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Canto 1-800-HELP

By the time I got to the end of the bridge, I was where I intended to be. My guide, Dr. Kimberly Mehlman-Orozco, led me into a tunnel. Lights flashed on, exposing glamorous advertisements that covered the walls: “Jump start your modeling career; all ages welcome,” one read. Another said: “Looking for a high-paying massage gig with flexible hours? Text 1800-666.” These messages made me flinch, but also enticed my voyeuristic curiosity. Reading them was like witnessing a wrong turn while bracing myself for the crash, in this case, between greed and vulnerability. The most impressionable kind of young women-- the Gretels of the world-- would watch this disaster, hypnotized by self-destructive oblivion. The tunnel’s exit revealed a scene that looked more like a thriving city than what it really was: a bazaar of misery run by sexual traffickers.

The doctor invited me down one of the ominous alleys. An old man, shaking with wrath and foaming at the mouth, flashed fierce eyes toward us. Behind him, a seductive mansion rose beyond my sight. The sinner was clearly unable to enter his own vacant paradise, for holding him back was a restrictive, metal collar. I ordered him forward. He lunged, but recoiled with a wince.

“The collar holds me back-- are you trying to humiliate me further? Who do you think you are, arrogant soul who does not belong?” Before I could respond, my leader, accustomed to this attitude and consequently unfazed, leaned in to explain the dreadful sight.

“Here, Jeffrey Epstein suffers the same dehumanization that he religiously inflicted on his victims. He is one of the many souls rotting in this ring, all sick in the head, further sickened by divine justice.” I was appalled-- the barbaric sinner, in all his tortured flesh, embodied every news story exposing the exploitation, caught too late, of young women.

The soul, angry and ashamed, still stared at me, demanding an explanation for my presence. Nervous he might attack if I didn’t explain myself, I said: “I have lost the straight way and the expert by my side leads me through these haunted hallows back to my rightful path.” The charred soul coiled back in trepidation, perhaps threatened by the power he now knew I held over his Earthly reputation, cowed by the ability I had to expose others as gutless and twisted as him.

Disturbed by the creature’s revolting rap sheet, we continued down the alley, only to encounter further evidence of abuse. As we approached a corner, I heard an orchestra of screams. I was unsure of its source. Curious, I asked the doctor if we could follow the noise. She silently complied and followed me around the menacing but alluring corner.

“Do not be tempted to offer the performers applause or attention. Remember, we are in Hell, not the theater; such sinners do not deserve such favors,” she warned. We turned a corner and upon adjusting to the dim shadows, I saw why she had warned me. My eyes widened at a circus of mesmerizing puppets, a horrific rendition of Carnevale. Overlined lips screamed in pain, plastic eyelashes batted and squinted in discomfort, cheeks reddened in shame. The features of these suffering souls were so loud they nearly drowned out the squawking noises from above.

The chorus came from Harpies circling among the skyscrapers. Connected to their claws were tethers to the puppets. Violently, the vicious birds yanked the victims' limbs asunder, nearly splitting their spent forms in two.

“Doctor, why do they perform what looks to be a tragedy before us?”

“They perform, against their will, because they spent their lives operating in the wings. Now, the wings of Harpies manipulate them in the name of justice.”

Their screams continued as the macabre soundtrack to our pilgrimage. I felt lucky to move freely, yet no degree of strength or speed could lead me quick enough past the ensemble of sufferers. After what seemed an eternity, the horror was behind us. The ring epitomized deception: it was similar to my native land, yet infected with the virus of predators. I rejoiced at the absence of such diseased souls, those who silently execute mischief.