

A Concert in Amber

One of the diaries of Leilani Hawkins, by We're All Mad Here

Music.

It can make us laugh. It can make us cry. There are some who say that music is the vehicle to the human soul.

It's unfortunate that some *things* have figured that out...

And I am not talking about pop music stars.

Mostly.

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My name is Leilani Hawkins and I am a librarian for Arcanum University. Never heard of it? It's exclusive and I'm going to leave it at that.

It's kind of a sweet gig, really. I'm working my dream job. The hours are great. The pay is much better than that of my peers. The only downsides really come from the odd, deranged lunatic breaking in, tying me up, and stealing books (or trying to). Sure, I wind up tied up in other situations, but if I'm to be completely fair, those are not really related to my day job.

Much.

Whew! Yeah, getting a little fixated there. Sorry.

It was a Thursday afternoon. The weather outside was overcast, grey, and a bit depressing. I was in a funk. One of the shelvers had called in sick and the other had an appearance in court (don't ask), so I was making my way through the winding aisles of the library to return books to their proper place.

Many librarians would look down on this as plebeian, but I always found this a bit soothing. There's something I've always enjoyed about hands-on restoration of order in a chaotic world. So I was pretty deep in my task when Annie McCoy came around the corner and scared the unholy shit out of me.

“AAAAH!!!!” I yelped. “God *damnit*, Annie!”

I picked up the books I dropped while the blonde grinned.

“You need to pay more attention,” she scolded. “It's not like I was sneaking up on you. Not in *these* heels!”

Annie was, as usual, dressed to kill in a form-hugging, lacy, white summer dress and matching heels. She had a jeans jacket held by the collar draped across one shoulder. Her golden blonde hair was tied back into a ponytail and her blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

Anyone looking at her would have thought she was some supermodel slumming about instead of a graduate student in anthropology and a practicing witch. Sorry, *wiccan!*

No, wait. She's totally a witch. That label can apply with multiple meanings if you catch her on a bad day.

“What's up, blondie?” I asked, sliding the last of my books into their proper place on the shelves.

Annie made a face. She hates being called 'blondie'.

“I got tickets to a concert. I was going to invite you...” She stuck out her tongue as she brandished a printout.

“A concert to what?” I asked, snagging the printout from her hand before she could pull away.

The printout was unusual, to say the least. It had proof of payment with a credit card and the indications of a show for tomorrow night. The layout used for the receipt was what set it apart. It was printed up like an old-style theater ticket. The borders were a series of squiggling patterns and dots.

The information for the concert itself was set in the form of a page held in the hands of a hooded figure wearing a crown.

“The Amber Monarchs,” I read. “Never heard of them.”

“Nor I,” Annie said, snatching the printout back. “I won the tickets and figured you might be interested.”

“What happened with what’s-his-name? Luke?” I asked, referring to the latest of Annie’s never-ending succession of flings.

She made a face. It was the “he did or said something that made me drop him like a hot potato” expression. I wisely did not press for more information. So this was an “I need a girls’ night out” thing. I totally got that.

“Fair enough,” I said. “I’m interested. Have you listened to anything from these Amber Monarchs? What kind of music do they offer?”

“You know,” Annie said. “That’s the funny thing. They have no online presence aside from a single website. No music samples. No YouTube videos. Nothing. But there’s forums where people talk about their concerts as amazing.”

“What’s so amazing about them?”

“Well, for one thing, they go with a peculiar theme,” Annie said. “Sort of a costume ball approach with a mix of baroque and gothic flavors.”

“And if it ain’t baroque,” I started to say.

“If you finish that sentence with a stupid joke, I will hex you and make all your hair fall out,” Annie interrupted matter-of-factly.

I stuck out my tongue at her.

“So a costume-ball concert?” I mused. “Now I’m *really* interested!”

“Good!” Annie grinned. “Bring your credit card. We’re going costume shopping once you’re off.”

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So when someone tries to combine baroque and gothic fashions, you get some seriously *weird* combos. Most people just go for a sort of steampunk aesthetic, it turns out.

I’m not really into the the whole giant poofy skirt look myself, though I own more than a few corsets.

So I opted for a slinky black dress with some kind of trailing attachment that I supplemented with a tight leather corset. Killer heels and a choker were mixed in along with opera-style gloves of black lace. I imagined somewhere that a historical fashion expert was probably choking to death on this image.

Annie had her hair done up in some crazy bundle of curls. Her outfit was a low-cut bodice of white lacy sexy and a tight corset the color of cream. She went for one of those poofy dress/skirts that I can never remember the proper name of. She wore a choker with a silver pentacle set in it and white-lace opera gloves. Under the poofy dress, I know she was wearing white heels, the pale sisters to my own.

“Damn girl!” Annie exclaimed as we modeled our outfits in a mirror. “We look *hot!*”

“We look like steampunk ravers,” I replied. “But hot ones, yeah.”

I’d done some research on the Amber Monarchs while Annie was trying on her outfit. She was right. There wasn’t much of an online presence for this band, which was pretty weird. No music samples, no recordings of performances, and no detailed reviews. They appeared to be largely world-of-mouth. There were a few blogs that made mention of them, but the blogs themselves were largely incoherent.

There was one bulletin board I managed to find that had a *bit* more detail. I found a posting made by *cassilda1895* who described the performances as “mind-bending” as “that is when the Sign is seen”.

The entire thing tickled my memory, and not in a good way.

I frown and toyed with the large ring on my middle finger. A “gift” from Annie, it now housed an Old One trapped within, or so we guessed. I didn’t care for wearing the damn thing. It always felt like it was *watching* me. Still, I had to wear it from time to time or the spells keeping it trapped might degrade.

And, as much as I hated to admit it, it kinda went with my outfit.

“Guess you’re going to get a little show, you otherworldly perv,” I muttered.

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The concert was held at what looked to me like a disused warehouse.

“Are we going to a concert or a rave?” Annie murmured, as we got out of the car.

The doorman was a hulking fellow of clear Neanderthal ancestry and the unfortunate birth defect of having been born without a neck. His thick skull seemed to flow right into shoulders that seemed as wide as Annie and I standing together.

He looked us over flatly, then looked at Annie’s ticket. He grunted and opened an unmarked door and suddenly it felt as though we entered a different world.

The interior was all done in gold decor with yellow silks on walls and the ceiling. Every wall had a strange yellow pattern on it that tickled my memory, but every time I tried to focus and think, I was distracted.

All the staff wore masks. Ornate things with porcelain and glitter or plain things of simple ceramic or polished wood and cloth.

Annie and I helped ourselves to champagne from a passing tray and took in the other attendees. As I feared, we looked like someone took the Vampire Ball and put it through a steampunk blender. In many cases it worked pretty well. In others, well suffice it to say there are some venues when goggles are simply *not* appropriate.

A man entered in an unusual tuxedo. His coat, cummerbund, tie, and trousers were all a golden-yellow. His shirt was an off-white and he wore white gloves. His shoes looked like they were actual polished gold. What was most noteworthy was the yellow featureless mask that covered his face,

leaving only a pair of dark slits for his eyes. The mask was textured in some peculiar way so it looked smooth but when the light caught it, patterns appeared in it.

They looked naggingly familiar too.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the masked man said. “Welcome to our own Carcosa. If you will please come with me, the Amber Monarchs await.”

“This ought to be good,” Annie said, fanning herself. “My, it’s warm in here.”

“Really?” I eyed her.

The air felt quite chill to me. The other attendees were also loosening ties and fanning themselves, as though sweltering. I started to wonder if maybe I was getting sick.

The concert hall was done up like an old style theater. I swear I was expecting the Phantom of the Opera to make an appearance at any moment.

Yeah, it was done up like that, only with a lot of gold and yellow.

The weird MC had somehow managed to get up on stage ridiculously fast as we were guided to our seats.

“Ladies and Gentlemen!” his voice seemed to resonate in a way that I swear I could feel in my teeth. “Honored guests! I present to you, the Amber Monarchs!”

Behind him, a yellow curtain raised to reveal a series of figures wearing yellow robes with raised cowls that mostly obscured faces that appeared to have the same odd mask as the MC. White-gloved hands handled instruments that looked to be made from polished bone.

“Program,” Annie said, handing me a piece of paper.

She had somehow gotten old-style viewing glasses, the kind you see in old movies used by ladies of substance. You know what I mean. Spectacles on the end of a long stick. She peered through them, her breathing was excited.

I looked down at the program.

“The Song of the Hyades,” I muttered. “Why does...?”

Then I *looked* at the pattern on the program. It was the same as was on the wall behind the performers. The same as on the drums. The same as I saw on the walls in the greeting area. Hell, it’s the same as the pattern I saw in the MC’s mask.

Oh fuck.

I looked at Annie in dawning horror. She was drawn in. She wouldn’t hear me now. I gave thanks that I was sitting at the aisle and slid out.

“The performance has begun.”

I nearly jumped. The masked staff member scared the shit out of me.

“Gotta go to the ladies,” I said, pushing past.

I made my way into the greeting hall. Another masked staff member appeared before me.

“The performance has begun. Please return to your seat.”

“Bathroom,” I repeated.

“The performance has...”

My rebuttal was a palm strike to the forehead of his mask followed by a knee to the groin.

Let me tell you: throwing any kind of kick while wearing stiletto heels is *damn hard!* Thankfully, I have practiced odd skills in my tender years.

The staffer fell soundlessly and I hastened through the first door I could find. It wasn't the exit, as it turns out, but I wasn't really looking to leave. I couldn't abandon Annie. I needed... I don't know *what* I needed! I needed to stop what was happening!

I made about six paces into a hallway when I realized the heels were a problem. I removed my very pricy shoes and held them ready, points out as impromptu weapons (remember this, girls!) as I hastily reconnoitered.

I found stairs ascending to an upper level and a locked door that I made short work of with lockpicks (which I, of course, carried tucked discretely in my sexy attire). I found myself in a room with the sort of equipment I'd expect from a theater. Lamps, lights, and even paint.

There was an observation window on the far end. I went to it and looked. The audience had gone beyond watching. Now it looked like a massive orgy was going on. Torn garments were discarded as the attendees became a mass of writhing flesh, grasping and grabbing and... oh my.

It wasn't cold anymore. Steady on, girl! Stop the evil cult, *then* get turned on by the orgy!

I studied the band. They continued to perform. Their music was... banal. I swear, they sounded a bit like *Hanson*. If they started playing "Mmmmbop", I felt I may have to abandon Annie to her fate as Hell came to sup on Earth.

Just kidding, Annie. I think.

The display behind the band had dropped to reveal another yellow symbol. This one was more pronounced. I eyed the stage and a plan came to mind.

I grabbed a couple of items, and moved out.

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They got me as I was coming back from behind the stage. I didn't even see them coming. Next thing I knew, two of those masked staffers had my arms. As I struggled, the masked MC was before me.

“The performance has begun,” he said in his resonant voice.

“Yes,” I said. “Heard it. Your band is shit. Was looking for somewhere to vomit.”

He tilted his head to one side, an oddly bird-like gesture. He reached out and cupped my chin with icy-cold hands that felt clammy.

“Interesting,” he murmured. “Yes, I think we have found our Cassilda.”

“Uh... no!” I brought up my leg to kick him squarely in the groin.

Fucker didn’t even pretend to feel it.

“Prepare her.”

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The small pleasure I had this time was that I wasn’t tied naked to an altar. No, somehow the stage had a full-on, four-post *bed* on a trapdoor beneath. So instead, I found myself tied naked on the bed, with each limb bound to a bedpost with yellow silk. A knotted gag filled my mouth. The only thing I had on me was the ring, which they’d ignored.

The MC was suddenly at the base of the bed.

“You will be a suitable gift for the King.”

“Fmph yuh!” I replied classily.

“That honor will go to the King.”

Did Mask-Boy sound *amused*? Well, he understood gag-speak well enough.

The MC left me in amber lighting (naturally). I heard him above.

“And we come to the conclusion of our performance,” his resonant voice seemed next to my ear.  
“Behold the Reveal of the Sign!”

There was a whirring and clicking. I felt the bed raise and lift up to the stage. The band was in front of me. The audience had stopped their mad orgy and were standing and staring. I could see Annie among them, her arms still intertwined with a man and woman. Her brow furrowed, as if she were trying to remember something.

“But first,” the MC said. “This is not a time for masks.”

He turned to me. “This is a time for the King to arrive. And the Sign to show.”

He gestured. I looked up. The last banner fell to show the last of the Yellow Sign sigils. The MC hissed. The band looked up and screamed an inhuman scream. I grinned into my gag.

The Yellow Sign was now a victim of the collection of paint I’d snatched from that room. A bit of red. A bit of blue. Snatches of green and some lovely pink. Oh and there was glitter.

“No!” the MC howled. “NO!!!!”

His pale hands went to the mask on his face that wasn’t a mask. Tentacles emerged from the fringes of what looked like the mask and started to flow out, enwrapping his skin. The performers (I will *not* call them musicians!) writhed as tentacles seemed to flow under their yellow robes.

And then, suddenly, they were gone leaving only empty garments on the floor.

Eyes were blinking as the spell was lifted and the audience came to their senses. And there I was, on complete display for everyone.

Hell’s bells.

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“I’m so embarrassed!”

It was Monday. Annie swung by to treat me to lunch. I eyed her askance.

“You’re embarrassed? It wasn’t *you* all spread out on a bed on a damn *stage!*”

“I should have recognized the Yellow Sign,” she said glumly. “We were nearly taken by the King in Yellow.”

“Nearly,” I nodded.

She eyed me. “And yet the cult’s magics didn’t seem to affect you. I wonder why?”

I shrugged. “Just lucky?”

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*In another place, in an adamantine void, an Old One rages. Oh, not against the walls of his prison. Not anymore.*

*The one sometimes known as Gol-Gorgoth has stopped with that nonsense. Sometimes you just have to accept the cards you’re dealt. Instead, the one called Gol-Gorgoth rages and head-bangs to metal. Not the thing mere mortals call “metal”, but the True Metal that only Old Ones can appreciate.*

*Dimly, the Old One wonders if his sexy jailor is done with that stupid concert. He could turn down the music and look, but... nah. Later.*

*Not wanting to hear some Hastur-themed pop music, the Old One turned up the volume and rocked out in the void.*

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Leilani Hawkins will return in **The Cornfield Shrine**