

# To Die For

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This will be the final entry in to my diary. I intend to leave it in the apartment when I move out. My hope is that it will act as a warning of what lies out there for those who look too hard or search too much.

I remember when I first moved to Paragon City. I had just finished medical school and I was full of excitement about my new job and what the future would hold for me. How things have changed. What I have seen during the last year fills not only my sleep, but also my waking hours, with horrific visions. I now fear for my life, and only venture outside during the day. Even then I avoid times when the clouds hang low and the sky is dark. Very rarely will I walk anywhere.

This is not the life I expected to be leading. I always thought it would be fun to live in a city with such a long history of fighting the war against the aliens. I would get a chance to see more than just the odd hero flying around as I had done in Detroit. Now, unfortunately, I understand how misguided my thoughts were - how wrong I was to think this place would be beautiful when it harbours such evil secrets.

I came to Paragon City after securing a job as a junior doctor at the hospital in the Kings Row district. A chance to do something to help people, I thought. I knew a few people who had visited the city before and they had told me about Atlas Plaza and the fabulous sights in some of the surrounding areas. On my first visit to the hospital I did notice that the area looked a bit run down, but that didn't bother me. Having lived most of my life in Detroit where there are plenty of slums, I didn't really think there would be anything particularly bad about Kings Row. The other doctors did appear rather weary, but then the hospital wasn't in Beverly Hills or Manhattan where they only do plastic surgery three hours each day for the rich and famous. It gave me a good feeling to know I would be helping those I thought needed it most.

The apartment was an easy find - a quick walk from the hospital. It looked rather tacky from the outside, but once I got in to the building everything was well kept. Some of the staff at the hospital told me it was a good idea to make sure I was getting a taxi after a late shift. Maybe this should have alerted me that things were not quite right, but I never gave it much thought. Most large cities have their some crime problems. Everything went well for the first month or so. It was exciting to be somewhere different and experience the sights and sounds of living in a new place. I spent my days off work visiting Atlas and others parts of Paragon such as Founders' Fall, enjoying the late summer weather and making new friends.

The first time I noticed anything strange was on the 9<sup>th</sup> February the following year. I had come back from a late shift, taking a taxi home as normal. Being on the seventh floor meant that I had a good view of the city in the daytime and that night I decided to leave the curtains open so I could sit with a cup of hot chocolate looking out at the dark skyline. As I sat on the sofa my eyes were drawn to what appeared to be flames coming from the top of a nearby building. I reached

for my phone to call the fire service, but for some reason the look of the flames made me stop. I don't know what it was that drew me to the conclusion that it wasn't a normal fire, there was just something odd in some way. Across the distance I could see what appeared to be a green tint to the flames. So instead of making the call I just sat there watching. After a while it disappeared. I watched for a bit longer but saw nothing more that night.

By the following afternoon, when I went back to do my next shift, I had forgotten all about the fire and my original idea of asking some of the staff what it could have been had gone out of my mind. I didn't think about the incident over the next few weeks and it was only when I was coming back from a party about a month later that the memory came back to me. After dropping one of my friends off at her apartment I happened to glance out of the window of the cab and caught sight of a greenish glow coming from the top of one of the buildings we were passing. Being slightly drunk I studied it for a moment to make sure I wasn't imagining things and then when I was sure the fire was real I asked the cab driver about it. He didn't seem particularly phased by the question, not even looking up to check what I had seen. At first he muttered something about a circle and I had to ask him what he meant.

"Well that's the Circle of Thorns," he replied, glancing at me in his mirror. "I guess you're new around here."

I told him I had not long moved to the city and he said that I should stay away from those Circle as they weren't the nicest of people, believing in strange magic.

"Some even say they kidnap people and do experiments on them," he told me.

I asked him about the green glow, and he said it was their magic, telling me again to keep away from them. Further questions were cut short as the cab arrived at my block and I paid the driver and got out.

The next day, after recovering from the evenings drink, the conversation with the taxi driver came back to me and I decided to do some investigation in to the Circle. Asking around at the hospital got me various answers from different people. Some told me it was all just myth or it was kids playing around and there wasn't really any Circle as such. Others told me that it was some worship based up on a religion and that people believed in it in the same way that they believed in such things as ghosts and spirits. There were even those who believed that the super heroes were just policemen in suits and the Circle were just another part of a government conspiracy.

Rather than frightening me away from them, the many different theories about the Circle just made me want to find out more. At that time I believed in super heroes (how could I not when everyday they flew around the city I now lived in), so the idea of the Circle having some magical power didn't really surprise me.

I started to do research during my spare time, mainly searching on the internet for web sites and references. I wish what I had started to uncover then had made me leave the subject alone. That The Circle actually existed did not seem to be in doubt. There also seemed to be a great deal of evidence that the world had been threatened by them on more than one occasion. Many of the heroes who we don't see, those who keep themselves to themselves, who avoid the public gaze, fight the Circle wherever they can. I had no idea that there are places in the parks, the deep woods and caves underground where the Circle holds sway. There are apparently even areas that the government have cordoned off as no go because of the alien invasion that aren't necessarily all they seem. I hope that we never find out all of what is truly hidden from us, for it is a colder, darker world out there than most of us realise. Working as a doctor had bolstered me against many gruesome sights, but some of the things I read chilled me more than I had thought possible.

While my research into The Circle, or Circle of Thorns to give them their full name, did frighten me somewhat I still found the mystery of their power intriguing. The searching, reading and study took me back to my time as a student and I suppose I started to treat it a bit like a project.

The Circle seemed to centre a lot of their visible activities in Kings Row and so I was in an ideal place to watch them and gather more information. I soon found out that from my window, late at night, I could sometimes see that green glow I had first spotted. These strangely coloured fires apparently occurred when they cast their spells. Some claimed it was people they practiced their spells on, where as others said it was animals they used. Now I know the horrible truth of it.

I soon took up a nightly vigil when my shifts would allow it. At that point I was still relatively fearless and filled with a desire to understand them. My naivety lead me to think that they couldn't really be that bad, whatever it was they got up to. During my first few observations I didn't see a great deal, but then as I spent more time looking for their fires against the dark sky I started to spot more of them.

The idea of keeping a record of what I had seen came to me, and so it was that I went from sitting at my window watching them to making notes on where I'd seen them and keeping track of which rooftops and at what times the fires appeared. I'm sure it won't surprise you to know that I found a pattern in this activity. I started to understand a bit more about what times they would appear and that it was only on certain nights of the month when I would see the flames. I never saw any in the daylight. When darkness fell, however, I plotted their times and made notes on where they had been.

The information I collected, barring the references I have made in this diary, has now been lost. This is probably for the best for I would not wish anyone else to follow in my footsteps.

The more time I spent watching them the more I became obsessed with these mystics. After a few months I had collected a great deal of information about their ways and it was then that I decided to venture out to see them at closer quarters. My time spent watching them had, I

suppose, caused me to become complacent and as I made my plans to get closer to their activities I had little fear for my own safety. On the odd occasion that I did wonder if I was getting in to something dangerous I convinced myself that it wouldn't be the likes of me they would be interested in.

So, with my naivety to comfort me, I took my notepad and my binoculars and in October of last year I ventured out in to the night.

I took what I thought were sensible precautions. I knew where The Circle would be and I thought if I could wait on a building opposite, maybe on the roof, they would have no reason to look for me. I would be safely hidden.

On that first trip out in the coolness of autumn I took myself to an apartment block as close to mine as I could find. I had a shift the next day but it wasn't until two in the afternoon so while I knew I would not get much sleep I could spare a few hours to watch what happened.

I got to the building just after midnight, dressed in black and carrying a small bag with my notepad, other equipment and a flask of coffee in it. Like a little kid back in Detroit when we used to play around the ruins of the car factories, the danger seemed irrelevant to me and the thrill of the clandestine activities itched in my veins.

From my observations I knew that the Circle's activities would not start until around two o'clock in the morning, so after settling down I busied myself with scanning other rooftops. For a few hours I spotted nothing more than smoke rising from the factories that worked all night, and the lights going out in apartment windows.

At 1:20 AM I heard the faint sound of footsteps on the fire escape of the building opposite and I looked across to see people making their way up. To my surprise they were dressed in normal clothes. This was not what I had expected at all, for the stories told of robes and dark masks to match their arcane arts. Any one of these people could have been someone you work with, someone you say hello to at the water cooler or a person stood on the monorail when you go to work in the morning. That alone is fearful enough and should have made me leave, but of course it didn't. The small group reached the roof of the building and I started to make notes as they pulled out robes from their bags and backpacks and put on masks. Then they stood facing each other and started to chant.

That first time there were four of them performing their rituals and I found myself drawn in to a kind of trance as I watched them. The chanting I did not understand, but I did see the green fire spark to life in between the four of them, leaping up in high but silent bursts. As the ceremony continued I became more absorbed by their chanting and the mystic light, and I stopped writing and just watched. When they finally finished their ritual I realised that I had been watching them for well over two hours - it was now four thirty in the morning. I came out of what felt like a deep sleep, my head groggy and thick. Things finished just as they had started, the cultists

removing their robes, packing away the candles they had set up and resuming the appearance of normal people. I watched as they walked back down the steps and disappeared in to the dark.

I could barely sleep when I got home and managed no more than a couple of hours of rest, but I felt no ill effects due to the adrenaline racing through my blood. I had done what so many people want to do - find something mystical and interesting in a city that, even with people flying around, can feel so mundane, even comic like, sometimes. I was left wanting to find out more, wondering what The Circle were doing with their strange rituals and what they were trying to achieve.

The next few days were filled with work, but I spent my spare moments going over the scene I had witnessed. I was eager to get back out at night, and the next time my shifts allowed was the following Saturday. This observation proceeded without incident. Not being caught in the rapture of the event this time I was able to make more thorough notes. After a few more excursions I started to understand their routine, getting to my vantage point in plenty of time, knowing roughly when they would arrive. By now I had become so wrapped up in my activities that it never occurred to me that someone could be watching what I was doing.

The highlight of these first few trips was a month and a half later. I had already observed six instances of The Circle's ceremonies, and seen little change from that first occasion, but on this seventh time things took a different turn. I had now seen enough of the ceremonies that I could mimic some of what they said and so I sat there watching them going through their rituals and keeping track of anything that was different from previous instances. Then, about half an hour in to their mystical chanting, a hero appeared out of the night sky.

I had seen plenty of heroes when I first came to the city. Just like any tourist or new visitor I had sat around in Atlas Plaza watching out for them. After a while I became less interested - sometimes I would barely turn my head when one went by. Paragon having so many more super heroes than other cities I suppose meant most of the residents didn't pay a great deal of heed to them.

Seeing this hero attack the Circle was something else though. To be there in secret when he appeared out of the sky made me feel like I was seeing a special event. I watched as he hit them with some sort of energy bolt and I found that part of me wanted to cheer for the hero, whereas another part of me wanted to stop him from ruining the ritual. I couldn't say I'd come to like The Circle, but they didn't seem to be doing anything wrong, just their own little ceremonies. The hero had little trouble capturing the mystics. He knocked each of them unconscious and teleported them away. Then he was gone, flying off in to the dark sky, and my night was brought to a premature end. I finished off the rest of my coffee and then went home, keeping to the shadows as I always did.

A few nights after this incident I took a break from watching The Circle. Christmas had come and, having worked through Thanks Giving, I was able to take some time off from the hospital to visit my parents. My time away was filled with food and present swapping and proved a

pleasant change from the grime of Kings Row. In January, when I was back in Paragon City and I had settled in to a normal routine, I began to get the urge to watch the Circle again. I suppose by then it had become a habit. Working in the hospital I didn't get much of a social life and the observations fitted in nicely with my shifts, giving me something to look forward to on my days off. If not an addiction then my observations had certainly become an obsession.

The Circle's pattern seemed to have changed in the new year. I guessed that this would be due to the movements of the planets or the moon or maybe even the seasons, and made a note to do more research about this at a later date. They had certainly changed where they were each night and it took me a while to find out when they would appear and in which locations. I almost had to start tracking them down all over again and it wasn't until February that I was back in to the routine of watching them on a regular basis. It was at the end of February, the eleventh time I had seen the Circle performing their strange spells, that I saw something different in a ceremony. This time they brought someone up the stairs with them - a small man with glasses. At first I thought he was just another member of the group. I had seen five of them on a number of occasions, with one of them acting as a guard and I presumed that this was the same setup. It wasn't the way he moved though, but more the way the others encouraged him to move, that made me watch more closely as they reached the top of the fire escape. When the group got to the roof they made the man stand in the middle of the group, one of them always next to him. It was when I saw the glint of a knife in one of their hands that I began to realise that the man probably wasn't a willing participant.

Of all the strange things I had seen I thought it most odd that the man did nothing to struggle or get away from them, as if he was resigned to his part in their scheme. Then their chanting began. As the green fire sparked in to life the man was lifted from his feet, his body locked rigid and I almost shouted for them to stop, fearing that they were hurting him. It could have been my imagination, but I am sure I heard him cry out as he floated in the air and I began to wonder if they were torturing him or performing some horrific right on his body.

From my other observations The Circle's experiments lasted for around two hours but with this one I could barely watch for more than twenty minutes. I found myself turning away from the scene and packing up my things, moving quietly across the rooftop I was on and down the fire escape, not wanting to see any more of what they were doing to that poor man. Back at my apartment I sat in a chair shaking and when I finally went to bed I was unable to sleep. I returned to the chair in front of the TV and dozed for a while, the monotony of the cable channels numbing me. When morning came things took on a muffled feeling, seeming slightly unreal.

Initially I doubted what I had seen. Was I really sure there had been a man in the middle of the flames or even that any of it had been real. Had my over working and lack of sleep caused some form of waking nightmare? As the morning wore on the strangeness of the previous night ebbed away and I started to come up with other theories about the fifth man. Maybe what I had seen wasn't part of a kidnapping but some ceremony carried over from ancient times. If I had stayed

to the end, I told myself, I would probably have found out that it was all just an act and the man was unharmed.

I went to work that afternoon and busied myself in the activity of the hospital, letting the drudgery of everyday life wash over me. During the next couple of days my thoughts about what I had seen became more rational and within a few days I had come up with a number of theories about what part the man had played and what had been happening. It was only a couple of days later that I found myself planning another observation. I wanted to try to catch another ceremony with a participant or victim in and I had come to the conclusion that the only way I could do this was to visit more than one site in a night. In all my previous observations it was only on that one occasion that I had seen what appeared to be a none Circle member involved and so if I was to see the same thing again I needed to increase my viewing rate. I started plotting out routes where I could get from one ceremony to another in the couple of hours I would have. This proved more difficult than I had at first thought, but a bit of work soon gave me a path plotted out, and my next two excursions at night allowed me to observe three ceremonies on each trip.

To my horror, during those nights, I saw yet another person, a woman this time, who was being put through the same trauma. This was the third of my observations that night and so although I was not able to watch how she was brought up to the rooftop, I was able to see how it ended and what I witnessed shook my soul.

The fires and the chanting of the Circle members died away and the body of the woman dropped to the floor. The magi packed away their robes just like any other time and I watched in horror as they carried what seemed like a lifeless corpse away with them. I have no idea if she was really dead. Even now I do not know what happens to the people the Circle use, but I do know that they are not willing participants and I doubt they are in possession of their minds.

My next trip was a few nights later and I decided to watch a further four ceremonies if I could. This would hopefully enable me to find another where a person was being used, and while I dreaded the thought of seeing further people practiced on by The Circle, I had decided on a course of action that I hoped would bring an end to the awful ceremonies of the cult. My parents had given me a digital camera as a Christmas present and I would use this to gather some evidence I could take to the police. If they would not listen then I would try to find a hero who could do something about it.

So it was that just as the blossom had started to appear in the trees and the light of spring had started to come back in to the world, I undertook what would be my final observation of The Circle's activities.

The night started disappointingly as I did not see anything at the first two gatherings other than what I had come to know as basic proceedings. There was an additional person at each one, however, and maybe this should have warned me that something was different that night. It was while I was moving to the third site that they grabbed me. I was walking down the alley at

the back of an apartment building towards the fire escape I intended to climb. The Circle members were on the adjacent building, and I had seen the flares from their fires as I had approached.

I didn't see the man waiting for me in the shadows nor the two who followed me down the alley. The single man stepped out of the darkness of a doorway as I approached the fire escape ladder, and in what now seems like a comical moment, said, "Good evening young lady. It's late for one such as you to be sneaking in to the back of an apartment."

I stepped back in surprise, instantly recognising him to be one of The Circle by his robe. Glancing back the way I had come I saw the other two approaching and even as it began to dawn on me that I was trapped, I started making excuses. I blurted out that I was on my way to see my boyfriend who lived in one of the apartments above. That he was expecting me. The man only laughed.

"Of course you are," he said. "You've not at all been watching us or following us around. So who is it you work for?"

With a sudden burst of action I tried to make a break for it, quickly dodging past the one cultist in front of me, but as I ran something hit me in the back and I felt myself lifted from my feet. I was held rigid just above the ground, my arms and legs locked in a running position. Slowly I was rotated around and I saw a green light spreading out from his raised hands and flowing around me. I was held there by this mystic's power, unable to move.

By this time the other two had moved to join their fellow and as I looked at the three of them I saw the knives in their hands and fear gripped me. The one holding me with his power let me down to the ground and the other two moved up to stand either side of me. I felt the point of one of their daggers dig in to my side and it was clear that any further attempt to escape would not be possible.

They questioned me for some time, asking me if I was working for anyone and I tried to humour them in the hope that something would happen that would allow me to make a break for it. I told them that I meant no harm and that I had not told anyone else about them. I told them that they could have all my notes, showing them the journal I carried in my backpack. I even told them I would work for them if that is what they wanted. I suppose I just babbled as I stood there, fearing for my life. They mentioned names and places I had never heard of, and never wish to find out more about, and no matter how much I beseeched them they refused to believe that I wasn't working with someone.

Finally the leader said, "You have obviously been trained well, we will find out how much we can extract from you with the power we wield."

It was then that I tried to get away again. I fought them in any way I could, fearing what was about to happen to me, but as I struggled one of them hit me on my head and the world went black.

When I came around I was lying on a rooftop with stars above me. For a few moments I just lay there trying to remember what had happened, and then, slowly, the memories came back to me. As fear flooded through me once more I struggled to rise but found I was weak from being knocked out. I'd like to say I found it in me to try to flee again, but a wave of resignation came over me and I could not find the strength to run. I just hoped that death would come quickly and that I wouldn't scream too much.

When I heard them start their chanting my body tensed with fear. The three of them surrounded me and from each I saw the green fire I had seen on many a night begin to flow forth. It enveloping my body and lifted me from the ground. I braced myself for pain, but as I floated there it felt more like pins and needles than the burning I had expected. Although I was held firm, unable to move my arms or legs, I found that I could relax my muscles – it was more like being suspended in water than being tied up. I heard them chanting words and phrases I had listened to so many times before. The proximity, however, brought a deeper more fearful tone to the sounds.

At first, as I listened to their chanting, nothing appeared to change and I started to become accustomed to the tingling that flowed across my skin. Then from the corner of my eye I caught sight of something. It was a tiny glimmer at first, a strange sort of light that started as little pin pricks in the blackness. It reminded me of stars coming out on a clear night. I also felt a change in the temperature of the air, a cooling. The green fire was still flowing over me and I could feel its effect, but something was different. As the light grew I started to feel something pulling at my mind – a strange sort of tugging, as if something was calling to me. The tiny lights continued to expand and the chanting from the mystics faded. I got the impression that a vast expanse of space was opening up all around me.

At the back of my mind I wondered why I hadn't seen this effect during the times I had watched from a distance, but even as I tried to understand what was happening the feeling of standing on the edge of something began to overwhelm me. I started to feel that a gaping chasm that had always been there, waiting behind what I thought was the real world, was only now being opened for me to see. Then the voices started. I heard them calling to me from out of the abyss in a language I did not understand, calling for me to join them. I knew then that I was being sent from my world to somewhere far from human understanding. Even now I struggle to describe fully what I witnessed, for it was unlike anything I had seen or felt before. It was a world that most people have no knowledge of and I can only pray that those who see it do not return with their memories still intact, for the burden is almost too much to carry.

Just as I had started to give myself up to the blackness of that other world, wishing only for death, hearing my own voice calling back to the creatures to take me in their dark embrace, it all

disappeared abruptly and I felt the concrete of the roof smack against my knees and palms as I landed.

I realised then that my eyes had been open during the ceremony for now I could see the rooftop of the building again and there, in the midst of the Circle, was a hero. He was clad in bright fire which he used to attack the mystics with. I watched as one tried to flee and was pushed over the edge by a blast, his cries rising up through the night air as he fell from the building. The hero leapt off after him and I just sat there, alone for a moment, with two unconscious Circle members lying near me.

Moments later the hero appeared again, and began checking the bodies. I managed to get to my feet and leaned against an air conditioning duct. As I regained some of my composure and my strength returned, I thanked the hero for saving my life. He asked if I was injured and I told him I was fine, just a little shaken, and that I could make my own way home. I had an overwhelming urge to leave that rooftop as quickly as possible. The hero watched me from the edge of the building as I made my way back down the fire escape and out on to the road where I flagged down a cab.

When I got home I sat huddled in the darkness thinking about what I had gone through and how lucky I was to have been rescued. Now, a week later, I don't feel I have been saved. I know now that it would have been better for the hero to have left me in the grasp of the Circle, for every time I close my eyes, every time I try to sleep, I see that dark place in my dreams and hear the voices calling out to me. I wished now that I had been taken to that dark world and never been brought back to what I used to think was reality. Now I know that there is so much more beyond the world we see. I do not know if The Circle come from the blackness that awaits beyond or if they just send their sacrifices there, but what I do know is that the longer I stay here in Paragon City, looking out at the green glows on the roof tops, the more I wish to flee. Now I only sleep for a few hours each night in a drug induced coma with the aid of self prescribed pills. Still, as the drugs wear off, I am awoken by a fear that leaves me shivering. I remember the great abyss that lay spread out before me, knowing that it will always be waiting for me in the darkness.

I am hoping that the small town I have found in New England will give me some solace and peace. My parting wish is that anyone who finds this diary heeds my warning and is wise enough not to follow in my footsteps. I also try not to think that every hero who releases someone from the clutches of The Circle may be leaving them to suffer a lifetime of fear.