action. "There's a good boy."
Douglas, as with all victims of mesmerism, has no idea what he witnessed in those sanguine hours, nor why he came to his senses overlooking the woody hills McCormick's mansion sat over. He knows we talked in the sunroom for a spell together, but no more. I wear a set of puzzled eyes when he doesn't remember going off to stretch his legs: did he drink too much? Does he need to see a doctor?

No, Dr. Edwin Douglas takes a taxi home that night with a fog hanging over his mind… and an aimless pain in his heart.

Not long after my feeding, I retire from the party and call my dearest chauffeur. Nicolette and I scour the slopes for a time until we find DeMaine's mangled, drained body. All that's left is my ghoul's vomit on the side of the road after we shove the corpse into the trunk of her car.
"Sorry, sorry… I promise I'll eat less on working nights. I'm sorry." Nicolette whispers, mostly to herself as she holds the rear door open. As I settle inside and get comfortable on heated leather, she's back in the driver's seat, carefully adjusting the rear-view mirror. When our eyes meet, I note she's not wearing her contacts tonight; she has the wig off, too, back to her natural brown curls. Her practiced elegant facade melts into anxious delight beneath my gaze.
"W-where to, Lady Sphinx?"
"I think I'd like to see my childe tonight. Do you remember Maya's place?"

"Uh, I remember where the manhole is." Nicolette snorts, adjusting her GPS. A moment later, she relents. "I meant no disrespect, ma'am. She's only… she's a free spirit. Rebellious. Not as refined, beautiful, o-or-"
"Not like you, Nicolette." I purr, giving her a playful flick over the shoulder with one of my ribbons. She leans into the silk, the ruinous scars I carved across her face meeting the sensual crimson. My body double is a spitting image of the woman I was, after all - it's only fitting she needs a mask as well.

"No, love. Nothing like you."