

POETRY OF A MADMAN

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## ABSTRACT

### POETRY OF A MADMAN

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*Poetry of a Madman* is a short story collection consisting entirely of prose tales. Each tale is a lamentation, and illustrates an inability to cope with the subsequent emotional dishevelment generated by the paradox of loss. A loss is never truly detraction, but an accretion of unwanted memories and pain, under whose shroud the vestiges of self struggle to be heard. In “A Very Cute Boy with Horrifying Warts,” Rachel Smith languishes over her own lost childhood, while attempting to help young Farrid keep his. This amalgamation of past and present springs to life and haunts its creator by heralding the immutability of the future, which fosters a conviction in the futility of hope. Wilfried Sorg, in “Stormy Seas,” becomes mired in sorrow after watching his every aspiration evaporate before his eyes. Psychological haunting, therefore, becomes the struggle of each story. The self longs to dwell with the beautiful, but the ghastliness of haunting silences the music, and all that remains is but the poetry of a madman.

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## Introduction

*Poetry of a Madman* stems from the plethora of contradiction I notice in society, and explores the instability of words. Words are far too often bandied about without any regard to the consequences of their misuse, creating situations rife with the potential for unnecessary pain. The title reflects this, as the collection consists only of prose.

An example of such contradiction is that “I do” more often than not really means “I don’t,” particularly in wedding vows. This is reflected in the relationship of the Sorgs in my short story “Stormy Seas.” Betlindis never truly loved Wilfried, but she lied to him without any thought of the consequences. It is a common faulty belief that words are not physical, and hold no true power, that their misuse can be easily rectified. It is far too easy to say one thing and do another, and still the world turns, the sun yet sets and rises. But the despair felt by Wilfried is very physical, very real.

Words are edifiers as much as they are weapons. Their use (or lack thereof) can have a positive or devastating effect on a person. Consider Rachel Smith from “A Very Cute Boy with Horrifying Warts.” Dialogue is completely void from her flashbacks, with the exception of a couple of exclamations toward the end. I did this to illustrate the complete lack of communication with her family during her childhood. There is no “good job,” no “I love you” from her father, only an intent preoccupation with practicality at the detriment of emotional development; there is only a book half-read.

Therefore, I use the ideas of contradiction and the power of words to help illustrate a couple of the main themes of the collection: the paradoxical effects of loss, and the futility of hope.

A loss is never truly detraction, but an accretion of unwanted memories and pain, under whose shroud the vestiges of self struggle to be heard. Rachel Smith in “A Very Cute Boy with Horrifying Warts” languishes over her own lost childhood, while attempting to help young Farrid keep his. Her past continuously haunts her. Her passion for life, signified by the color red, leaves her when she is forced to be an adult as a child. She reaches out for fire in an attempt to reclaim her passion, only to learn it is something that cannot be taken back; the power the past exerts on her makes her a prisoner of her own mind. As an adult, she becomes a successful pediatrician. But how can that success help her cope with the loss of her childhood?

Wilfried Sorg’s loss is another example of accretion from detraction. A missionary from “Stormy Seas,” the departure of his wife leaves him shattered, and that loss is quickly compounded by numerous other losses all stemming from his wife’s decision. Because of the flippant misuse of words—Betlindis’ empty wedding vow--Wilfried’s entire future is altered: he is forced to give up his dream of helping his faith grow in the United States, and is forced to return to a war-torn nation.

Another example is that of Henry, in “The Haunting of Kingward House.” Edward lauds his arrival, stating “It is good that you are here.” These words mimic those of St. Peter during the Transfiguration, when Christ’s divinity radiates from Him in bright light, and Moses and Elijah both appear at His side. St. Peter then proposes to build three tents so everyone could stay on the mountain and learn. Perverting these words, Edward is primarily interested in casting Henry in the image of himself, into a Kingward, to embrace wealth and power. Henry realizes this, and takes the only way out he can recognize—death.

Yet, for all this darkness, for the overwhelming sense of futility, a glimmer of hope is always present. Pastor Schäfer, in “Stormy Seas,” mentions to Wilfried that the only thing a person can’t steal from someone else is their faith, since it is freely given by God.

In “The Haunting of Kingward House,” the roses in Kingward Gardens are another sign of hope, a symbol of God’s constancy, that even within the midst of such a volatile atmosphere as Kingward House, God remains.

Stylistically, I used symbolism to add depth to the themes of loss and hopelessness. Despair can often feel like the imposition of a foreign entity. Detremius Spaere, or the “detrimental spear” in “Stormy Seas,” is the personification of despair, remarking once to Wilfried, “I feel as if I walk within you.”

This possession makes one feel like something other than their self, as if they are blemished. Farrid’s horrifying warts in “A Very Cute Boy with Horrifying Warts” are another symbol of the consuming force of despair.

The symbol of despair with the largest presence, however, is Kingward House from “The Haunting of Kingward House.” This mansion, built from the stones of a former castle, represents the erection of walls within the human heart, that once torn down, are often only rebuilt under a different guise.

For inspiration in illustrating the tug between despair and hope, I looked to the Romantic authors Mary Shelley and John Keats. I think no work of English literature exists which better displays the darkness of the human heart than Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. In a mad furor, Frankenstein creates a monster that in turn haunts him until the moment of his death. Because of his fear and unwillingness to take responsibility for himself, Frankenstein consigns everyone close to him to death, by running from his laboratory and leaving his monster behind. Because

Betlindis from “Stormy Seas” did not own up to her true feelings, because Rachel’s father from “A Very Cute Boy with Horrifying Warts” valued practicality over relationship, those around them suffered.

As a response to this despair, death is often looked to as the ultimate escape. Keats wrote

“for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath;  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die.”

However, Keats continues “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!” The ancient song of the nightingale continues, the bird driven to share its song of beauty. Likewise, man can be driven to pursue such beauty. Henry comes to this conclusion when he states “*Life without poetry is only death,*” poetry being a symbol for beauty. In the absence of emotion, devotion can give purpose—devotion to a religious faith, or to an idea or pursuit.

The underlying symbolism is one of the collection’s greatest strengths, in my opinion. Every name, color, and even certain phrases, each serve a symbolic purpose. Strict realism doesn’t get a reader thinking. I believe the greatest test of the effectiveness of a piece is whether it can get a reader to stop and think about it after they put it down. Why is a pair of red boots walking down the hall? What is the significance of a boy sharing the name with a dragon-slaying saint? A reader should be left with questions, because they allow for greater interaction with the text.

Another strength is my painstaking research into historical grounding. Governor McCallum, Pastor Löhe, Lord Germain, and General Clinton are all actual historical figures

active during the time the stories are set. Furthermore, every historical detail—dress, equipment, the like--was equally as researched.

On the other hand, however, I think the symbolism can potentially be the collection's biggest detraction. Certain areas may be too abstract, and instead of eliciting thought, may only provoke frustration. The entirety of "A Very Cute Boy with Horrifying Warts" may fall under this criticism. The constant shift in time is intended to tie Rachel and Farrid closer together, but may instead disrupt the flow of the story. Rachel's mind is given a concrete setting, but it might be mistaken as an actual place. I rewrote the piece once, and it may best be served by another total rewriting. The previous draft did not contain the flashbacks, but I found it necessary to increase the role of Rachel's childhood to better establish an emotional pull to the story.

Furthermore, I changed the main character's name from Sarah to Rachel, to utilize a Biblical metaphor. Rachel, Israel's most beloved wife, longed to bear him children, but was barren. She was eventually able to have two children, Joseph and Benjamin, but died delivering the latter. Her weeping was later used as a prophecy foretelling King Herod's slaughter of the innocents at Christ's birth.

The detraction of the symbolism can best be explained by the fact that *Poetry of a Madman* is not complete. In its entirety, it is a seven story collection, an exploration of the mind of characters abused and abandoned, who begin to believe in fantasy as a means of justifying their pain.

There are three stories that I elected not to include in this thesis. The first of these, "The Door," will ultimately open the collection. This story is written as a first person account of the disappearance of a red-headed woman named Echo--the narrator's lover--through a door she opened to Hell, an apparition and event that is totally indescribable by the narrator. Echo

represents the narrator's passion, which is lost when the door is opened to something he can't understand, that he can't describe—infidelity. This is only revealed in the last story of the collection, however. "The Door" has therefore been left out due to the final story's absence.

I intentionally created a sequence of stories that would each build upon the theme of pain and tragedy: child abuse in "A Very Cute Boy with Horrifying Warts," insecurity in "Makookoo," and the search for purpose in "I Know Why the Nightingale Sings." This latter piece, the second to be left out of this thesis, is set during the bloody battle of Hurtgen Forest in World War II. John Smith, a young, poor farmer with an unfaithful wife, displays exceptional courage on the battlefield, all the while fighting his biggest battle inside himself. He carries with him at all times a small pocketbook of handwritten poetry, including "Ode to a Nightingale," which he reads on a daily basis in his search to see a nightingale—or to find purpose for his life. It isn't until he is shot and killed that a lone nightingale descends upon him, illustrating an opportunity robbed from him by the actions of another.

The robbery of John Smith's opportunity leads to despair in the following two stories. Despair leads to suicide in "The Haunting of Kingward House," while it leads to murder in "Stormy Seas."

The final story of the collection--and the last of the three not included in my thesis--is "The Hounds of Hell are Calling," which bookends the theme "The Door" opens with. The story opens with Norman, an escaped inmate from a mental institution, running through a courtyard, followed by the sound of the guard dogs. He is fortuitously picked up by another man named Norman, who drives him away. The inmate explains to the driver that he was wrongly institutionalized, but through a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that he murdered his wife when he found out she was going to leave him. Driver Norman drops inmate Norman off at the end of

a long driveway without explanation and drives off. Norman follows the drive to a massive mansion with a sprawling garden. Within the garden, he finds young Farrid, George, and Wilfried playing ball. After they play a game together, the boys explain that they must leave “to hear the nightingale sing.” A flock of nightingales descend from the sky and carry the boys away. Falling stars strike the birds carrying Norman, and he falls back to the ground. Distraught, he notices a set of gravestones at the corner of the garden: one for John, one for Henry, and one for Wilfried. Glancing at them through tear-bleared eyes, he finds the names etched on each had changed to Norman. In a fit of despair, he attempts to jump from a cliff at the edge of the garden, but is stopped by the Makookoo, Edward, and Spaere. They reveal that Norman is in a realm of his creation, and that they are the embodiments of his fears, and if he dies, they each die with him. Norman therefore asks what would justify his continued existence, and he is answered that by showing people ugliness, they can better appreciate true beauty.

Content with this new sense of purpose, he is directed to a door, coming full circle with “The Door”--Norman has been to Hell and back. When a hand reaches out to grab him, the story switches to reality, where Norman is an inmate at a mental institution, writing stories on an old typewriter. After being abused as a child and abandoned by his wife, he went mad and convinced himself that he had murdered his wife, which he did not do. His pastor frequently stops by, and after deciphering Norman’s stories, tries to convince Norman to find strength in his faith. But Norman points out the differences in their lives, and the difficulty he has in having faith in anyone. The pastor leaves, his own faith tested. Alone, Norman goes to a barred window, where he sees his reflection staring back at him. Not wanting a reflection but an echo—a companion through his vale of tears--he reaches through the bars and shatters the window. He shouts out to the empty courtyard in dejection, but all he hears in response is the sound of hounds.

As a whole, I wrote *Poetry of a Madman* to be shared, to bring attention to the unintended consequences of actions, and to the power of words and saying what you mean/meaning what you say. It has always been a dream of mine to get published, and, once the collection is finished, that is an avenue I want to pursue. Until then, it will be prowling the corridors of my mind.

## A Very Cute Boy with Horrifying Warts

She stepped slowly into the hospital, flanked by two armed soldiers, and began to unwind her headscarf from her fair-skinned face of anachronistic youth, leaving the desert behind glass doors. The cool, steady stream of conditioned air continuously exhaled by hidden industrial units spilled over the creases and edges of the unfolding fabric and blew over her gradually exposed skin—

--teleporting her to a corridor within her memory, a corridor with many rooms. A shaft of light pierced the darkness from a keyhole several doors down. She shuffled her way towards the door, dodging an empty low hanging light socket by a dip of her shoulders with a developed determination. Her shoes scraped the dirty floor until her feet came to rest side by side. She reached out a hand and grasped the brass knob to a door she knew well, a door that led to a room she visited often which housed another time and place, and swung it open.

An incandescent bulb dangled from an exposed wire in the center of the room like an all-seeing eye, blanketing the interior with its steady gaze, illuminating a dust-coated slide projector on an otherwise empty table. The projector whirred to life spontaneously, the loud hum of its spinning fan drowning out all other noise. Light projected from a small lens onto a cracked screen, and she marveled at how something from so minor a source could grow to consume so large a space.

The black and white image on the screen was of a fire-lit room with a pair of small red boots sitting beside a door. The vivid red bled from the screen, as if spilling from an unseen inkwell.

With a loud click, the image changed. It was still the same fire-lit room, but this time one boot was on a young girl's foot.—

--The scarf was pulled back from her left cheek, and the conditioned air pumping from the hidden industrial units washed over her exposed skin. The gentle touch of the cool air heightened her senses, and euphoria washed over her, as if bursting through a dam in her brain. She felt a pressure around her left ankle.—

--The door stood open. A dog hung frozen in mid-air, at the height of an excited leap, a chain dangling from its neck, surrounded by snow. The young girl's cheeks had crowned the edge of a scarf in a genuine smile, the cold winter air bringing out a soft hue of red that lay dormant just beneath her skin. The clock above the door read ten minutes to three.—

--The momentum of time constantly pushes life forward, until the senses become numb to their surroundings. It took little time for the young woman's body to acclimate to the more controlled and favorable temperature of the interior of the hospital, and the initial tide of euphoria from leaving the desert heat crept back into the recesses of wherever such feelings come. Actually, she knew. *From the ventral tegmental area to the nucleus accumbens, via dopamine. From the VTA to the NuA.* The phrase played through her head in a sing-song fashion: *from the VTA to the NuA, via d-o-p-a. Head, shoulders, knees, and toes.* The emptiness slowly reclaimed her.—

--The young girl was back inside the fire-lit room, in the process of unwinding the scarf from her face, a few red strands of hair having already fallen to her shoulders. The door was being closed by her father; beyond it the dog slinked back toward its small wooden house, its head turned back to face her in an abject sign of longing. The clock above the door displayed the right angle of three o'clock. The little pair of boots, now back in their former resting place, no longer shined, as if the hidden inkwell had run dry.

The next slide photograph depicted her father feeding a slab of wood to the eager flames, his arm outstretched, the wood not yet released from his fingers. In his other hand he held a large textbook entitled *Basics of Human Anatomy*, a bent bookmark jutted out from the top.—

--“Dr. Smith?”

Dr. Smith inhaled sharply as the solitary dangling bulb flickered and went out, allowing darkness to claim that small room in her mind, taking with it the slide projector of memory.

A good-looking man, certainly no older than forty, stood beside her, eyeing her with concern. “Dr. Rachel Smith?” he reiterated.

“Dr. Malick?”

Malick waved her armed escorts away. “I’ll take her from here.”

The soldiers nodded and turned to the door, the belts and ammunition on their uniforms clanking as they left. The orderlies and visitors--some in white lab coats, others in more traditional Arab garb--that stood nearby paid them no mind, unaffected by the constant presence of heavy firepower at a time of war.

“Is everything all right, Doctor?” Malick asked, studying her face. “Your eyes seemed a bit distant.”

Rachel smoothed a hand over her long, red hair, struggling for an explanation she felt comfortable giving. “Yes,” she replied quickly. “I was just... shocked. Culture shock.” She looked Malick in the eyes, hoping her steady gaze relayed a sense of assurance.

He smiled. “Am I not what you expected?”

Rachel hated to admit it, but he was right. She had expected some small, dingy, out-of-the-way building, where the head doctor was an old, gray haired man with a long beard and dirt-streaked robes. Instead, Dr. Malick was young, clean-shaven, and well-manicured, with trimmed black hair. Instead of robes he wore a black and brown dotted Polo neatly tucked into a pair of khakis.

He waved his hand and cut her off before she could garble anything that remotely sounded like a response. “It is all right,” he reassured her. “Not everything here is as it seems. Please, follow me.”

Rachel cast her blue eyes about the interior of the hospital in awe, yet uncertain if it was really only a mirage conjured by the desert heat. The hospital was more expansive than she envisioned. A monolithic testament to the future and the supremacy of man’s knowledge, it was a multilevel complex with a beautiful glass façade. Iraq was full of awe-inspiring art, some of it the oldest in the history of mankind, and the hospital served as a link between the past and present—joining the ancient art of healing with modern aesthetics.

“So, how are you enjoying Iraq thus far?” Malick inquired.

“It’s beautiful,” Rachel replied.

“Then I’m sure you’ll fit right in,” he responded, turning back to her with a smile.

Rachel smiled and looked away from him to a spot on the floor.

They entered his office, Malick quickly rounding his desk and opening a drawer. Stacks of books and papers lay scattered about his desk and several bookshelves. He withdrew an identification card on a lanyard and handed it to her. “Here is your official identification. Welcome to the Pediatrics Department.”

Rachel put it around her neck, where the weight hung heavy.

Malick closed the drawer and came back to her side. “Let me show you to his room.”

While on the plane from the United States, Rachel had stared at the portrait of the young boy. A leading pediatrician, she had been contacted by the U.S. military to help with a rather strange case, on behalf of the Iraqi medical establishment.

Pediatrics. That’s what she’d devoted herself to. She strove to give children something she had never had—an enjoyable childhood. She jumped at the opportunity to study a disorder that the medical community had never seen, to help a boy be a six-year-old boy.

Malick stopped in front of a closed door with a narrow window. Rachel peered inside. The boy was sitting on the floor with a nurse, his hands bandaged to the point where only the tips of his fingers were visible. Any semblance of a smile was an obscure memory as he pushed a toy fire truck across the floor with a clubbed hand, a fire truck as red as—

--the fire that crackled and danced before her. The flames weren’t a living being, yet they were more alive than she. They had no vocal cords, no muscles to contract for voluntary movement, but spoke in whistles and snaps, moved in fluid motion.

Sprawled on the floor, the child Rachel rested her head in a hand and stared into the flames, ignoring *Basics of Human Anatomy* which lay open before her. She stared, and grew jealous. She was envious of the fire. She was the one with the gift of life, yet she was constrained

to the pages of a book in which she had no true interest while the fire crept at will to the edges of the log. She wanted to talk, she wanted to move.

With her eyes locked on a single flickering flame, she extended a hand in an attempt to grasp it, to somehow hold it, and make it hers. She watched as her skin turned a deep red and started to blister, yet the numbness within remained.

It wasn't until she heard a sharp cry from behind her that she quickly jerked her hand out. Blood trickled down her wrist and splashed to the floor. A small pool grew and pushed against the edge of the book. At the contact of blood and paper, the pain finally exploded in her head, and she released a piercing shriek.—

--“Dr. Smith?”

Rachel snapped her head toward Malick, who was once again eyeing her with concern.

“I'm so sorry, it's just that my heart aches for him. Why should any child have to lose their innocence so early?” She studied Malick's face as if it might contain the answer.

He shook his head in resignation. “It is one of life's biggest mysteries as to why the greatest horrors are reserved for those who deserve them least.” They both turned back to the window and observed in silence the boy seated beside a nurse, while an older man sat in a nearby chair reading a book. Malick stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Are you ready for your briefing?”

Rachel's hand felt wet, and she wiped it down the side of her pants. “Yes.”

“He was found by Americans, lying in the corner of an abandoned house. He was severely dehydrated, despite there being several containers of water nearby. He told them his name is Farrid Hussein Amiri. When asked where his parents were, he refused to answer.”

Malick shook his head. "It can only be assumed that they have been killed." He paused for a moment before continuing. "His hands were wrapped in dirty bandages, and when asked about what had happened to them, he again refused to answer. It wasn't until a military medic took a look that anybody knew what he was hiding."

Malick inhaled deeply. "The growths are about four centimeters in diameter and two centimeters in height. They become inflamed at certain times during the month and cause him great pain." Malick withdrew his hands from his pockets and slapped them on his thighs in frustration. "Then, without explanation, they go away." He shook his head. "We cannot decipher why. I have had every pediatrician in Iraq take a look at him, and yet it remains as much of a puzzle as it did when the soldiers first brought him in. We don't even know what to call it. We refer to them around here as 'the warts.'" He chuckled. "He's a very cute boy with horrifying warts."

Malick folded his arms across his chest and sighed. "I don't even know where to begin to start piecing it together." He turned to Rachel. "They told me you are the best. So I pray that you can discover what it is that plagues this poor boy, because I cannot help him."

"I will try my hardest," Rachel assured him. She motioned towards the door. "Can I go in?"

Malick nodded. "Absolutely."

Rachel grasped the cool metal knob, and gently pulled the wooden door open. It squealed loudly on its hinges. Both the nurse and the old seated man looked up as she walked in followed by Dr. Malick, but the boy didn't budge--he was too intent on pushing the fire engine back and forth on the floor.

Malick spoke in Arabic to the nurse, who subsequently rose to her feet and left the room. He motioned to the older man, who had sparse gray hair and a round figure. “This is Abbas Bibi, who will be serving as your interpreter since Farrid does not know English.”

Rachel introduced herself. Abbas took off his reading glasses and set them on top of his book on the nearby table. He stared at her with a hint of disapproval as he returned the greeting.

By now Farrid had left the floor and climbed onto his bed, the fire truck in his lap. He wore a dirty pair of olive green shorts with a tattered orange shirt. He had no socks or shoes.

Rachel sat on the edge of his bed. “Hello, Farrid. My name is Dr. Rachel Smith, but you can just call me Rachel, OK?”

The interpreter prattled off emotionlessly. Farrid stared at his truck, never raising his eyes to look at her. He spoke softly in response. “He says hello,” Abbas replied.

Rachel pointed to the boy’s lap. “Where did you get the fire truck?”

Abbas and Farrid exchanged words and the translator replied, “An American soldier gave it to him.”

“Do you want to be a fireman when you grow up?”

Listening to Abbas pose the question, Farrid shook his head.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” she inquired.

Abbas got a single word response. Abbas narrowed his eyes and said something else, but Farrid didn’t respond, he simply stared at his toy. “He said when he grows up he wants to be dead.”

Rachel reached out and gently placed her hand on his bare shin. “Well, I’m your new doctor, and do you want to know what’s really special? You’re my only patient. I’m going to do

everything I can to help you. You are going to be seeing me a lot, and hopefully we can become good friends. Would you like that?"

Farrid lifted his head and looked her in the eyes. What Rachel saw within them was well beyond the age of six. He replied and Abbas said, "He says for you to leave him alone, and just let him die."

Rachel turned her eyes idly to her pant leg, searching for a way into the child's mind. She had worked with children for years, worked with children from abusive homes, starved and beaten and sick, but she had never encountered a child who wanted to die. "I'm told that when you were found, you were severely dehydrated, yet there was water in your house. Did you know about the water?"

"He said yes."

"Then why didn't you drink some?"

Farrid started speaking rapidly, angrily, waving a hand that had been reduced to an ineffective stump through the air.

"He said that he wanted to die, and that he would have if it wasn't for the Americans. He says that he curses you and your country for stealing death away from him."

Rachel leaned in close. "Why, Farrid? Did something bad happen to you? You can tell me, I want to help you."

Farrid's eyes fell back to his lap. His mouth moved with a soft utterance. "This is my pain," Abbas declared. "That is what he said."

Rachel glanced about the room at the assortment of pencil sketches that adorned the walls. Each one depicted a pattern of circles with a varying degree of shading. She rose to her feet and examined one closely. The center circle had been filled in completely, small black drops

seeming to drip from it. “What have you drawn here?” she asked, still searching the pencil strokes etched on the page.

“He says it is the moon.”

Following the shaded circles consecutively, Rachel realized what they were depicting: the lunar cycle. For a six-year-old, he was very smart. But the center circle still puzzled her. Was it the full or new moon? And what was that dripping from it? She didn’t want to bombard the boy with too many questions, and since she had plenty of time to get to know him, she decided to relinquish the pursuit for now. She turned and smiled at Farrid. “It was nice meeting you. I’ll be seeing you soon, OK?” Farrid stared apathetically at her as she made her way to the door.

Dr. Malick followed her out and closed the door behind them. Frustration and sadness spiraled together to form mild anger, and she had to fight to keep her composure. “What could have happened to that little boy to make him desire such a thing as death?”

Malick shook his head but stayed silent.

Over the next couple of weeks, Rachel kept watch over Farrid, trying to become his friend, staying at the hospital for long hours into the night. As the month dragged on, he became more and more withdrawn as his warts began to grow inflamed. At night, he would rest his head against the wall and stare up through the window at the moon that hung in the night sky, crying softly to himself.

It was late at night and Dr. Malick and most of the hospital staff had left. Rachel sat at her desk, working through stacks of test results and other myriads of papers, while tapping her fingers against the plastic I.D. card that hung from her neck. Her eyes were dry and burning.

Placing her elbows on the papers covering her desk, she lowered her head to her hands and rubbed her eyes vigorously. She lifted her head for a moment to glance blearily at the digital clock on the corner of her desk—ten to three. She sighed loudly and lowered her head back to her hands.

She was jolted awake when a loud whirring shattered the silence. She sat up so abruptly that she threatened to tip the chair she was sitting in. She shot her hands out to the desk top to steady herself, and found her hands were sweating profusely as the papers stuck to her palms.

She glanced over at the clock at the corner of her desk—three. After rubbing her eyes one last time, which was a poor attempt at parting the black curtains of sleep that had settled over them, she haphazardly scooped all the papers atop her desk into a pile—to be sorted later--and crammed them into a leather briefcase.

Rachel shuffled to the door, turned off the light, grabbed the doorknob—and heard footsteps on the other side. Puzzled by the thought of who would be walking the halls at this hour, she opened the door and stepped into the dark hall.

Light filtered through a keyhole several doors away. The whirring that awoke her was coming from the other side of that door. She took a step forward and the door slowly creaked open. The whirring increased in volume until it was nauseating, vibrating Rachel's head. She watched as a bright glowing pair of red boots walked on their own out of the room and into the hall. The boots paused, and then walked away from her.

Rachel realized that those were her red boots from when she was six years old, that those red boots meant more to her than anything, and that they mustn't be taken from her. "Wait! Don't leave me!" she cried, but the boots didn't hesitate.

Rachel dropped her briefcase and ran down the hall after them. Running nearly blind, her face struck at full speed a low hanging light socket. She inhaled sharply and stumbled back a couple steps, her hands reaching for her face. Pain pulsed through her head. She peered down the hall. The boots had had stopped in front of another door, perhaps twenty feet away. The door slowly opened as she watched. “No!” Rachel bolted down the hall once more, this time dodging the empty light socket, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t reach them in time. The boots disappeared into blackness as the door shut. Rachel pulled frantically at the doorknob, only to realize that it wasn’t there anymore. She slammed her palm against the door in panic. “Please!” she cried, pounding until pain radiated up her arm. “Please!” The beating became softer as tears spilled down her face. Falling to her knees, Rachel wept.

Rachel awakened with her face on a stack of papers. She’d fallen asleep and hit her head on the desk. The pain slowly settled behind her eye.

The air conditioning droned loudly. She glanced at the clock at the corner of her desk-- three. She sighed and lifted her hands. Papers stuck to one by some unknown adhesive. She peeled a sheet away and discovered that a sizable red blotch had soaked through. She glanced at her palm, which was now covered in blood. Her eye was bleeding. With a tissue she tried to stanch the flow. Wadding the tissue, she used whatever was left of it to wipe the paper that had stuck to her hand, before she scooped them into a pile, which she decided to resort later. She crammed them all into a leather briefcase.

Rachel stepped out into the hall. The long corridor was dark and serene. From Farrid’s door she saw moonlight spilling through the narrow window. She decided to check on him briefly before she left. She made her way down the hall, clutching her briefcase to her chest, and stopped before the door. Moonlight washed over her as she peered inside.

Farrid's face was twisted in agony, his body contorted in strange angles on his bed.

The briefcase fell from Rachel's arms as she flung the door open and raced inside.

"Farrid, what's wrong?" she implored, leaning over him.

His eyes slowly rolled forward, and he leveled them at his doctor, the muscles in his neck pulled taut, his face red with strain.

"Farrid, what's wrong?" Rachel said again. "Can you understand me? Is it your hands?" She reached for the bandages, but Farrid slapped her away. He shouted rapidly in Arabic.

Rachel ran to the door and shouted down the hall. "Quick, get help!" A nurse came running at the sound of her cries.

The nurse shook her head, not understanding.

Rachel struggled for a word the nurse would know. "Malick! Call Dr. Malick!"

With a quick nod, the nurse ran back to the nurse's station.

On the bed, Farrid had begun to shake. He shouted at her and pointed furiously to the door.

Rachel shook her head. "Farrid, I don't understand you! Just hold on, help is coming."

Farrid swung his arm over to his bedside table and groped frantically until he found what he was searching for. He worked his fingertips under his fire truck and flung it at Rachel's head.

The metal toy struck her skull.

She hissed in pain and grabbed her face. Blood spilled between her fingers and ran down her arm. The boy was staring at her, fearfully.

He jabbed a wrapped stump towards the door and shouted, tears spilling down his cheeks.

"Farrid, I want to help you!" she told him, frustrated, knowing they couldn't understand each other.

Conjuring every last bit of energy he had, Farrid leapt from his bed and cowered in the corner, glancing up through the window at the full moon. He started to convulse violently, his head striking the wall behind him rhythmically.

Rachel took a step toward him to move him away from the wall when his body fell limp as he surrendered to the forces inside of him. Farrid's hands lifted from the floor and long tentacles burst through the bandages, sliding out from his warts. They wrapped around Rachel, squeezing her so she couldn't breathe, couldn't scream. They bit down voraciously on her fingers and scalp with tiny razor-sharp teeth. Rachel's heart beat furiously as she struggled to free herself, but their hold was too great. Bit by bit, Rachel was ripped apart and devoured until she was no more.

Gluttoned on the life of another, the tentacles wormed back into Farrid's hands and disappeared.

The hall soon reverberated with rapid footfalls. A nurse ran into the room and came to an abrupt stop. Farrid was asleep peacefully in his bed. She lowered her hands to her knees as she tried to get her breath under control. Why had she been running? She couldn't remember. She turned her eyes to the floor and saw a plastic I.D. card lying face down. She picked it up, and turned it over in her hands: *Dr. Rachel Smith*. The nurse puzzled over the foreign name, and looked about the room. Except for the boy, she was alone. She looked down one last time at the name card before slipping it into her pocket. She stepped out into the hall, slowly closing the door behind her. Whoever Dr. Smith was, she was gone, and had left behind nothing but her name.

## Makookoo

“Send him victorious! Happy and glorious! Long to reign over us: God save The King!”

The searing Natal heat did little to melt the pride within Major General George Smith’s heart at the raising of the Natalian flag. He remained at attention through the entirety of the anthem while sweat cascaded into his eyes, stinging them with its splenetic salinity, though not budging them from their stoic gaze at the colonial flag.

The blue banner regally accepted the invitation of the wind to run with it whithersoever it should lead, and though tethered to the tall, stationary pole, yet did it gracefully wave, the Union Jack and the Device of wildebeest cresting the waves and sinking into the valleys that rippled through the fabric, fanning the flames of patriotism in some--while solidifying the ice of hatred in others. More than one hundred native Zulu stood in compulsory compliance, watching indignantly as the emblem encroached upon the vast expanse from which they took their name. Armed colonial troops stood watch, ensuring that proper decorum was carefully practiced by all.

General Smith dragged the backside of his hand across his forehead, diverting the deluge before donning his pith helmet to shield his eyes from the glaring sun, enshrouding the tufts of bristly grey that still clung to the sides of his cranium. He pivoted to face his second in command, Brigadier General Henry Christopher, a man of younger years, who was in the process of doing the same. “General,” said he, “dismiss the natives.”

General Christopher curtly nodded his head. “Yes, sir.” He started across the sandy terrain before he was stopped once again by the voice of the Major General.

“And General--” Christopher turned respectfully to take heed of his superior, “--be sure to communicate to the Colonel that I want them all back here this evening for the lowering of the colors. I’ll make good citizens yet out of these savages.”

Though by now accustomed to the Major General's prejudices, General Christopher nevertheless momentarily bristled at the statement before once again nodding in accedence.

"Yes, sir." The two men parted ways, Smith in swift retrogression to his tent.

Small, nearly naked native children congregated before the canvas drawn ingress, rapturously engaged in a game of mbube mbube. Their vernal shrill voices rose in intensity as the blindfolded child mimicking the lion drew ever nearer the blindfolded child portraying the impala. "Mbube! Mbube! Mbube! Mbube! Mbube! Mbube! Mbube! Mbube!"

The velocious cadence of the children's chant seemingly lulled the lion into a daze, and he momentarily hesitated, the impala frenetically dashing to and fro, desperately trying to evade the clutches of the predator. Then, in a moment of possessed furor, just as the cat carefully calculates the precise moment to pounce upon its prey, the lion darted forth. With his eyes veiled from the world, he bolted past his intended quarry and crashed head long into the Major General. The children's voices abruptly fell silent as the lion reached up and tore away his blindfold. His gaze slowly crept along the General's impervious stature, climbing the khaki uniform before coming to rest upon his implacable countenance.

Discerning a disturbance in their merry making, the impala doffed his own blindfold, and, upon sight of the towering figure, took up the fleet footedness of the animal which he portrayed, and sprinted for the nearby native huts, the other children scrambling close behind, the onetime lion wresting himself free from the General's grip.

Smith stared after them before stepping foot in his commodious lodging. His Zulu aide, whom he had christened Othello, the only African allowed in the command tent, greeted him at the door and accepted the proffered helmet, hanging it upon the nearby hat stand. The interior was sparse, as would be expected of a seasoned military man, yet included a few added luxuries

per rank, the greatest of which was a massive wooden desk situated in the center, at which strategy was devised and correspondence scrivined. The General brushed off some of the fine granules of sand that clung to his uniform before settling into his seat. He glanced toward the door. "I shall take to my letters now, James."

The lean African paid the slip in moniker no mind, and bowed his head in obeisance. "Yes, sir." He drew back the canvas curtain and stepped outside, the familiar giggling of the children drifting in before once again being muffled by the falling drape.

*My dearest Rachel,*

*August 30, 1906*

*Sand. The only thing this God forsaken land has thus far yielded is sand... and dissension. Let me tell you about this sand. It holds no likeness to the earth of England, in which a husbandman can sow his seeds and reap a bountiful harvest. Rather, it serves no purpose but to assault one's attire--and to frustrate his ambitions. Why, I've had my boots shined so often, I fear them to be worn thin! It finds its way into everything, its coarse texture being most irritating.*

*It is at times like this that I find myself dwelling upon your milk-like skin, and tender embrace. The loneliness of the setting sun brings memories of your red hair and of the nights we shared by the fireside... It is of most agonizing torture not to retreat to your arms and rest my wearied head to your bosom. But I shall never surrender to the impulsive whims and frailties of man; after all, I am an Englishman. I will not fail my King, and most importantly, I will not fail you.*

*The Africans are still bent toward contention, even after facing our superior might, and suffering a swift vanquishment. I cannot help but think that their cognitive faculties have yet to*

*evolve to the point to comprehend the idea of utter defeat. So, despite the most gracious welcome of Governor McCallum to reside with him, I remain amidst the natives, that my presence may always be known, that they may accept our colonial rule as the fact of life it is, as sure as the sun will rise at morn, and set in the evening.*

*Brigadier General Christopher seems to think that a softer approach would bear more fruit, but he is too idealistic, too inexperienced. Reality does not allow for his suggestions. My thirty-nine years of service for the House of Hanover and five for the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha nearly outnumber those he has been breathing air.*

*Time is all I need to assess the true mineral content of this land, but the hoar hairs of my balding head tell me that time is something I don't have much of. And so the natives must be dealt with swiftly. They must learn the futility of their disobedience, to the extent they reveal at last the secrets they hold concerning any deposits, for this country must truly not be void of any worth, as it appears to be. And so I bear this cross for the greater good of the Empire.*

*O, my precious budding flower, lovely lily of the valley, soon will I return to England's inviting shores, and retire from His Majesty's service. Perhaps then I can give you the family your young heart so desires. Until then, think of me, for I, with my whole soul, dwell on you.*

*With most affectionate love,*

*George*

The tent door rolled back and Othello stepped inside. "Sir, Brigadier General Christopher to see you, sir."

Smith laid his pen to his desk. "Send him in."

Othello stepped to the side and held the canvas open, allowing General Christopher to enter. Christopher deposed of his pith helmet and handed it off to the young aide before reaching for his spectacles to wipe away the sand.

Smith rose to his feet. "Brigadier General Christopher, to what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit?"

Christopher stepped forward. He hadn't as imposing a figure as his superior, but was still fit for his size, and handsome for his age, which fell about a decade short of the Major General's, as testified by his well-groomed brown hair--which, despite wearing a helmet, always remained parted to the left side--and neatly trimmed mustache. "Major General, sir, I was wondering if we could discuss our assignment."

"Absolutely," Smith replied. He returned to his seat and motioned to an empty chair in front of him. "Please be seated."

Christopher obliged, donning his glasses. "Thank you, sir."

Smith grabbed his kerchief and dabbed at the sweat that had collected in his thick gray mustache. "What would you like to know?" he asked, returning the kerchief to his pocket.

"Well, sir, I received a post declaring that my commission had been extended, and since I was oblivious to the fact that you requested an extension, I was curious as to what our objectives entail."

Smith waved his hands through the air. "To ensure the native population adjusts well to colonial rule after their uprising, surely you know that."

"Yes, sir, those were my orders upon accepting the commission to Brigadier General. Yet, it appears to me, that the native population, while still embittered, poses no true threat, due

to the fact that a large portion of their population was decimated in the late uprising. Therefore, are not our obligations to the Colony of Natal fulfilled, rendering our presence unnecessary?"

Smith chuckled softly. "Christopher, you make a brilliant colonel, but when it comes to generalship, you must trust experience."

"Well, sir, what is there that the colonial police cannot handle?"

Smith leaned forward, joining his hands on his desk, and narrowed his eyes. "Are you questioning my judgment, Brigadier?"

"No, sir," Christopher replied calmly. "I simply wish to understand the full spectrum of your vision, that I may better execute my position, sir."

Smith eased his posture and settled back into his chair. "These natives are not as complaisant as they appear: the malignant look as you walk by, the hushed whisperings they confide to one another each time the King's name is mentioned..."

"I unfortunately do not know the native tongue," Christopher confided.

Smith leveled his finger. "One does not need to to comprehend their meaning. These savages cannot be dealt with in the same manner of rehabilitating a criminal in England. They must be spoken to in a language that they can understand--the power and force of the Royal British Military. These seemingly insignificant occurrences only add heat to the pot that it runneth over. Who, then, is responsible for that failure?"

Instead of responding, Christopher interjected thoughts of his own position. "What of Christianity, commerce, and civilization?"

Smith sighed and shook his head. "Reality is no place for an idealist. Only when the dog has been completely broken of its own will will it heed your every word. These brutes are no

different. Once they are made to understand the futility of resistance, only then will they reveal to us the secrets they hold concerning their mineral deposits.”

“Mineral deposits?”

“Gold, Christopher. Diamonds. Have you ever heard of King Solomon’s Mines?”

“I remember being told legends of them as a child.”

“Well, what if I told you that they were not merely stories told to entertain children, but reality?” Smith’s eyes lit up, and before Christopher could respond, he leaned forward and vigorously jabbed himself in the chest with his index finger. “I,” said he, “I will be the one to rediscover them. I shall bring greater honor and glory to His Majesty the King, and to all of Britain.”

Christopher leaned back in his own chair, struggling with the preposterousness of the Major General’s proposal. “Over the Mountains of the Moon, Down the Valley of the Shadow, ride, boldly ride, if you seek for Eldorado,” he recited.

Smith’s eyes narrowed. “What do you speak of?”

“Oh, just a line of poetry from an American,” Christopher explained. “The point is we are not even sure these mines exist. Is this not a large leap to make, risking so much that the colony has fought for?”

“Then I better leave no rock unturned.” Smith’s voice softened. “Think of the legacy it would bestow upon our late beloved Queen. ‘We are not interested in the possibilities of defeat; they do not exist,’ she once said. This determinacy will see us through, my good Christopher, and I shall dislodge India as the crown jewel of the Empire with riches unending. And I would be happy to oblige my Sovereign if he were to therefore award my faithful service with knighthood.”

“I see.” Christopher swallowed hard, formulating his rebuttal carefully. “I would merely like to propose a different trajectory of undertaking. The Zulu tribe has just been defeated in battle, and distemperment is to be expected. But if these utterances and furtive glances which you cite truly have the potential to be as incendiary as you state, then perhaps if we were to utilize the persistence and benevolence of Britain’s many missionaries, we could teach the natives the value of virtue, and to abhor vice and violence. By refraining from the use of force, resorting to it only in need of self-preservation, we would reinforce those truths. Therefore, by demonstration of our full faith, perhaps they would be more willing to accept our presence and to trade resources and establish commerce, allowing the roots of civilization to take hold.”

Major General Smith abandoned practiced propriety and laughed boisterously at Christopher’s suggestions. “You think you can reason with these savages?” He paused to catch his breath. “Teach them virtue and catechism, right from wrong?” He had one more good laugh before sobering. “You cannot reason with the unreasonable; their under-evolved minds cannot comprehend it.”

“Sir, St. Luke, under holy inspiration, testifies that we are all of one blood, which Moses declares.”

“Yet nature affirms their inferiority,” Smith replied matter of factly.

Recognizing the tone of voice, Christopher knew it time to change direction. “Sir, a native woman gave birth the other day. I am requesting permission to call upon the priest to baptize the child.”

“Oh, is not Heaven full enough of such savages?” Smith replied jocularly.

The storm of umbrage whirling about within Christopher brought him to his feet. “With all due respect, sir, it is one thing to subject myself to your gross xenophobia, which, as my

commanding officer, I, in duty, bear reluctantly. But, again, with all due respect, sir, in complete acknowledgment of you as my superior, I will not abide such speech in regards to the Church of England.” Smith’s face betrayed his surprise at such an outburst, but Christopher wasn’t finished. “Not only does it dishonor our Sovereign, but also the Sovereign of Sovereigns, and I will speedily tender my resignation of my commission as Brigadier General before I hear any more of it. Our Lord opens His arms to all who have faith in Him, whether white or black, civilized or uncivilized.”

Smith sat silently. He was not prepared for such an ultimatum, and, although he did not share the same ideals, he knew he could not afford to lose Christopher as his second in command. He would therefore have to rely on a tactic he hadn’t much experience with, but was convincing enough in its execution--diplomacy. “Permission granted, Brigadier General. We shall fetch the priest together.”

Christopher curtly nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Smith quickly stepped past him as Othello scrambled to retrieve his helmet and to hold the tent flap open. Christopher took his own when proffered by the aide, nodding his thanks before following the Major General outside, Othello bringing up the rear.

“There is beauty in a baptism,” Christopher mused, mostly to himself. The three men slowly ambulated along the dusty path back to their tents, flanked on either side by an armed guard. The scorching South African sun is no discerner of persons, and the priest, replete in vestiture of flowing black cassock and white surplice, had to retreat to his chambers immediately following the Trinitarian formula, to be granted reprieve from the merciless heat.

“Beauty?” exclaimed Smith. “There was more water dripping from the priest’s face than was being applied to the child’s head. Leave a priest to his orisons and charity to the state. If a people are to be subdued, they must be made to realize that all good things come from those in governance above them. Reliance upon a deity leads to thoughts of liberty, and the idea of self-governance is kindling that feeds the ravenous monster of revolution.” He put extra emphasis on the last word before turning to face Christopher. “We are here to maintain the Crown’s hold, not destroy it.”

“I would think rather the opposite, sir,” Christopher stated. “The Empire’s goal is to create a productive civilization, which can only stand stably upon the unshakable moral foundation of divine law, rather than the ever changing whims of man. Because of this, the natives will be thankful and the bonds of the Empire will be ever strengthened. It is oppression, whether from burdensome taxation or from unjustified execution of militaristic force, that awakens the slumbering giant Fear, who is bedfellow with that other grievous beast--Suffering. It is therefore the liberation of the Gospel that quells the furor of that most unstable accelerant to the destruction of all order--that same Fear.”

Smith nodded. “Cogently expressed, Christopher. However, the great error on which your theory rests is the presumption that these barbarians are anything akin to the civilized man.” He stopped to release a hearty laugh. “Think you them your equal?” he asked incredulously. “Equal to a Briton?” He laughed again, shook his head, and then continued on.

All the while, Othello followed behind the arguing generals, more than aware of that which they spoke, but choosing to remain silent and loyal to General Smith, considering it an even greater offence than the bigotry of his superior to break his word.

“...the duty of the superior race,” continued Smith, “to rule over the weak. And since their underdeveloped intellects can by no means comprehend sophistication, we have the ability, indeed the right, to take from them that which can propel upward mobility in those on whom nature’s favor rests. Hence the gold, Christopher. We have more of a right to it than they do.”

Before Christopher could voice his rebuttal, an old, withered village elder, standing outside his hut, and seeing General Smith walk by, shouted, “Umlisabi! Umlisabi!”

Smith stopped and turned to the old man, who repeated his chant, thrusting a gnarled finger in the air. “Othello.”

The African stepped up to the old General’s side. “Yes, sir?”

“What is he saying?”

Nervous about the General’s response, the young man nevertheless faithfully translated the words of his elder. “He says you are an evil man.”

Smith approached the angry native, stopping only a couple feet away, his intimidating stature towering over the hunched, crippled frame of the man beaten down with age. “Ask him why he believes this.”

Othello translated, and before the last word exited his mouth, the old man rapidly prattled off an anger-laced response.

“He says that you steal from them with your great taxes, that you kill their men, their leader, and leave many a widow and fatherless child.”

“Even the dog, once clapped upon the nose, has sense enough to no longer sniff around your boots,” Smith replied. “What greater a consequence is held in store for those who incite rebellion!”

The old man stood silent, his face stony as the words of the General sunk in. After what appeared to be great deliberation, the old man unsuspectingly shot forth his withered left hand, catching the General off guard, and slowly caressed Smith's cheek. "Makookoo," he uttered.

Smith stood wordless, both amazed and paralyzed with disbelief at the audacity of the frail man before him, his mouth slightly agape.

One of the guards raised his rifle above his head and brought the butt of it crashing down upon the old man's skull. He crumpled to the ground. Neighboring natives, who stood watching the confrontation, shouted out with offense. Even Christopher started forward at the use of such excessive force.

Smith stared down at the broken body, which was now drawing inconsistent ragged breaths. Without taking his eyes off the old man, he addressed his companion. "Brigadier General, see to it that this man is flogged."

Christopher stepped forward to the side of his superior. "Sir, is that necessary? Should we not have clemency? This man is elderly, and a flogging might kill him."

Smith whipped his head over to address his fellow officer. "I will not have insubordination towards a superior. If delinquency is not stamped out at the moment of ignition, how then do we prevent it from flaring out into a full conflagration? Carry out the order."

Christopher reluctantly inclined his head. "Yes, sir." He detained one of the guards while Smith and Othello were escorted back to the command tent.

"Tell me, Othello," Smith inquired, approaching the tent, "what was it that the old man said at the last?"

"Makookoo, sir," Othello explained, his voice wavering. "It is an ancient beast who seeks out the cursed after six days and devours him. That man is still a practitioner of the old arts, what

was once the craft of the elders. But most in the village no longer subscribe to such superstition,” he added quickly, though his quivering lip betrayed his true concern.

Pausing before his tent, Smith noticed a strange silence had befallen the town. The wind whipped around his ears, filling them with whistling. The children, they had gone. Smith scanned the surrounding village for them, but they remained absent from his field of vision. He smiled. “So I’ve been cursed by a witchdoctor.” Chuckling, he added, “Next I suppose I’ll find a herd of Alexander’s unicorns, and ride one valiantly into battle.”

Othello pulled the curtain back, allowing the General to step inside. Craning his head, he cautiously observed the horizon before reluctantly following Smith into the tent.

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*My fairest Fanny,*

*August 30, 1906*

*My lief, my rose of Sharon, thou art truly the lily amongst the thorns of service, among which Major General Smith has proved to prick the deepest.*

*Sometimes I fear he has gone mad. If I thought he at all saw the moon I would say he suffers from lunacy. But when he is not giving orders he is busy in his tent dreaming of gold mines, prestige, and knighthood. Why, just today he had an elderly man flogged for merely reaching out and touching him. He continuously reveals himself as a stricter disciplinarian than formerly thought; any sense of pardon void of his lips. And all in the pursuit of a fairy tale! His eyes have become scaled to the distinction between reality and fantasy. I do not wish to put you in the position of doubting me by putting forth his desire for the Colony. Indeed, I would feel the need to bowdlerize my own letter of such a preposterous notion. In short, he is driven by ambition rather than charity.*

*Yet I will stand by the man, as I have given my word as an Englishman, until he finds it fitting for our departure. But never again will I accept a commission that puts me under his command. It is a most trying time for my soul.*

*It is at these times that I find myself dreaming upon your portrait. Though the picture fades in the sun, your pulchritude blossoms ever more vivid within my memory. I pray daily that the shifting sands of this continent will sweep me off across the ocean, back home to you. And then “I will make thee beds of roses and a thousand fragrant posies.” Until then, sealed upon this note, I lay my affectionate kiss.*

*Forever truly yours,*

*Henry*

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As the next couple of days passed, Smith mostly forgot his curse, but the villagers did not. Whereas before certain of the men would stand defiantly at their hut entrance whenever he would pass by, they now all shied from his presence, as if fearing his malison would somehow rub off on them. The village fell strangely quiet, as though patiently awaiting an approaching storm.

“Governor McCallum has requested our presence for dinner this evening,” said Smith to Christopher, as they approached the command tent.

“Very well, sir.” As they drew nearer, the faint, queer sound of rushing wind filled Christopher’s ears, yet any sensation fell absent of his face. As the Major General continued to drone on about the report he was to give, Christopher was formulating the opinion that something was about to beset them, and as Othello reached for the tent flap, he knew the young man must be stopped, but the words mustered themselves too slowly. “Othello—“

He was cut off by the beating wings of dozens of flying creatures that swarmed from the opening, forcing the trio to the ground. As the last flier left circling the interior finally found the exit and took to the sky with the others, one of the guards leveled his rifle and fired. The creature fell to the ground lifeless, sending up a cloud of sand that shrouded it in a pall of orange haze.

Smith climbed to his feet, brushing the sand from his uniform. "What was that?" he demanded.

Othello stepped over to the remains and knelt beside the animal. "Bats, sir," he answered. "The flying fox." Rising to his feet, he explained, "This is most bizarre, for these creatures never interfere with man. Nevertheless, they are dangerous, since they bear within themselves the means of plague."

General Smith therefore ordered an inspection to find any openings in the tent through which such an animal could squeeze through, yet none were found. After a systematic cleansing of the interior from the copious amounts of droppings that were left behind, he was finally able to lay himself down to sleep.

That was when the voice began. "Daddy? Daddy, it's me, James."

Brigadier General Christopher noticed the Major General's haggard appearance the next morning, evidence that the solace of sleep had been elusive, but Christopher remained silent, not wanting to insult the man. It wasn't until the following morning, when his countenance was even more rugged, that he ventured an inquiry. "Major General, sir, how was your night?" His voice wavered.

"Perfectly fine, Brigadier," Smith snapped, purposefully lowering his rank. "And what grants you to be so bold to be interrogative of my personal affairs?"

“Quite right,” Christopher conceded. “I defer to your better judgment as my superior officer.” They continued forth on their journey back to Smith’s tent in an awkward silence, the morning sun strengthening, its dominion ever stretching as it climbed to its throne at the pinnacle of the sky, where it governed its tellurian kingdom by day.

It was Smith who finally shattered the still. “Christopher, what do you know about spirits?”

“What do you mean, sir?” Christopher inquired, taken aback by the question.

“You know, a dislocated spirit from some other world,” Smith elaborated, eyes straight, embarrassed by his question.

“Not too much,” Christopher confessed. “I am not a spiritist, but I do know that they do not like to be conjured from the bliss of Heaven.” He glanced over at his commander and noticed again his exhausted appearance. “Sir, if this has anything to do with that curse, pay it no mind. That man was afraid, and his fear bore anger, which he displayed in an attempt to frighten you.”

His eyes squinted as if in deep thought, Smith rubbed his chin and muttered, “Quite right, Christopher, quite right.”

As the hours passed and the sun slumbered beneath the blanket of night, Smith sat at his desk staring at his watch. As a general in the Royal British Military, when he spoke, people listened. Yet, no matter how hard he tried, time would not obey his command and cease its restless charge, 86,400 seconds barreling forward boldly into the valley of Death, drawing him ever nearer the thundering guns that spit forth that most terrifying ammunition--the small childlike voice that addressed him as ‘Daddy.’

Othello lay in his hut, staring up into the night sky. Based on the Major General's appearance over the last couple of days, he knew it had started. He numbered the stars as he struggled with his conscience. His village had ostracized him because of his affiliation with the foreigners. He missed the fellowship of his people, but he knew that working together with the British could prove to be mutually beneficial. By proving his fidelity and integrity, he would show the Major General that his people were no different than those from across the sea. So, going against the advice of his people, he gave his word to serve General Smith and to faithfully translate his native tongue. And he was a man of his word.

Othello sprang from his bed, prodded by his conscience. He had to warn the General. The elder had laid the curse, and the elder could lift it. Exiting his hut, his feet beat sand rhythmically, creating a tune that only the night watchman Moon would hear.

General Smith found the body outside his tent early the next morning. His deep guttural cry of anguish reverberated throughout the village, stirring natives and soldiers from their dwellings.

Christopher found the old general on his knees in the dirt, cradling Othello's head, gently stroking his crown. He had been savagely disemboweled, his intestines arrayed across the sand in fleshy, knobby flagellums.

Smith glanced up at the Brigadier General, his eyes tinged with red, his face contorted with rage. "Who did this? Who did this to him?" he demanded, knowing Christopher didn't have the answer, but feeling he should ask nevertheless.

"Judging by the savagery of the wounds, sir, I would posit an 'it' rather than a 'who,'" Christopher concluded.

As armed soldiers began to flood the vicinity, the natives began to file out of their huts and examine the commotion. Due to Othello's outcast status, there were few gasps of shock, the only cries coming from his mother, who was dragged away by fellow villagers.

Smith rose to his feet as a soldier reverently covered the body with a sheet, the still pools of blood soaking through. "He will have a state funeral," Smith decreed, dragging the back of a hand beneath his nose, "for his service to the Empire." Sand still magnetically clung to his trousers.

A soldier pointed the General's attention to the far corner of the tent. "Sir, over here." The soldier extended a finger toward a small strip of earth as the two generals drew close. The large tent acted as enough of a wind barrier to prevent the erasure of all evidence, and a few solitary paw prints remained.

Smith glanced around at the gathered natives, who by now were beginning to disperse. He caught the eye of one man, who quickly looked away and started walking more quickly to his dwelling. "You there!" the General cried out.

The man stopped and reluctantly turned around.

Smith pointed to the ground. "To what beast do these prints belong to?" Then, as an afterthought, "Do you speak English?"

The native nodded his head. "Yes, sir," he replied, approaching slowly. He knelt beside them. He fell silent, searching for the correct words in his limited English vocabulary.

"Impungushe," he at last explained. "Impungushe—the jackal."

The soldier who discovered the prints spoke up. "That is not natural, sir. Some others and I went game hunting a few days back, and I can tell you jackals tend to avoid any contact with man."

Smith clenched his fist, frustrated at the uncertainty of the situation. Glancing towards the milling people, his eyes fell upon a small, stooping, solitary man who stood staring at him. The man did not smile, for he wished not to provoke the General to any further bouts of anger. Rather, he studied Smith with a look that seemed to penetrate him, and fall upon something that lay deep inside. Despite the General's intimidating glare in return, the elder never removed his gaze.

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*My hypnogogic Rachel,*

*September 5, 1906*

*The other night I had the most terrifying nightmare that I was drowning in a sea of sand, the crystalline waves rising over my head, blotting out the sun, blanketing me, yet here was no mother's warmth; I could feel each grain carving its way to my lungs, filling me like a child's doll, absorbing every last spark of life from my limbs, until I, too, would soon lie lifeless. I reached out for you to pull me from the tugging tide, but you were not there, but a world away. When I awakened, I yearned so much for it all to be a fantasy, yet when my tent was peeled back, I found the foreign sand waiting for me once again. My chest constricted, and I could feel the weight returning to my limbs.*

*This epistolary relationship has silenced your voice--which I so long to hear--from my mind. Your image dissipates behind a thieving fog that relegates your memory to some apocryphal, distant dream. I feel as if this ocean, this sand, this time, this distance, has dissevered my soul from your soul. What phthisis of mind or spirit plagues me? Please tell me, if you can, for I fully submit myself into your tender hands.*

*We lost a man today, my loyal aide Othello. He served the Empire faithfully, and will be remembered for such. The meaninglessness and tragedy of his death whilst the fire of youth yet*

*burned so brightly has made me realize, now in the winter of my years, that all is vanity. For thirty-nine years have I labored, sacrificing every fiber of my being for the prosperity of Britain. In her sacred lands have I trusted, yet I have risen only to a Major Generalship. O, how ambition has robbed me of my years, leaving them only as empty words to inhabit the dusty pages of a roster that shall lie forgotten on a sagging shelf of an archive.*

*I count my greatest reward to be your love, but I fear in my absence it may be repudiated. Territories have I conquered, my Rachel, I have brought war instigators to their knees in submission, yet I have not, in all my years, been able to conquer that which tortures me most-- fear. And so it is now that I find myself upon my knees, in submission to this sentiment, pleading with it to release me at last from its fetters, and let me rest. As the sun sets, I fear the approaching night, and what the lurking shadows of life may hold. Those memories I hold so dear, of you, my flower, quicken from me, while those I wish to leave behind hold fast. Can it be possible that the past may speak? Can the dark manifest itself in some corporeal manner and take hold of me, drag me down into some swirling pit, and there keep me? Christopher, that most peculiar man, from what mystical fountain does his hope spring? From what does he gather strength? Into what foreign earth must I delve to discover such arcane secrets before twilight consumes me? So many questions, where hides the answers? This is my pain. I wonder where the unreal ends and the real begins, if I live or am a mere marionette, toyed with by a power I never believed before to exist.*

*Cast not off these ravings as those of a lunatic, but save me. Can this earthly love grant me peace?*

*Most dolorously yours,*

*George*

*My most comely Fanny,*

*September 5, 1906*

*Keats once wrote "Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight, so haggard and so woe-begone?" Oh, what ails poor General Smith? He is a troubled man. From where his vexation springs, I know not, but it is my sincerest desire that the Lord would be most merciful to him, that when night threatens to eclipse his soul, he would look up and see the stars yet shine. I know I should not divulge the secrets of others, but you are the greatest of confidants. The poor man lost his first wife quite young, and his only child, a boy by the name of James, also perished at the age of six from influenza. He has since remarried, to a woman two score and some years his younger, and I wonder if it is this that gives him trepidation. Could he have been trying to replace the woman whom he lost? No... forgive me, Fan, for speaking such ill of him. Though he is cold and callous, I do not foster a single doubt that he loves her sincerely. But it is the young lad James who I believe he has tried to replace.*

*Heaven gained another blessed soul today--that of the good and faithful servant Othello. Though I am sure he would not admit it, I believe the General thought of him as a son. To lose one a second time... is a terrible cross to bear. But he need not bear it alone: "Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and He shall sustain thee." In this trying time, perhaps he needs the comfort of a familiar face. Though the man is great in offences, I will speak to him; I know you would do no other. To empty the heart to a lent ear is a soothing practice. And perhaps General Smith's rough exterior is the result of the absence of reception to his inner most emotions. It is simple human desire to be known, and the lack thereof can lead to anger and madness.*

*My darling wife Fanny, I find myself staring at the moon at night, because the same nocturnal heavenly body that governs Natal also governs England, and it brings me that much closer to you. My heart swells at the mere sight of your name as it is shaped by my pen.*

*Faithfully yours until the end,*

*Henry*

Laying down his pen, Brigadier General Christopher glanced over at his lamp. The soft glow of the flame brought thoughts of that lesser light that ruled the night and, despite the admonishments of walking alone or unarmed outside at this hour after the late tragedy that befell Othello, he stepped out of his tent. The light washed over him, illuming his face, and he closed his eyes, the gentle breeze sweeping across his skin.

But the contentment was short lived when shame overthrew it, shame at being at peace while General Smith was, undoubtedly, still at pains with the world. Christopher slowly opened his eyes and glanced around. Nothing stirred but the wind. Disregarding his better judgment, he set off for Smith's tent.

"Daddy, will you play with me?"

Smith slammed his fist down upon his desk, the flame of his lamp wavering. "You are not my son!" he cried. He slowly slinked from his chair to the floor, tears streaming from his eyes as sobs racked his body.

"Daddy, it's me, James. Don't you remember me?"

"You are not my son," the General reiterated in a whisper, dragging his hands across his eyes. Raising his right arm, he yanked open the top drawer of his desk and danced his fingers

blindly around inside before one struck the smooth metal cylinder of his sidearm. He clutched it greedily and drew it to himself. His fingers fumbled the weapon since tears blurred his vision. Once he had a good hold, he raised the barrel to his mouth. With two last chest heaves, he closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. The firing pin clicked audibly, failing to discharge the round. Smith opened his bloodshot eyes. Spittle hung from the side of his mouth, dripping into a small pool that collected on his lap. He pulled the trigger again. And again. As the cylinder revolved like clockwork, each chamber misfired. Smith's weeping began anew as he tossed the small arm aside.

Crawling to his knees, he stretched out and grasped his lantern. Overtaken with thoughtless desperation, he shattered the glass and reached for the flame. The tongue of fire flickered and went out, cloaking the room in the darkness the General so hated. He gasped, his body now trembling with fear. He frantically shifted his eyes around, but everything was one solid wall of black.

A soft scratching on the canvass of the exterior sounded behind him, and he scuttled forward, turning in a futile attempt to see what created the noise. The scratching grew in intensity, and slowly made its way along the side of the tent, twisting Smith's head with it.

The noise stopped, and all the old general was left with was the sound of his own ragged breaths and the echo of his heartbeat resounding in his head. The agony of the passing seconds dissolved into a reprieve, and the tightness within his chest began to loosen as his breathing became more regular.

A violent wind ripped the tent flap open, and the lantern, which in Smith's frenzy had rolled across the floor, spontaneously ignited, illuminating the ghastly creature that now stood in the doorway. The Makookoo was a towering beast of seven feet and the shape of a man, but with

a thick coat of shaggy black fur that blanketed its body, and long, pointed ears. It stepped on hooves, its outstretched fingers tipped with long razor-edged claws. A length of tongue snaked from its mouth, flicking the needle points of teeth that poked out from beneath its broad grin. Its crimson eyes bore into the deepest recesses of the General's being.

In his last moment of coherence, Smith screamed.

The death shroud slowly drifted down and enveloped the General's body, settling unevenly over the cragged peaks and misshapen knobs of torn flesh, a puddle of blood quickly saturating the mid-section.

The Colonel, now new commanding officer, stepped over to a soldier that stood guarding the back of the tent, rifle held attentively across his chest.

"This is how we found him, sir," the soldier explained.

The commander knelt down and stared General Smith in the eyes, who sat huddled against the canvass wall, his uniform stained with blood, his hands trembling before him, his fingers juttled out in awkward branchlike fashion, globs of flesh still stuck beneath his fingernails. He shook his head, trying to figure out what possessed the former commander to brutally disembowel Brigadier General Christopher, who had apparently left his tent by night to visit with Smith.

The tent flap was opened for the proceeding body, and Smith's eyes followed the blood stained pall before falling on a familiar stooped figure.

The village elder smiled back. After holding the General's gaze for several seconds, he turned and disappeared into the crowd that the posted guards were having difficulty holding back.

The tent flap swung back down, sealing Smith off from the rest of the disturbance. *Can't they see him?* he thought, casting his eyes over to the far corner, where the Makookoo still stood, unmoving but for the occasional flicker of the tongue. *He can't hide. I won't let him.* "I still see you!" Smith shouted, jabbing a finger to the back of the room.

The commanding officer followed his head in the direction of Smith's finger. He turned back to the quivering man, shaking his head once again before rising to his feet and exiting the tent.

And yet the Makookoo grinned.

## The Haunting of Kingward House

*My first recollection of Kingward House is from when I was six, when my mother brought me with her to call upon your graces for salvation from dire penury after the abandonment of my father. The ominous look of those cold, lifeless, gray stones looming high above my approaching coach made it feel as if each and every one hung heavily about my shoulders, the weight pressing down upon my chest, forcing out any room for breath. I clung to my mother's arm then, and, turning and burying my face into it, could hear the rapid beating of her heart, and could discern even at that age that she must have felt the same.*

*Now, twenty years later, I find little has changed. Except now I have no arm to cling to.*

Though the only visible sign of the coach's conveyance was great--thick clouds of dust first masticated by the hammering of the feathered horses' hooves in steady, greedy rhythm as they devoured more of the earth that stretched long before them, forcing it down the underbelly of the carriage to be spit out by the hind wheels, living and inanimate working in unison—those unseen were greater. The footman, bedecked in bright blue livery, illustrating the Kingward's intimate connection to the Crown, sat grim-faced, diagonally opposite Henry, the constant jostling from the uneven roadways dancing his head before Henry's eyes, but not drawing even the slightest sigh from his tight-pursed lips. They had been riding for nearly an hour, and the footman only sat in somber silence staring straight ahead through the rear window as the coach brought them closer to their destination.

Henry glanced at him several times, uncertain of whether to initiate conversation, but found only his blank stare enslaved to some unknown point of interest behind them. Curious, Henry nonchalantly cast his eyes up to the coach ceiling, and followed the fine golden

embroidery around the edges until his neck was craned toward the rear window. Peering through the dirt-streaked glass, he found only dust--great clouds of it.

His observation was soon interrupted as the coach struck a deep pock in the road, sending its right side into the air before landing hard, the wooden frame creaking loudly. The collision threw Henry into the air, his arms shooting out to steady himself, before landing back atop the plush cushioning of the bench.

The footman remained emotionless, landing with his hands still folded neatly in his lap. And so he stayed until the coach soon came to a halt. The footman leaned forward and, swinging the squat door open, leapt to the ground without a word, the tails of his overcoat fluttering out behind him. The snorting of the horses filled the cabin before he closed the carriage door gently and proceeded to the front to converse with the coachman.

The ferocious tone of his words startled Henry, and he shimmied himself across the bench closer to the door to make out what they were saying.

“What were you thinking? You better be more careful!”

Henry leaned forward to better hear, resting his elbows on his knees.

“The Lord Kingward will not be happy,” the footman continued.

The coachman replied with an obstreperous, wet cough. “Oh, shut up, will you? Go back and fill it up.”

Henry sat up and followed the footman with his head to the back window. The footman opened a long trunk and, drawing from it a shovel, made his way several paces down the road. The dust had by now settled, and Henry watched as the Dalmatian carriage dog darted by, making a quick lap around the footman, before lowering its nose to the ground and wandering to the edge of the woods. The footman thrust the implement into the edge of the road, out of the

way of any sober driving, and used the gathered dirt to fill the cavity they had struck. After three large shovelfuls, he tried his best to smooth out the fresh earth, using his toe to position the clods into a patchwork, then bringing the heel of his shiny black boot down to pack it in. Giving a sharp whistle, he started again for the coach, the dog running past him. He deposited the shovel, and then withdrew a spotted cloth with which, after raising his foot to the carriage, he wiped the flecks of dirt from his boot. Henry quickly slid back across the seat to his former place as he heard the wooden chest behind him slam shut.

The carriage door swung open and the footman climbed inside. As the door closed, the coach was once again on its way, this time with an added rattle. The footman folded his hands calmly on his lap.

Henry looked over, amazed at the sheer size of him. Standing well higher than himself, he filled out his livery well, one stocking-clad calf rivaling the circumference of his own thigh. Glancing down at his own leg, he slowly moved one hand down the far side, and brought the other opposite, locking his hands around his thigh, connecting the tips of his thumbs and middle fingers. He slowly slid them down, over the metal buttons of his breeches, to his own stockinged calves.

Henry was analyzing the gap between his leg and hands when the dog began to bark. Leaning across the seat, he drew his face close to the side window. The towering façade of Kingward House had become visible. Standing three stories, it stretched out ten windows on either side of the central entrance. Quickly forgetting his self-conscious musings, his hands fell limp, for with each step of the horses, his chest grew tighter. As the carriage drew nearer, it hurt Henry's neck to crane it any longer. He sat back in his seat and inhaled deeply. Tightness developed along the back of his neck, and he lifted a hand to massage it, digging his fingers deep

into his shoulders, his tongue running the length of his lower lip. The coach eventually came to a halt, and the footman jumped out and stood silently beside the open door. Henry remained inside, still too overwhelmed by the sheer size and intricate masonic work before him.

The massive wooden doors, standing nearly two stories high and a foot thick, each braced with iron, slowly swung out, revealing a liveried servant behind each one, pushing their weight into the proper forearm which rested upon a specially designed cushioned plank. Once opened, both servants turned and stood solemn and silent.

A man about twice Henry's age emerged, and stopped at the edge of the great stone staircase. Gaily bedight, a white wig crowned his head, framing a face still handsome for its age. Over his broad shoulders was worn a shirt of white, tufts of ruffles billowing from his chest, each wrist girdled with a length of intricately sewn lace that hung over his palms, which rested near deep blue breeches that ended at the knee, where vibrant white stockings led down to shoes with buckles of solid gold. His face displayed a natural propensity for frowning, and his eyes slightly narrowed as he glanced down to the coach. At his emergence, the Dalmatian darted up the steps to his side, its tail wagging so furiously that its entire backside swung from side to side. The man clapped his hands to his thighs. "Why, Dick!" The dog sat back calmly on its haunches as the man reached out and patted it gently atop the head, the lace about his wrist falling over the dog's eyes.

The coachman jumped from his seat and started to unload Henry's luggage, a black overcoat hanging past his knees, its thick capes girding his shoulders, while a wide brimmed hat concealed his face from Henry's view, but did little to deafen the occasional guttural cough.

The elder man's attention returned once again to the stationary coach. His narrowed eyes walked over Henry slowly before a slight smile spread across his face. He opened his arms in welcome. "Henry!"

Henry jumped to the ground, dust sprinkling his shoes. "Uncle Edward?" As Henry stepped forward, the footman closed the coach door behind him and grabbed hold of his luggage. Henry ascended the steps slowly, amazed at the mere breadth of each. At last he stood before his regal uncle, and, out of respect, bowed his head.

Edward gathered the young man in an embrace. "Henry."

Henry lifted his arms and returned the gesture warmly. "Uncle."

Edward held him out at arm's length, nodding his head in affirmation. "It is good that you are here. I was deeply pained to hear about your..." he paused, leafing through the pages of language in his mind before settling on, "circumstances."

Henry felt the tightness return in his neck, but his uncle's arms blocked any attempt to knead it, and so he settled for staring at his feet, where he noticed the stark contrast between his dull dirty shoes and the bright cleanliness of his uncle's.

Edward didn't allow the moment to sit much longer before continuing. "I am sure that within the walls of Kingward House," he waved a hand out at the sprawling mansion, "you will find what you need to move on—the ability to purge the past and to forge a new future, under the glorious governance of the Kingward name, and at last find your rightful place in the world." He inhaled deeply. "So, it's been, what, twenty years since I have seen you last?"

Henry lifted his head and nodded. "Yes, Uncle, since I was here last with my mother."

Edward's face fell. "I am also sorry to hear about your mother, my sister. I furthermore regret that I was unable to be in attendance at her funerary services." He squeezed Henry's

shoulder. "She bore the Kingward name well. Heaven is the richer with her presence." Dropping his arm, he turned for the doors. "However, the... *circumstances* in the American colonies have been demanding more and more of my attention." He turned again to Henry. "Do you know much about it?"

Henry shook his head. "Nothing besides they are in rebellion."

Edward fell silent, his eyes growing distant as he became lost in thought. After a few seconds he came to. "Yes, well more on that later." He clapped his hands to his hips. "Look at me, playing a poor host." He motioned to the doors. "Come; let me introduce you to the House."

Once inside, Henry observed the entrance hall and its spiraled, columned staircase which ran the length of the high vaulted ceiling--with a landing for the second floor--before terminating at the third. On either side of him stretched a long hall.

Noticing Henry's amazement, Edward asked, "She is beautiful, is she not?"

All Henry could muster was, "Yes, Uncle."

"She has three floors, twenty rooms a floor. The servants occupy the top floor, while the second is reserved for our honored guests and remaining servants. The ground floor contains the dining hall and family rooms." He leveled his eyes at Henry, which gleamed with pride. "In twenty years I will be dead and buried," he slowly shook his index finger, "but this house will remain."

Before giving Henry time to respond, he started for an adjacent door. "You know, my dear Henry, there has never been a greater constant on this beloved island than the name of Kingward." He swung the door open and motioned for Henry to follow him. Before them lay the vast dining hall, centered with a sprawling wooden table that could seat twenty people. Dozens

of family portraits lined the walls. “Royal dynasties--God bless each and every one--come, and they go. But the Kingwards have served them all.”

He continued some distance down the left wall before stopping at a particular portrait. “This land was gifted to our noble ancestor Eldred, depicted here, by King Edgar, for his venerable counsel. It was also during his reign that we received the high honor then called *cyninges weard*, or ‘the King’s protector,’ which we still hold today, as Kingward.”

Resuming his step, several portraits down he stopped again. “It was during the reign of King Edward III that our ancestor seen here, Richard, had the great Kingewerd Castle built on these grounds overlooking the cliffs. The very stones of that magnificent structure were later reused in the construction of the one in which you now stand. The foundations of that stronghold can still be seen along the edge of the property.”

He turned, pointing above the door. “It was also His Majesty King Edward III that granted us the Kingward coat of arms.” There painted in a breadth of nearly six feet was the great seal of the Kingward family--a red dragon within a sea of blue, lifting high above its head on the tips of its wings the Royal coat. “The blue sea of the background represents our loyalty to the sovereign,” Edward explained, “while the dragon hearkens back to the first sovereign our family ever served--King Arthur himself.”

Henry was taken aback by the claim, but maintained his silence.

“The shield, of course, is that of the royal house of Hannover.” Edward paused, losing himself in the painting. “Many have been the arms that adorned those wings.” He turned and looked Henry in the eyes. “You see, my dear Henry, the name of Kingward *is* England.”

Unsure of what to say, Henry simply followed Edward as he continued through another side door, this leading into a much smaller, and more cozy room.

“This is the smoking room,” Edward explained. An intimate table sat in the center, with a small bar nearby, consisting of crystal decanters filled with an assortment of different liquors. On the far wall stood a fireplace, above which hung a large portrait of an aged man with a bald head, grim face, and long, gray beard that fell to the gray woolen robes of a religious order. “This here is St. Æthelred,” Edward explained. “Yet another descendant of notable distinction. Since his elder brother Æthelwulf served the King, he chose, rather, to take up monastic life.”

Henry stared at his gloomy face. “A saint? I’ve never heard of him.”

“Yes, well, his cult isn’t much followed these days,” Edward replied, a hint of perturbation in his voice, “though it is said that King Offa had a special devotion to him, since they knew each other in life.” Edward narrowed his eyes at Henry with a stare that shrank him to his shoes. “That must count for something.”

Henry swallowed hard, yet his voice came out weak anyway. “Yes, of course.”

Edward’s disposition brightened. “Let me show you to your room.” He led him back through the dining hall, across the great entrance chamber, and down the far hall. He opened the door to a small, simple room. It was sparsely furnished, a small writing desk and chair standing next to a fireplace along the right wall, across from which was a dresser, which stood near the bed that looked out the solitary window. “I hope you find it to your satisfaction.”

“Yes,” Henry replied. “It will be perfect.”

“Good,” Edward replied. “A servant will call on you when supper is served. I must return to my work--business of the state. We Kingwards are busy people, as I am sure you will soon discover.” With that, he turned and left Henry to settle in.

Moments later, a light knock sounded from the door.

“Yes?”

The door opened, revealing yet a different servant in blue, luggage in hand. “Your belongings, Master Kingward.”

“Oh, yes, thank you. There will be fine.” Henry pointed to the empty space adjacent the small writing desk.

“As you wish, sir.” The servant deposited each parcel before returning silently to the door.

Henry stopped him before he could leave. “I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name.”

The servant stared back at him, dumbfounded. “My name, sir?”

“Yes. What are you called by?”

“Uh... Albert, sir.”

“Well, Albert, thank you.”

Uncertain as how to respond, Albert stood silent for a moment before saying, somewhat shakily, “you are most welcome, sir.” He quickly exited the room, closing the door behind him, leaving Henry alone once again.

Henry sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at his luggage. Too exhausted from the long, shaky coach ride to put it all away, he took to studying his surroundings instead. He rose to his feet and rounded the edge of the bed and peered out the window. Half of its view was obstructed by a large shrub, the other half looked out on an expansive, lush garden beyond, its vibrant greenery spotted with bright red roses. Henry sat on the foot of his bed and began to count the number of blossoms. Losing track of time, he was startled out of his reverie by another soft knock at his door. “Yes?”

The door opened and Albert emerged from the hall. “Supper is served, Master Kingward.”

“Thank you, Albert. I’ll be right there.”

Albert bowed his head and closed the door behind him.

Henry found him waiting at the door to the dining hall as he stepped out of the long hallway. Upon his approach, Albert stepped in, swinging the door open. Inside, Henry observed a myriad of different maids, bustling about the table, performing last minute duties: maintaining the desired temperature for the food, and ensuring the silver shined its brightest. Albert led him to his seat, positioned to the left hand of the head of the table, where stood Edward’s tall, blue cushioned chair. His own, on the other hand, was of simple wood, yet intricately carved, impressions of dragons adorning the crest.

Only moments after taking his seat, Albert opened the door to the smoking room. Acting as herald, he declared, “The Lord Kingward.” Henry rose to his feet as his uncle strolled in. Once seated, the herald disappeared through the door behind them.

Edward rubbed his palms together as he examined the assortment before him. “Ah, roast chicken with oyster sauce. Most delicious.” He pointed to a particular dish. “And be sure to try the apple pudding.”

Henry had never seen so much food at one meal before, and began to question the capacity of his stomach.

Albert reemerged from the door to the entrance hall. “The Lady Kingward.” He took a step back and both Edward and Henry rose to their feet as two handmaids entered, adorned in light pink, followed by their mistress. Dressed in a deep green gown edged with fine white lace, she was capable of great beauty, but the tight bun in which her brunette locks were drawn into, coupled with a stern countenance, lent her a rather unpleasant air. Once she took her seat at the opposite end of the table from her husband, everyone else followed suit, a handmaid on each

side. Albert stepped forward to the table. "Let us pray." Each at the table bowed their heads, their eyes sliding shut. "Gracious Lord, as You provide for every living creature from Your everlasting bounty, grant us wisdom in our judgments, and strength to vanquish our foes. Amen."

At the conclusion of the prayer, the servants stepped forward and began to fill each plate. Edward silently waved one off as she spooned out a corn relish. Returning the silver spoon to the serving dish, she stepped over to Henry and proceeded to do the same.

Henry glanced up at her as she passed the spoon between dishes. She was young and pretty, a few years younger than him. A few strands of her red hair had slipped out of her head piece, and dangled near her ear.

With a quick flit to the corner of her eyes, she discovered his gaze, and blushed a deep red.

Noticing her reaction, Henry turned to his plate. He lifted his hand. "That is plenty, thank you."

With a slight bow of her head, she backed away to attend to the wine.

Edward looked up at his wife. "Lizzie, I do not believe you have had the pleasure of meeting our newest resident."

Lady Kingward's fork clattered noisily to her plate as she lifted her hand and cradled her cranium. "Must I repeatedly voice my displeasure at the sobriquet of Lizzie? And no, I do not believe I have."

Edward's eyes narrowed momentarily in confusion before tapping his fingers to the table. "Oh, that is right, my dear. Well, this is my late sister Mary's son, Henry. Henry, this is your aunt, Lady Elizabeth Kingward."

Henry bowed his head respectfully. "It is a pleasure to meet you, my lady."

She turned to him, her face exhibiting the same natural inclination to frown as her husband's. "It truly is." She lifted her napkin to her mouth and gently dabbed at her lips. "Now, what will Lady Germain be wearing? We must not clash colors."

Edward released a sigh just loud enough for Henry to hear. "I will send for it in the morning, my dear."

Elizabeth stared at him from across the table. Not removing her eyes, she smote her hands sharply. "Wine." The young maid that had served the corn relish rushed toward the table. "You know, I do not believe this reception concerns you," she continued. The maid reached down and retrieved her glass.

Edward lifted his napkin to his mouth.

"No, I do not believe you care one whit about the color I wear!" She brought her hand down hard on the table.

Startled, the maid jumped, her grip slackening, and the glass fell to the floor. The crystal shattered, spattering red wine across the white lace at the hem of the Lady's dress.

Elizabeth gasped and jumped to her feet. Staring into the maid's eyes, she brought her hand back and slapped her hard across the face, knocking her cap from her head, her red locks falling to her shoulders. Henry jumped at the crack as flesh met flesh; Edward's napkin fell from his mouth. "Look at what you've done!" Elizabeth cried.

The maid's chin began to quiver, her eyes growing red.

Elizabeth spun to her husband. "Now how are we going to entertain Lord Germain!?" Before he could reply, she abruptly turned for the door. Albert darted across the room and made it just in time before she stormed out. The handmaids lowered their forks to their plates and rushed off after her.

Edward sighed deeply. Retrieving his napkin, he tossed it to the table and turned to Henry. “You should be happy about your... circumstances,” he said, before standing and following them out, leaving the maid still standing next to Lady Kingward’s chair, her arms wrapped tight around herself, shaking visibly.

Once Edward left the room, the maid fell to her knees, tears steadily streaming from her eyes. The rest of the servants left her to clean up the shards of crystal alone as they cleared the table, no one uttering a word of consolation.

Though he couldn’t see her from his seat, Henry could hear the maid’s sniffing, and rose to join her. He knelt down beside her and began picking shards from the floor. “What is your name?”

Her loose hair clung to her moistened cheeks, and she lifted her free hand to brush it back. She looked over at him in shock as he dropped a handful of broken crystal into her apron that she held out as a cradle for the shards. “Rachel.”

Henry nodded his head. “Rachel. That’s a beautiful name.”

Rachel blushed again, and averted her eyes to the floor. She reached out and retrieved the segment Henry had reached for. “I’ll take care of it, Master Kingward.”

Henry leaned back to his heels and watched her, sniffing but wordless, pick up the last couple of pieces before rising to his feet.

Thunder pealed and rain came down in torrents as Henry squirmed in his bed, his legs kicking within his nightgown, the inside of his belly mimicking what was happening outside his window. He couldn’t remember ever eating as much as he had, and his stomach was still full and ached as he lay down to sleep that evening. He rolled from side to side, for hours it seemed,

before finding a comfortable position for his distended belly. He had just dosed off when he was startled awake by a distant cry.

“Help me.”

Henry lifted his head and waited to hear it again, uncertain of what he heard.

Moments later, the cry sounded again. “Help me.”

Henry rolled over and lifted himself up on one arm to look out his window. A young boy with a pallid face and dark circles under his eyes stared back at him. Henry fell back, startled, and nearly rolled off his bed. He sat back up and looked again to the young child. He wore black knee breeches and a black jacket, with a small white scarf that normally would have billowed from his chest but hung limp, soaked through with rain. His dark hair clung to his forehead as he held his small arms tight around himself. His face showed of fear and entreaty.

“Please help me. I’m cold.”

Henry leaned forward and tapped on the glass. “Hey you there! Boy! What are you doing outside?”

The boy stared back at him in silence. At last he turned and started to walk away, still clutching his elbows tight to his chest.

“Wait!” Henry pounded his palm on the window. “Stop!” He surmised that the boy couldn’t hear him over the sound of the rain, so, forgetting the pain in his stomach, he climbed down from his bed. He stumbled over to the writing desk and fumbled around for his candlestick. Once his fingers struck the cold brass handle, he yanked it off and thrust it into the glowing embers in the fireplace. The wick jumped to life and, holding a hand before the flame to break the wind, he rose to his feet and briskly made his way down the hall. He found the rear door that led to the back lawn and, setting the candle on the cold floor, entered the rain and took off down

the length of the house. Henry stopped and turned in a circle, surveying his surroundings, chest heaving. Even though his vision was slightly blurred by the sheets of rain, the young boy was nowhere to be found.

“Master Kingward!”

Henry heard another voice over the clamor of nature, and tried to ascertain where it was coming from.

“Master Kingward!”

He spun around and found Albert running toward him. He stopped to catch his breath.

“Master Kingward,” he said between gasps. “I heard you stirring. Is everything all right?”

“There was a boy,” Henry explained. “Outside my window.”

Albert’s face grew solemn, and he started to take steps back.

Noticing the servant’s retreat, Henry declared, “We have to find him! In this weather he could get sick!”

Albert shook his head. “I am sorry, sir, but I really should be getting indoors.” He turned and ran inside, leaving Henry alone in the rain.

Reaching the conclusion that any further searching would be pointless in the dark, Henry followed suit. Once inside, he reached down for his candle, which had gone out because of the draft from the door. Remembering the best he could, he felt his way in the dark through a foreign house back to his room. Once back inside, he changed out of his wet gown and, draping it over the back of his chair, brought the chair closer to the smoldering fireplace. But rather than going to sleep, he sat on the edge of his bed and stared out the window until dawn.

In the morning, Albert called on Henry to announce breakfast. Judging by his haggard appearance, Henry knew he hadn't slept, either. Henry entered the dining hall and found only Edward sitting there, wrapped in a blue robe.

"Good morning, my nephew."

"Good morning, Uncle," Henry replied, taking up his seat next to him. A maid approached and lifted his plate from the table.

"Do try the ham and egg pie; I am sure you will find it delectable."

The maid had already dished it onto Henry's plate before he could respond. "I will surely do so," he stated as she set his plate before him. "Thank you."

As he bit into his breakfast, which was every bit what his uncle had said, he replayed the events of the previous night in his head. "Uncle, there was a boy outside last night, alone in the rain. I called out to him but he could not hear me. Worried he could get sick, I went out to retrieve him, but by the time I made it outside, he had vanished. A servant had followed me out, but once he discovered what I sought, he grew very timid and retreated inside. Why, you would have thought he saw a ghost."

Edward issued a reply without looking up from his breakfast. "You went outside last night? In that weather? Henry, you really should be more careful. You could get sick yourself."

Henry lowered his fork to his plate. "Uncle, if there is a boy living here, he really must be better cared for. I mean, if he would have caught cold--"

Edward cut him off. "That boy is not going to get sick."

"Why not?" Henry inquired, incredulously.

Edward lowered his fork and turned to him, staring him in the eyes. "Because that boy is dead, Henry."

Henry's heart began to beat hard. "What?"

"That boy, who you saw out your window last night, is George, a young boy who lived here about a hundred years ago. When he was six he committed suicide by hanging himself in his bedroom. Your very same room, in fact. It had lain dormant since then." Edward returned to his breakfast before continuing. "Ever since there have been rumors of a spirit haunting the grounds. Several servants throughout the years claimed to have seen the apparition of a young boy. I finally tended to the matter and threatened to discharge anyone who raised the subject. Upon your stay I thought it good to return some life to that wing of the house."

Henry sat in silence, drinking the words his uncle spoke. His mind raced with questions, but none would slow down long enough for him to grasp it, besides the silliest. "You're not afraid?"

"Afraid? Of a young dead boy?" Edward scoffed and leveled his finger. "A Kingward is afraid of nothing." Finishing his breakfast, he dabbed his mouth with his napkin, then tossed it to the table. "Shall I show you the Gardens today?"

"Yes, that would be enjoyable."

"I have some business to attend to first, which should not take too long." Edward lifted himself from his chair and made his way to the smoking room. He stopped before entering. "I heard you have been talking to the staff."

"Not very often," Henry replied. "Everyone is reluctant to do so."

"You are above them," Edward returned flatly. "Be mindful of your station. If you are going to be a Kingward, you are going to have to act like one."

"Yes, sir," Henry replied weakly.

“And I took the liberty of ordering you new garments with the measurements I had called for before your coming. They will be arriving today.”

“Thank you, Uncle,” Henry said quietly as Edward left the room.

“One last thing.” Edward laid a hand to the doorframe and craned his head back. “Be careful of the monsters under your bed.” He chuckled as the door closed behind him.

Henry stared down at his half eaten breakfast, unable to finish it.

Henry grasped the lapels of his new blue overcoat and gave them a light tug so that it sat evenly on his shoulders. His new wig was itchy, and he wanted as little of it touching the back of his neck as possible. From there, he ran his fingers down their edges, over the white lace, until he reached the gold buttons. Grasping one between thumb and forefinger, he wiggled it gently back and forth. He had never owned such an ornate wardrobe before, and he was nervous to even move, in fear of developing a spot. He glanced down at his bright white stockings and marveled at how they brought splendor to otherwise unmuscular limbs.

The afternoon sun filtered in through the window and glinted off the golden buckle of his shoe, casting a darting reflection to the floor. Henry flicked his foot one way, and watched the reflection race toward the wall. He twisted it the other, throwing the small golden light to the edge of his bed. He set his foot down, his shoe clapping the wooden floor as he stared at his bed.

*Be careful of the monsters under your bed.*

Growing up, he had read stories of faeries and witches, even ghosts, but they were never more than that, a story. He recalled the tale of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, and how the ghost of King Hamlet came not to frighten, but to tell his story. Like his uncle, Henry found it hard to be afraid of a young boy, but unlike his uncle, he was curious as to what the spirit sought. What was

his story? If he was bent on frightening the new occupant of his old room, he could have pursued different means than to entreat his help. However, his face--that mixture of pain and fear--spoke of an inner struggle.

*Be careful of the monsters under your bed.*

Henry walked over and retrieved his nightgown which was still draped over his chair, though now a bit drier. Folding it in half, he dropped it to the floor and knelt down to his hands and knees, not wanting to smudge his new stockings. Surveying the shadowy recesses, he noticed an odd-shaped object tucked in a short distance. He reached out an arm, balancing precariously on his gown, his head craned back towards the door as his fingers slowly spider-walked the wooden planking of the floor. His index finger finally collided with it, and he quickly hooked it with his middle to drag it closer. Latching on to it with all five, he pulled it out into the light of day. A child's toy, it was a wooden carving of St. George, brightly painted, mounted on a rearing steed, yet instead of third century Roman armor, he wore a white crusader's tunic, emblazoned with a red cross. The spear in his hand was broken at the end, as was the wooden base on which the figure stood. Reclining on his heels, Henry turned the toy over in his hands. Concluding it had to have been George's, he imagined the boy's excitement at sharing his name with England's patron saint.

A light knock came from the hall, interrupting Henry's musings. "Yes?"

The door slowly swung open and Albert stepped in. "The Lord Kingward is now ready to show you the Gardens."

"I'll be right out."

With a slight bow of his head, Albert closed the door and disappeared.

Henry rose to his feet and tossed his nightgown to his bed. Walking towards the fireplace, he gingerly set the wooden figure on the mantle before leaving the room.

“Kingward Gardens are among the very best in all of England,” Edward explained. His hands were locked behind his back as he slowly strolled along the grounds, Henry at his side.

Henry didn’t think it possible, but quickly discovered that wearing his wig in the heat of the day caused even greater unpleasantness than normal. The hairs itched and caused the back of his neck to sweat profusely. He could feel the great beads rolling down his back, creating a tickling sensation, but he dared not exhibit his discomfort; his uncle bore his wig and heavy overcoat with fine golden embroidery without murmur.

“Covering the rear lawn all the way to the cliffs, it is also one of the largest,” he continued. He spread his arms out. “Within its midst is an ample variety of flowers, topiaries of assorted shapes, and even our own hedge maze, to whose labyrinthine halls I implore you to devote yourself to one afternoon.” Edward turned to Henry and took him by the arm, and raised a finger. “But by far the greatest beauty of Kingward Gardens is the roses.” He led him over to several long rows of meticulously trimmed rose bushes, the ones he saw from his room, adorned with blossoms of the deepest red. He stood before them with pride. “Tell me, have you ever seen a rose so beautiful?”

Henry leaned forward and gently cupped a blossom as large as his fist. “Never. They’re gorgeous.”

Edward nodded his head and clapped his hands to his thighs, a wide smile on his face. “Behold the envy of every garden.”

Henry gingerly lowered the bloom and cradled another, the velvety texture of the petals caressing his fingers. “That is the fault of beauty, isn’t it?” Henry posed, his eyes lost in their deep hue. “Envy?”

“Fault?” Edward laughed. “Why, it is an advantage to have something that others desire. It solidifies your power.” He stepped up next to Henry. “These roses are a family heirloom, dating back to St. Æthelred. One of the many miracles attributed to him, as a gift for saving a shepherd boy’s flock from a pack of wolves, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared and gave him a single rose, and told him that rose would never die. It was safely kept by each descendant of Æthelwulf, until Kingward House was built, when it was decided to plant it in the garden. It is from that rose that these bushes have grown.” Edward lifted a finger in declaration. “And *that* is something no one else has.” He clapped Henry on the back. “Come, there is plenty more to see.” Following the winding paths, they passed dragons, lions, and unicorns, as well as every color of the rainbow, all arrayed in dazzling splendor.

As his uncle was explaining the significance behind a particular topiary, Henry noticed, off to the left, a corner of the garden, skirted by the path, which had been abandoned to thick overgrowth. He pointed towards it. “Uncle, what lies over there?”

Edward turned and followed his finger. When his eyes fell upon the tangle of weeds and bushes, he sighed. “That, dear nephew, is young George’s grave. Being a suicide, the Church would not allow him to be buried in its cemetery, so the family had to bury him out here, and, due to the manner of his death, the gardeners refuse to tend to his grave, so it has become overgrown over the years.”

Henry watched as a rabbit poked its head out from a thicket of weeds, nose twitching, eyes searching the horizon. Settling on a source of sanctuary, it darted across the open before

disappearing under a flower bush. Its sense of liberty struck Henry with wonder. If it thought itself to be threatened, the rabbit could escape to any number of different bushes, and under their lush branches find safety. When he was only six, George had no bush he could run to, and now he was relegated to the furthest corner of the massive garden, and there left to be forgotten.

Edward started back down the path, interrupting Henry's thoughts, who had to step briskly to catch up with him. "The Crown Games are tomorrow," he said, changing subjects. "Competitors from every corner of the Kingdom will be showcasing their strength and will to determine who shall hold the title of Victor. Seldom have you seen such an assembly of men. I held the title several years myself in my younger days." He turned his head to Henry. "I shall be in attendance. Would you like to join me?"

Henry glanced down at the trail disappearing beneath his feet. He had never been much attuned to physical prowess, yet didn't want to admit to the fact. "Yes, of course."

Edward clapped him on the back once again. "Great. We will ride."

The crisp morning air felt refreshing on Henry's neck as his wig bounced with each step of his galloping horse. He struggled to maintain speed with his uncle who knew every turn to make and all the right paths to take. Once they passed a couple of other slower riders, he knew they had to be getting close.

As they exited the woods, the sprawling event field stretched out before them. Hundreds of spectators milled about, some tying their horses off, others biting into hawked food or swilling beer, some even setting up small shops to peddle their wares. Edward led him to a stable reserved for aristocrats, where a stable hand waited to tend to their horses. As they snaked their way to their private seating, Henry saw an old man in ragged clothes behind a small cart, selling

hand-carved toys. Small children stood about, ogling longingly the assorted wooden pieces on display.

The seats were along the edge of the field, affording envious Edward an intimate view of the Games he so missed from his youth. The competition consisted of three segments. First, competitors displayed their prowess with a bow through a variety of archery contests. The second consisted of a boxing match. The archery portion passed painfully slow, and at its conclusion, Henry leaned back into his chair and pulled out a book he had brought along, as his uncle leaned forward with eagerness. “This is where they will really get it,” he said, eyes fastened to the field, his fingers drumming his knees.

Henry looked up. Two men slowly paced out a circle, fists raised. Henry turned back to his book, getting lost in its pages until Edward slapped a hand to his knee.

“Well placed, man!”

Henry glanced to the field and discovered one of the boxers had collapsed to the ground, blood running down from his eyebrow, mixing with that which dribbled from his nose. He fell forward to his hands and struggled to lift himself to his feet, but the other lifted a foot and pushed him back. The crowd erupted with derisive laughter. The bloodied man attempted to sit upright, but, lacking the strength, fell back to the ground. A field hand rushed out onto the field and, tucking his arms under the loser’s underarms, dragged him off, whilst the victor threw his arms up, basking in the crowd’s approval. The intermittent bouts of cheering marked for Henry the end of rounds as he focused his attention on his reading.

Once the boxing finished, the third and final segment began: tossing. Field hands hauled towering cabers over and dropped them to the ground as the first contestant stepped forward. He bent over and lifted one end of a caber and slowly walked down its length until it stood erect.

Crouching at its base, he interlocked his fingers and tightened his grip. He clenched his teeth as he lifted it and rose to his feet, his lips shooting out, face red with strain. With the long pole resting against his shoulder, he ran as fast as he could for several paces and then extended his arms, launching the caber into the air. It spun around once before crashing to the ground, tossing up clumps of dirt. The thrower stood and analyzed his score before the field hands rushed out and hauled it off. Satisfied, he stepped back, allowing the next competitor to step forward.

A broad-chested, towering Scotsman proudly stepped up, the wind blowing his long brown hair back, and sending waves through his green plaid kilt that draped his thick, stockinged legs. He hoisted a mug of beer high above his head. “Aonaibh Ri Chéile!” he shouted in Gaelic, eliciting a few acclamations before lowering it to his lips and draining it. Pulling the cup away, he ran his other hand over his mouth, brushing away the drops that speckled his beard. Most of the crowd, however, sat in nervous silence.

Noticing the sudden change in atmosphere, Henry glanced over at his uncle and found that the familiar frown had returned.

The Scot tossed the mug off to the side and slowly made a circuit, scanning the surrounding crowds. His eyes finally settled on Henry. He took several steps forward, and pointed to him. “What is this?” he called out. “Reading at a man’s game?” He walked up to the sideline where Henry was seated. “What read you, laddie?”

Henry immediately felt his neck tighten, and he gripped the book firmly in his hand. “*The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*,” Henry replied quietly.

The look on the Scot’s face betrayed his confusion and ignorance. “Well, aren’t you quite the learner.” He pointed back to the cabers lying behind him. “But can you toss?”

Henry shook his head. “No, that’s all right, I much rather enjoy watching.” His heart pounded furiously in his chest, adding a slight quiver to his words.

“But you were reading, laddie,” the man pointed out. “Surely if you can read then you must know how to toss a caber.”

Henry shook his head once more. “No, no, that’s all right, really.”

The Scot started to pump his fist above his head. “Toss! Toss! Toss!”

The crowd joined in, their collective cry booming in Henry’s ears, his head pounding from the pressure in his neck. He lifted a hand in resignation. “All right.” He stood and placed his book on his seat.

The Scot thrust his arms into the air as if claiming victory. The crowd thundered with cheering.

Henry followed him onto the field, his head hung low, unable to look at the myriads of people encircling him. The Scot lifted his hands to the caber, and with a slight nod, silently beckoned him to begin. Henry stared down at the daunting wooden pole. When the Scot started to whistle impatiently, he bent down and worked his fingers under the closest end. With a grunt, he hoisted it to his waist. He held it there for a moment before, struggling, he raised it to his chest. It rolled from his fingers and fell, bouncing off the ground. He jumped back from it, nearly falling.

The Scot leaned forward, slapping his thighs in uproarious laughter as the spectators joined him.

Henry returned to the wooden pole for a second attempt, and managed to get it to his shoulder, where it rested as he caught his breath.

The Scot lifted his kilt daintily with his thumb and forefingers and started to prance. “I better step lightly, mustn’t spot me brogues.” The crowd erupted again with laughter, and Henry could feel the blood beating forcefully in his face.

“Enough!” Edward rose from his seat and stepped out on the field. With one hand he lifted the caber off from Henry’s shoulder and tossed it away. He drew up close to the Scotsman, staring him straight in the eyes. “You dare speak to an Englishman that way, you Scottish swine?”

The Scot looked down at him, nostrils flaring in anger.

“What do they call you?” Edward asked.

“I am Cosgrach, of the Clan Cameron,” he replied brusquely.

“Ah, the Camerons,” Edward mused, tapping a finger to his lips. “I know the name well. And the King thanks you for the generous donation of your land.”

Cosgrach fidgeted, his chest heaving, jaw quivering with fury, but he remained silent.

“Now, let me try and understand. You stand out here and make a call for unity. Unity against what? The Crown? Have you so quickly forgotten what happened to your clans the last time you united?” Edward leaned in closer and lowered his voice. “Then let me remind you how the guns cut down Scots like a scythe through a wheat field, and how no mercy was shown to the wounded, who met with the bayonet until Culloden lay littered with stinking filth, many a Cameron amongst them, leaving your Lochiel to die in France.” He paused, staring into Cosgrach’s eyes. “Is that the kind of... *victory* you are looking for?” Cosgrach didn’t respond, but only returned Edward’s stare. “If you ever openly defy the King’s Laws again, I will have you hanged and gutted like the beast you are, leaving your wife,” he pointed behind Cosgrach to a woman in simple dress who had rushed out onto the field once the confrontation began, “to sew

you back up. Now do *you* understand?” Edward smiled. “No matter where you go, whether you lift your voice or a finger, there will always be an Englishman with his boot on your head.” He lowered his head to gaze at his spotless riding boots, an invitation for the Scotsman to strike him.

Cosgrach only stood silent, his broad chest rising and falling, clenching and unclenching his hands.

After several seconds, Edward returned his eyes to the towering man. He waved his hands out in front of him. “Run along now. She is waiting, and, with no doubt, worried.”

With one last look of bitter hatred, his chin quivering, Cosgrach turned and stamped off, his wife running up and grasping his arm. With a forceful thrust, he pushed her away and disappeared into the crowd.

Henry stared at his uncle, dumbfounded, as they returned to their seats. He picked up his book but found that he could not concentrate on the words, and so set it aside.

At the conclusion of the games, they started for the stable in silence, passing the old toy seller once again. The children were now dispersing, following their parents gloomily and empty-handed. Once they passed him and trekked a short distance, Henry stopped. “I left my book behind. I’ll meet you at the stable.”

Edward nodded and continued on his way.

Henry waited until his uncle had gone several paces ahead before he jogged back to the old toy seller. He was in the process of packing up his cart when Henry stopped him. “Please, sir, I wish to purchase one of your toys.”

The old man looked at him with a smile, waving his hand over those remaining on display. “What will it be, sir?”

Henry looked them over and then pointed to a wooden cup with a wooden ball attached by a string. "I'll take this one." He dropped a coin into the old man's twisted, proffered hand, and retrieved the toy from the other. Taking off his jacket, he tucked the wooden item inside, and then draped it over his arm.

Henry returned to the stable to find his uncle standing before his horse, gently stroking the long bridge of its nose. He waited for the stable hand to retrieve his own. Unable to stand the silence any further, he turned to his uncle. "You didn't have to do that. Back there."

Edward stepped out from in front of his horse and stood next to the saddle. "It was necessary. My dear Henry, if a dog is not scolded, he will never learn not to jump on your trousers." As the stable hand appeared with Henry's horse, he lifted a leg and climbed atop his own. Once mounted, Edward twisted his head back. "And Henry, never embarrass me again." He jolted off toward the woods, leaving Henry to stare after him before following in shame.

Back at Kingward House, Edward sequestered himself in the smoking room, while Henry wandered the winding trails of the Gardens, until he came to the patch of overgrowth in the far corner. He stood and stared into the bushes until a bird, perched in a tree branch above, started its song. Henry glanced up at the bird and then down at his jacket draped over his arm. Reaching inside, he retrieved the wooden toy. Leaving the path, he approached a large stone that sat before the bushes. He gently set the toy to its surface before turning and reluctantly starting back toward the house.

That evening, Edward entered the smoking room, flickering candle in his hand, and found Henry sitting at the table, a glass of amber liquid resting in his fingers. He sat staring up at the

painting of St. Æthelred, while a fire blazed below. Noticing the stirring behind him, he turned to his uncle.

“Henry, what a surprise it is to find you here.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Henry responded. He lifted his glass. “So I thought I’d come in for a nightcap.” Lifting the glass to his lips, he emptied it into his mouth. Coughing, he reached for the crystal decanter and poured himself another glass.

Edward stepped forward, and, setting his candle to the table, grabbed himself a glass. “You said a nightcap, not the full gown.” Studying the small bar, he chose a different decanter and filled his glass.

“And I hate Scotch,” Henry replied.

Edward lowered himself into the seat opposite him. “Yes, it is those barbarians’ lasting revenge, is it not?” He raised his glass to his mouth and turned his eyes toward the fire.

The two sat quietly for some time until Henry broke the silence. “Uncle, what do you suppose is the meaning of life?” he asked, watching the tongues of fire flicker and dance.

Edward drained his glass before rising to fill it again. “Wealth, power, pleasure,” he replied. He sat back down and looked over at his nephew. “Without these things we are not who we are. Some are meant to rule, others to be ruled.” He paused. “What would you say it is?”

“I know it should be to serve and love God with all your heart and all your mind, I know this.” Henry drained his glass of the dark contents and set it to the table. He exhaled loudly, his mouth twisting back in disgust, before reaching again for the decanter. “But, honestly,” he watched the liquid fall and splash into the glass, swirling around the edges, “I would say the pursuit of beauty.”

Edward laughed. “Beauty?”

“This world is hopelessly mired in the ugliness we bring to it,” Henry explained. “We are told to love,” he shook his head, “but love doesn’t really exist. It is nothing more than empty words spoken to blind our eyes to the fact that we are alone. Why is it that a poor man can pray for a son, not gold, and have that son conscripted into the army to die in a foreign land, while others, who walk in golden halls and have much, lose nothing, and only grow more prosperous? Not all will have wealth. Not all will have power. Not all can enjoy every pleasure of this world. I understand these things. But to be lonely...” Henry emptied his glass, oblivious now to the taste, “is to suffer death while still breathing. This is my pain. So once these things are stripped away, beauty is all that remains: in the words of the poet, in the notes of the violin. Through these things I feel.” He turned and faced his uncle, eyes imploring. “Why is it that happiness eludes me? Why must Fortune’s wheel always spin away from me and spill my riches into another man’s hands?”

Edward emptied his glass and set it to the table. He rose to his feet and poked at the fire. “King Canute once stood before the sea--who,” he craned his head toward Henry and interjected, “our ancestor Edgar served with utmost fidelity.” Turning back to the fire, he continued. “Dressed in every royal accoutrement and symbol of his authority and office, he demanded, by royal proclamation, that the waves cease their endless crashing.” He turned to his nephew. “That selfsame moment, he got his feet wet.” He returned to his chair. “There are some things that even a king does not have control over. Or a Kingward. We may never know in this lifetime why certain things happen.

“Take the American Rebellion for example. They toss aside the King’s good graces, for what? Liberty?” He returned to the bar, this time bringing the decanter back with him. He poured himself another drink. “Lady Liberty has blinded more eyes and shackled more men than any

other power in the world,” he continued. “She must be courted with caution. It is easy to grow drunk on her love, and stumble and fall. But when you look for a hand up, she is nowhere to be found. And so, like an erring child, the American colonies must be chastised, and brought back under the protecting guidance of her parent.” He stared down into his glass, swirling the liquid within. “I give them fifty years,” he added. “If they are to win this conflict, that is. Fifty years until they begin to squabble amongst themselves, and then everything they now fight for will be lost to those not as benevolent as King George.”

Draining his glass, he set it to the table and rose to his feet. “I know you are in pain, but you just have to move on.” He started for the door. “I am going to retire, and you should consider doing the same.”

Henry stared blankly into the flames. “Good night, Uncle.”

The next morning, Henry dressed before breakfast and left for the Gardens. He tried to walk briskly, but his head was pounding and his legs were weak, and several times he had to stop, resting his hands on his knees. However, without vomiting once, he was able to make it to the distant corner. The toy he had left on the large rock was gone. In its place sat a bright red rose blossom. Henry reached down, and, with a slight smile, gingerly picked it up.

The summer passed quietly. Men came for Edward and went, some happy, others not so pleased. Henry read several books from the House’s library. With autumn came cooler temperatures--but hotter tempers.

Once again, Henry found himself tossing in bed, unable to sleep. He threw his blankets off to the side and sat up to look out the window. He found only the moon's dim illumination cast over the Gardens.

Sighing, he crawled off his bed and quietly crept down the hall to the smoking room for a nightcap. As he approached, he found the door slight ajar, wavering light spilling from around its edges. He turned to return to his room, but the sound of voices drew his attention closer. He peeked inside.

Elizabeth stood behind Edward, who was seated at the small table, analyzing a map, her hands resting on his shoulders. She was dressed in her nightgown, her long hair free from its bun and resting upon her shoulders in loose curls. It softened her appearance, and emphasized her beauty. "Won't you come to bed? It is late."

Edward sighed. "Elizabeth, I have much to accomplish here."

She slowly ran her hands down the inside of his open shirt, over his chest and to the ridges of his ribs. She lowered her head and whispered in his ear. "Can't it wait? These November nights are cold." She gently bit down on his earlobe.

Edward grasped her wrists, pushed them away, and jumped to his feet. "No, it cannot." He slammed the glass he cradled in his hand to the table, where it clattered vociferously, causing Elizabeth to jump. "Believe it or not, Elizabeth, there are actually some things in this world I care about." He jabbed his finger forcefully to the map-covered table. "Such as winning this war. Do you understand what will come of poor planning?" Moving his lips slowly, emphasizing each word, he answered, "Failure and shame." Edward shook his head. "I will not allow it. I will not leave one rock unturned or one corner unlit. Everything will be accounted for."

Elizabeth took a step forward. "Just talk to me!" she implored. "I know you are scared--"

“A Kingward is afraid of nothing!” Edward shouted, slamming his fist into his thigh, causing Elizabeth to jump back. He took a step toward his shaking wife, staring her in the eyes. “If I wanted to confess my soul I would go to a priest. If you are cold then have a servant throw another log on the fire,” he said coldly.

Elizabeth’s eyes grew red as tears welled up within them. Without a word, she turned and stormed for the door.

Before she could reach it, Henry took off down the hall. Albert had just stepped out of his room to see him quickly approaching. Henry placed a finger to his lips and Albert turned and went back inside.

Now lying on his bed, Henry stared at the ceiling. If sleep eluded him before, it all but abandoned him now. He cycled everything that had been said through his head on endless rotation. About an hour later, a light knock was heard from his door. “Yes?”

The door opened and Edward stepped inside, candle in hand.

Henry jumped from his bed. “Uncle Edward!” he declared, surprised.

“Get dressed,” Edward told him. “We are going into town.”

Henry turned to the window and the moonlight. “At this hour?”

“I have an important meeting with Admiral Crookshaft,” Edward explained.

The interior of the coach was flooded with darkness as it jostled down the road, bearing the two to town. Henry still wasn’t certain as to what his presence meant to his uncle, as he was keeping rather tight-lipped. The carriage left the dirt road of the country for the cobblestones of the city, the passing streetlamps casting their momentary luminance over their faces. Edward sat staring out the window, lost in thought. They approached a considerable sized gated mansion,

each of its windows ablaze with light. Recognizing the carriage, servants slowly pulled the heavy gates open.

“Is this where he lives?” Henry asked.

Edward turned to him with a look of confusion. “Who?”

“The Admiral.”

Edward smiled. “Ah, the Admiral.” Nodding his head, he turned back to the window.

“You will see.”

The carriage came to a halt before the semi-circle stairs that led up to the entrance, ornate wrought iron railing lining the edges. Edward exited as the footman opened the door, followed closely by Henry. As they ascended the steps, Henry turned to him. “Uncle, I don’t mean to question your judgment, but I am unsure as to what I’m doing here.”

Edward smiled. “All in good time, Henry.”

The door to the house opened and the doorman, a man of heightened years, reverently bowed his head as they stepped inside. “Lord Kingward.”

Edward removed his hat, handing it to the older man. “He is with me,” he said of Henry.

“Very well, sir,” the servant replied, taking Edward’s jacket. Henry stripped himself of his own and handed it over. Edward waited patiently as the doorman took care of their hats and jackets before leading the two down the hall. Muffled laughter and the sound of strings came from the other side of the wall. Halfway down, the doorman stopped and turned toward the wall. He reached down to a small brass knob and swung a section of the wall in. Light spilled out, as well as raucous laughter, as he stepped inside. “The Lord Kingward,” he announced.

Henry followed Edward into an enormous ballroom. The walls were paneled with gold and numerous doors that led to side chambers. A towering central staircase diverged into a

balcony that wrapped around above them, leading to more rooms. Musicians played on an elevated stage in the center of the room. But by far that which held Henry's attention were the women--countless numbers in nothing more than brightly colored corsets, undergarments, and lace garters. Some sat on men's laps at least twice their age, while others milled about lackadaisically, conversing and giggling.

Edward turned to him with a wide grin. "Welcome to Admiral Crookshaft's."

Henry felt his neck tighten at the realization that his uncle led him to a whorehouse. He stood, immobilized, as Edward started into the crowd. He stopped and turned to Henry, who forced himself to move. Edward led them through the crowd, acknowledging various dignitaries as he passed them. Henry ran his tongue along his lower lip as he watched the various women curl in laps, laugh, and whisper in ears. Some rose to their feet, taking their partner by the hand, who, with a lascivious smile, followed them to one of the many surrounding chambers.

Edward stopped before an elderly bespectacled man with a slim, stooped frame, as though time fed from his body, seated on a broad, plush sofa and bowed his head out of deference for his age, an action Henry rarely seen him perform. A young woman, barely into her twenties, with long brown hair tied with green bows, wearing a bright matching corset, sat next to him, the old man's legs too fragile to sit on. She rested her head on his shoulder, gently stroking her fingers between his. "Lord Whimpledy."

Lord Whimpledy looked up at him and nodded, no longer able to speak.

Edward beckoned Henry to step forward. "Sir, this is my nephew, Henry." He turned to his nephew. "Henry, meet Lord Whimpledy, the eldest statesman on this entire magnificent island. He recently turned ninety-six, and has served faithfully under four sovereigns."

Henry bowed his head. "It is a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Whimpledy nodded slowly, as though two nods in such close succession was too much physical exertion. The girl next to him raised her head and gently took a liver spotted and wrinkled hand and lowered it to her bare thigh. She looked on in silence.

Edward chuckled. "You should have seen him in his younger days, my dear Henry."

Whimpledy lifted one side of his mouth in a weak smile. Edward respectfully bowed once again before he led Henry away, the young woman gently resting her head back on Whimpledy's shoulder.

They approached another sofa where sat a man of Edward's age. Seeing him coming, he tapped the thigh of the girl sitting on his lap, bidding her to move. He rose to his feet, extending his arms in welcome. "Edward!"

Edward smiled. "James!" They embraced one another cordially.

As he drew back, James nodded toward Henry. "Who do we have here?"

Edward held his hand out to Henry. "This is my nephew, Henry."

Henry bowed his head, but James reached out and took his hand, shaking it vigorously. He smiled. "Welcome, Henry," he waved his hand in a broad stroke, "to Admiral Crookshaft's. These girls will crook your shaft for sure, if you let them." He erupted into an obnoxious fit of laughter and poked Henry in the ribs. The girl on the couch climbed to her feet and wrapped her arms around James from behind, giggling with him.

"Henry, this is James Smith," Edward continued.

"*Lord* Smith, if you will," James interjected.

"Lord of Hell, perhaps."

"Better to reign than to serve, is it not, Edward?"

They fell over one another in another bout of laughter. Henry joined in weakly. Edward clapped James on the shoulder. "Have you seen Lizzie?"

"No, I have not," James replied, glancing about the room, "but I am sure she is around here somewhere."

Edward turned to Henry. "Please excuse me." He disappeared into the crowd, leaving Henry unsure of what to do or say.

James sat back down, the girl climbing back on his lap, wrapping an arm around behind him. James ran his hand slowly up and down her leg as she played with the ponytail of his wig, letting it slip through her fingers. He looked up at Henry and motioned to the seat beside him. "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you." Henry sat down on the edge of the sofa, and kneaded the base of his neck, staring at the floor.

Edward reappeared with a young woman, his hand resting on the blue corset around her waist. "Henry, meet Lizzie."

She curtsied, holding out an imaginary dress, her long locks falling over her breasts. "Pleased to meet you."

They settled down on the other side of James. "It is high time, Henry, that you get your mind off from your circumstances. Enjoy life. Let me find someone for you." He craned his head back toward the people passing behind him.

Henry protested. "No, uncle, it's all right, really--"

"You there." Edward stopped a young woman passing by. He motioned down the sofa. "I would like you to meet Henry. He has been a bit gloomy over some circumstances in his life. You see--" he motioned for her to step close, and she lowered her head to Edward's. Lizzie

wrapped her arms tightly around Edward's neck and eyed the other girl suspiciously as Edward whispered in her ear.

Straightening, the girl turned to Henry with a piteous look. "Awww." She made her way back and around the sofa. She pushed him back into the seat and climbed on top of him, wrapping an arm around his neck, her purple corset-accentuated breasts resting before his eyes. "I hope I can help you take your mind off from things."

Henry looked down at one of the most gorgeous and slender set of legs he ever laid eyes on. He ran his tongue along his bottom lip, his heart beating furiously. He slowly turned his head and looked upon her long brown hair hugging her bare shoulders. "What's your name?" was all he could manage to say.

She leaned in close to his face. "Moira," she replied, puckering her bright red lips and drawing out the final syllable. Noting his rapid pulse, she placed a hand over his heart. "Don't be nervous. Here." She lifted one of his hands and set it on her thigh, right below a purple lace garter. "Now, how do you know this man?" she asked, pointing down to Edward.

"He is my uncle."

Moira gasped, raising a slender-fingered hand to her corset. "Really?" She looked over at Edward to make a comment, but he and Lizzie were laughing over comments unknown.

Lizzie slowly climbed off his lap and took him by the hand, drawing him to his feet. Edward turned back to his nephew. "I will return, Henry." Lizzie snaked through the crowd, leading Edward to an adjacent room. Pulling him inside, she closed the door behind them.

Smiling, Moira watched them leave. She looked back to Henry. "This is your first time here, isn't it?"

Henry nodded his head. “Yes.” He focused his mind on how uncomfortable his wig felt pressed against his neck by Moira’s arm.

“Well, I can help you forget your pain.” She lowered her head and brushed against a curl of his wig, which tickled the tip of her nose. She laughed playfully and reached up and dragged it off his head, tossing it to the sofa beside her. She lowered her face, resting her forehead above his ear. “Take me, have me, I’m yours,” she whispered.

Henry laughed nervously. “I’m sorry,” he said, pulling his head away.

“Forgive me,” Moira implored, “for moving too fast.” She took his hand from her thigh and slowly trailed it up her smooth skin to her hip. She looked Henry in the eyes. “Perhaps I should have started here.” She leaned forward, closing for his lips.

Henry pulled his head back, shaking his head. “Doesn’t your kiss mean something?”

Moira drew back and studied his face, perplexed. “Mean something?” She smiled. “It can mean anything you want it to,” she said softly, leaning forward. Half way to his lips she gasped. With a smile spreading across her face, she slowly trailed her eyes down to her lap. “But I can feel that it must mean something to you,” she stated, running her hand down his chest.

Henry pushed her forcefully off his lap and jumped to his feet.

Moira tumbled to the floor, landing hard on her tailbone, falling back on her hands. She stared up at him with dismay. “What is wrong with you!?” she shouted. The surrounding patrons fell silent and turned their attention to her. She waved a finger at him. “He must be effeminate!” she accused.

“I am not effeminate,” Henry professed. “Listen, I’m sorry.” He reached down to help her to her feet.

Moira slapped his hand away. “Don’t you touch me!” She climbed to her feet and stormed off.

Henry lifted his eyes and found everyone witness to the scene staring at him. He turned back to the couch. James sat speechless, his mouth slightly ajar. Henry grabbed his wig and set it haphazardly on his head before moving to a seat close to the door he watched his uncle disappear behind. His neck throbbed, and he could feel the blood coursing through his head. He lifted both hands and massaged his shoulders vigorously. His head started to spin, and he found a spot on the floor to stare at as he tried to focus on the music.

After what felt like an eternity, Edward emerged alone, buttoning his trousers. He spotted Henry next to the door. Spying his crooked wig, he smiled. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Very much,” Henry feigned.

Edward tugged on the lace around his wrists. “Well, if you are all done here, we better get back to Kingward House. I have another busy day tomorrow.”

Henry followed his uncle past the door he left ajar and peered inside. Lizzie lay sprawled on her back, nude and gasping for air, her chest rising and falling in violent spasms.

The following day Henry tried to steer as clear of his uncle as he could. He would have preferred to suffer humiliation at the hands of Cosgrach a hundred times over than to relive the previous night once more.

He sat in the library until the sun fell below the horizon, signaling the close of another day. He read on by candle light, but the words no longer spoke to him like they once had. Though his eyes skimmed over the paper, the words there were only empty letters, until he was no longer turning pages, but staring blankly at the one opened. Losing track of time and

concentration, his tempest of thought was quelled when his uncle entered the room. He slowly lifted his head to meet him. Edward appeared haggard, a distant look in his eyes.

“Henry, I am paying a visit to Admiral Crookshaft,” he said softly. “Would you like to come?”

“No, thank you.”

Edward nodded. “Very well then.” He turned and disappeared out the door.

Edward stepped out into the brisk night air and made his way down the steps to the waiting coach. He reached into his left jacket pocket and fingered the letter within. Motioning for the footman to ride up front with the coachman, he climbed inside. Once the door shut, he exhaled loudly. Clapping his hands to his breeches, he stretched back. He turned and, gazing out the window, settled his eyes on the window set before the master room, where his wife lay sleeping. He reached up and pulled his wig from his head, his hat falling to the seat beside him. Running a hand through his hair, he exhaled loudly once more, staring at the empty seat across from him. Fixing his wig back onto his head, he leaned forward and tapped on the front of the coach. It lurched forward, and started off down the drive toward town.

Not sleepy and unable to read, Henry stepped out the back door into the calm night, and made his way to the Gardens. He continued past them until he heard the crashing of waves. He made his way carefully to the edge of the cliff, and watched the waves far beneath his feet. Turning back, he scanned the ground and found the moss covered stones of the castle foundation that remained. Walking slowly, he made for the overgrown corner, and, taking a step off the trail,

lowered himself to the ground. He sat on the dew drenched grass and stared up at the night sky, drifting away into the recesses of memory.

Edward entered the ball room of Admiral Crookshaft's, scanning the faces.

From a distance, Lizzie saw him step inside, and turned and walked quickly in the other direction.

Edward spied her across the room and shouted her name. "Lizzie!" He started after her. "Lizzie!"

She continued forward, walking as fast as she could without it being noticeable.

Edward finally caught up with her and grabbed her by the shoulder. "Lizzie!"

She spun around. "Oh, Edward." She forced a smile. "I didn't hear you."

Edward's eyes narrowed. "Then how do you know I was calling for you?"

Lizzie looked down at the floor, struggling for a response. "Well... I figured that since--"

Edward cut her off. "Listen, Lizzie, I'm not here to play games with you." He grabbed her by the wrist. "Let's go."

Lizzie stood firm. "Edward, I can't," she whispered, lifting her head, her eyes pleading with him. "I'm still bleeding after what you did to me last night."

Edward stared at her intently. He took a step closer, forcing her against the wall. "Do you dare tell me no?" he asked, incredulous. "Do you know who I am?" He slammed his fist forcefully into his thigh, causing Lizzie to jump. "I am--"

"--the right ear of the King!" Edward brought his hand down forcefully on the smoking room table. He leaned against it and lowered his face in front of Lord Germain, who was seated

across from him. "If Clinton will not listen then write to the Earl Cornwallis himself and tell him to move his troops from Carolina to Virginia. If the Carolinas are to be conquered then the rebel supply line must be severed."

Lizzie stared at Edward in fear. Attempting to calm him, she smiled wanly and took him by the hand. "Let's go."

Henry sat in an open field, watching the night sky. A young woman sat next to him, resting her head on his shoulder, their hands entwined, resting between them.

A falling star streaked by, and, gasping in excitement, she pointed. "A falling star!" She turned and looked to Henry, her eyes dancing with excitement. "Make a wish."

Henry turned his head, drinking in the beauty of the long blonde curls around her face. Smiling, he turned back to the sky. "I wish... that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor depth, nor any other creature will ever separate us from one another, and that we will remain together forever."

"You shouldn't have said it out loud," she replied somberly. "Now it can't come true."

Henry jerked his head toward her, troubled, but found her smiling. She giggled, and the pit in his stomach that had so suddenly solidified started to dissolve as she lowered her head to his shoulder. He gently stroked her left ring finger, which would soon be bare no more.

Lizzie reached up and wrapped her fingers around the edge of the bed, gripping it as tight as she could. She clenched her eyes shut in pain as Edward thrust forcefully inside of her. Tears slowly worked their way out and rolled down her temples to the bed, but she didn't say a word.

Edward held himself up on his hands, pushing himself harder and harder into her. His eyes grew red and he blinked furiously, fighting hard to stop the tingling in them. The tears eventually spilled out, streaming down his cheeks as his chin quivered--

--with anger. He stared at Lord Germain as the other averted his eyes to the table.

“Yet General Clinton seems to think that if we capture the Carolinas first--“

“Damn Clinton straight to Hell!” Edward shouted. He lowered a finger to the map on the table below him. “Washington will without doubt attack New York. Once Earl Cornwallis moves from North Carolina into Virginia, I am confident Clinton will come to his senses and notice that we can control the coast from New York to Charleston. All Cornwallis needs to do is fortify,” he glanced down at the map, running his fingers down the Atlantic shore line, “either Williamsburg or...” Studying the small printed names, he tapped his finger and looked up at Germain. “Yorktown.”

High up in the sky, above mere mortals, the Wishmaster sat listening to every wish uttered from the lips of man, where he collected them and formed them into orbs, bright shining with the hopes and dreams treasured in the heart of those who so fervently wished them. He in turn suspended them from strings, so that, dangling down, they would illuminate the earth and assure doubtful man that their wishes had been heard.

He was in the process of molding a new one, pressing it firmly within his hands, when the words of a spoken wish drifted up to his ears. Setting the new wish aside, he reached down beside his seat and pulled up a giant pair of metal shears. Rising to his feet, he danced gaily through the suspended orbs of light, twirling gracefully, his robe spinning out around his knees.

He leapt into the air, his feet kicking out in either direction before pausing before a single hanging light. Twirling once more, he lifted the shears and cut the string with one fluid movement, and watched the light plummet into the darkness beneath him, before it flickered and went out.

Yes, every falling star is a broken dream.

Henry watched as a falling star streaked across the sky. He followed it until it disappeared behind the tree that stood amongst the overgrowth. Lowering his eyes, he found George sitting on the great rock, head turned to the sky, hugging his knees. “George?”

The boy swung his head over and, seeing Henry, jumped to his feet.

“No!” Henry held a hand out, beckoning him to stop. He clambered to his feet. “George, wait! Please!”

The boy turned and ran into the overgrowth.

Edward rested his elbows on his knees and stared out at the night sky as Admiral Crookshaft’s disappeared behind him. A falling star blazed across the black. He watched it until it blinked out, the coach carrying on indiscriminately. Raising his hands, he lowered his face into them and wept.

Henry was enveloped in darkness. He groped about blindly with no sense of direction. Then, as if he willed it, she appeared before him. Her back was to him, but he knew it was her; he could tell by the long blonde curls that fell about her shoulders. She wore a white nightgown that radiated light in the darkness. He felt now as though he were standing upright, and slowly

stepped toward her. He wanted to call out to her, to say her name, but she turned around before he had the chance.

Smiling that same mischievous grin, she held in each hand a squirming rooster by the neck, their wings flapping frantically. Despite this, Henry's eyes fell upon her left hand, and noticed the ring he had pledged to her was gone. Her head began to shake uncontrollably, and with a violent jerk, her jaw dislocated and fell to her chest, revealing a black pit. While they still struggled, she lifted each rooster to her mouth and devoured them.

Frightened and disgusted as he was, Henry stumbled toward her, hands outstretched, as her image started to fade, but the more he ran, the further away she drew, until, after one last flicker, she disappeared. Henry fell to his knees with a guttural cry. Somewhere in the darkness, a clock tolled thrice.

Henry startled awake and jolted upright. His nightgown was soaked with sweat, and his chest heaved as he gasped for air. He fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling before rolling his head toward the window. George stood outside, watching the window. Henry saw the understanding in his eyes, and gave a slight smile. Lifting a hand, he bent his fingers and waved.

George raised his hand in return, and with a comforting smile, waved back.

The next morning Henry skipped breakfast and left instead for the stable. The coachman was busy cleaning the runners of the sleigh, preparing it for the approaching winter, his back to the door, and didn't notice Henry approach. Thankful that Dick was nowhere to be found, Henry spotted a scythe and sickle hanging on a nearby wall. Retrieving them both, he left for the Gardens.

He made his way to the far corner, and, tossing the implements to the ground, rolled up his sleeves. He had left his jacket behind in the house, knowing he would work up a sweat. Grabbing the sickle, he took to clearing out the light brush, tossing it into an orderly pile. With each swing of the sickle, more fell--

--to the table with a loud clatter. Edward reached over and dragged the decanter across the table and filled his glass again. He hadn't slept, and his eyes stared down glassily at the map on the table. He hadn't seen Elizabeth all morning. Of course he hadn't left the room since he had taken to pissing in a spittoon in the corner, but she hadn't sought him out, either. He couldn't blame her. Lifting his fist to his face, he brought it down hard--

--into the woody base of the bush. Henry wiggled the scythe back and forth until it dislodged. He lowered the blade to the ground and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of a grimy hand. He glanced down at his shoes, the bright golden buckles caked with dirt. Lifting the scythe again, he swung it out forcefully. The bush toppled to the side, still hanging to its roots by a thin ribbon. Henry dropped the scythe and retrieved the sickle, and, falling to his knees, sawed through what remained. Dragging it to the side, he paused, hands on his hips, breathing steadily.

What once lay forgotten was now cleared, and found the light of day for the first time in decades. Henry slowly and reverently approached the grave stone. It read simply

George

1693-1699

Henry's eyes came to rest at the base of the stone. Sitting next to its cold surface was an untouched, bright green painted, wooden toy dragon. He stooped and picked it up, turning it over in his hands. The bottom base had been broken, and a thin piece of metal stuck out of its belly. Henry smiled.

Climbing to his feet, he followed the path back down to Æthelred's roses. Reaching out his spare hand, he cupped a blossom, and, pinching its stem between thumb and forefinger, plucked it from the bush. Returning to the grave, he gently lowered it atop the head stone before turning and making his way back to the house.

Swinging his bedroom door open, he approached the mantle, where the figure of St. George still rested. Setting the dragon beside it, he slowly pushed the two together. The bases lined up perfectly, St. George's spear now running straight into the belly of the beast.

Closing his door, Henry sat down at his desk and started to write.

*I knew then, as she left its steps crying, that my mother always kept this house locked within her heart. However, I did not know at that age, for it was a secret she kept well until the end of her life, that she was expelled from the fellowship of her kin for having born me out of wedlock. She would never again lay eyes on its cold, gray stones, yet, despite her absence from its long echoing halls, she kept the Kingward name well in life.*

*It was in my steps past the furthest recesses of the Gardens, and the discovery of those mossy stones you spoke of, that I made sense of the past. You tear down one castle only to build another. How many more years until Kingward House slowly rots away, and is destroyed, only to be built anew, in different dimensions? How many castles must be built until your eyes are*

*finally opened? Yet, for all our faults, I know that God is merciful in the afterlife. It's this life that I'm not so sure about.*

*It was when I first saw George that I started to make sense of the future, and I know now that in his face that night I saw my own reflecting back at me. In all things--as a Christian, a husband, a nephew, a son, a friend, a sinner--I have failed. This life has stolen from me all emotion. That which I've always wanted is that which I've never had--a family. But for all its tribulations, this life can never touch my devotion. So it is to that I cling--devotion to the stories of voices unheard. Yet no one loves a dreamer. Rather, people seek out those veiled behind a mask, hiding their heart of hearts in darkness. But it is the dreamer who is maskless, the dreamer who reveals his soul.*

*My most gracious uncle, I thank you for your generosity in inviting me within your castle walls and mean you no ill repute, but why must we join the sinful to obtain innocence? I can never be a Kingward, for*

*Life without poetry is only death,*

*The world without a dreamer only emptiness.*

*I have learned to listen to the waves, and I hear their symphony.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Henry*

Folding the letter, Edward tucked it into the right pocket of his jacket. He stood alone in the dining hall, and lifted his eyes to stare at the portraits on the wall in silence. He had awoken this morning to find the bed next to him empty. He later learned from one of her handmaids at breakfast that Elizabeth had taken up residence in a different room. Then, to crown it all, he

learned from Albert that Henry had not been seen for about a day. Upon entering his room, he had found a note signed by him on his writing desk.

After a considerable time spent in the empty hall, Edward made for the meandering garden paths, telling himself to move on, repeating it over and over again in his mind. After all, that's what you do, right? Just move on? Along the way, he stopped to smell the roses, but the cold November temperature made them retreat within themselves, cloaking their beauty from his eyes.

He set off again, patting the letter in his left pocket. He didn't need to pull it out to see its words; they had been burned into his mind since he first read them two days prior.

*To the most right, venerable, devoted Servant to His Majesty King George III, the Lord Kingward,*

*It is with great humility that I write to inform you that General Charles, Earl Cornwallis, has surrendered his troops to the rebel army at Yorktown...*

Reaching the far corner, Edward discovered that George's grave had been cleared, and a single red orb, which he deduced from a distance to be a rose blossom, sat atop his gravestone.

From the path, he could hear the cacophony of the crashing waves in the distance, slowly biting away at the cliffs, bit by painful bit. Listening to their roar, he could not understand how Henry could hear music in them at all.

He made his way out of the gardens and paused at the castle foundation. He knelt down, the edges of his blue jacket dusting the ground, and patted the cold wet stones, recalling all of the family history encased in them.

Rising to his feet, he continued past them, to view the approaching waves. Reaching the cliff's edge, he peered down. Far below, on a large rock, limbs splayed in contorted angles, was the lifeless body of Henry--smiling, happy at last.

## Stormy Seas

The Germans happened upon the wreckage piece by piece. It drifted by in concord to the gentle undulation of the ocean, telling its tale in fragmentary riddles. The segments of planks were clearly hewn by the hands of man, yet evinced nothing more in concern to their origin. It wasn't until the splintered timbers began to approach begrimed with soot that they were pieced together into a grim portrait of calamity. A call to alarm was trajected amongst the crew of the trans-Atlantic packet, and the passengers three, who had gathered on deck to ponder the floating curiosities.

The captain, the edges of his long, deep blue overcoat gently brushing against his knees, stood silent upon the quarter deck beside the coxswain, his arms crossed, one hand holding the opposite elbow, whilst the other was raised to his face, his thumb and forefinger slowly stroking the long hairs of his mustache that skirted his mouth and curled skyward. It was international entente to aid fellow mariners if devastation struck, as well as the rule of conscience, but he couldn't help but harbor the resentment borne of the fact that any possible refugees would board his vessel without payment. A packet service wasn't free of cost to operate and workers long since ceased accepting payment in salt, which now surrounded them in abundance and could easily be extricated from the waters and doled out without hesitation. No, time and space were money, and so he cursed conscience. His unease grew into impatience, and he shouted out to the first mate stationed below, beside the main mast. "Is there anything in sight?"

The mate relayed the inquiry to the watchman in the crow's nest above.

With a hand raised to shield his eyes from the glare of the setting sun reflecting off the waters, the other gripping the banister in front of him to steady himself from the furious beating

of his barely sober head, the watchman scanned the boundaries of his drastically crippled plane of vision. “Nothing but debris, sir,” he answered.

The mate reiterated his reply, and the captain merely nodded.

The passengers stood along the bulwark, peering down at the litter as it floated by. The young woman turned to her husband, her green eyes squinted from the falling day, her fingers spinning a small silver heirloom around her right ring finger. “What do you suppose happened?”

His eyes enthralled to the passing blackened boards, his mind fettered to the endless possibilities and potential dangers of the situation, the woman’s young husband replied, in a withdrawn whisper, “I do not know.” *Was this simply mischance, or the deliberate strike of immanity?* He lamented any loss of life, and it panged his conscience that he favored one over the other. But his wife was here and now, and the idea of non-divinable misfortune did more to quell the unsettling influx of perturbation. The open seas were devoid of any sense of security, and he wistfully prayed that he had made the right decision to sail to the New World to begin a new life. He broke free of his melancholic thoughts, and turned to face his wife with eyes that permanently reflected the ocean waters, a soft sea breeze ruffling his wavy, light brown hair. “You should return below deck, mein Schatz,” he spoke lovingly, reaching out and tenderly taking her by the arms.

The young woman wrested herself from his grip, her abundant ringlets of bistered hair doddering about her shoulders. “No. I want to stay and help.”

The young man searched for words to piece together a response, but he didn’t have to look long, for the loud clacking of boots upon the smooth ligneous surface of the sea vessel marked the approach of the captain.

The commander towered over them all, an imposing figure set to impose his will. “You should return to your cabin, Frau Sorg. The uncertainty of the situation is not befitting for a lady.”

The young woman bowed her head in deference. “As you wish, Captain.” The hoops of her dress swayed with each step as she disappeared below deck.

Without another word, the captain returned to his stance beside the helmsman, awaiting any new word from the foredeck.

The young man’s eyes returned to the sea. Before long, and without shifting his gaze, he asked the other passenger beside him, a man of many years with a length of white beard and a balding head, “What do you suppose lies hidden within the depths? Leviathan? Jonah’s great fish?”

The old man clasped his hands together, interlinking fingers twisted with age and experience. “I think a world of wonder,” he replied, “a creation of great mystery waiting to be discovered.” He turned to Herr Sorg, but the young man still stared into the ocean, a slave to his thoughts.

“What wreckage of lost lives lies hidden beneath this mirrored façade?” Sorg posed. He at last turned his head and met the old man’s eyes. “Do you think the voices of the dead cry out for discovery?”

“They are known to God. Every life has value and should be remembered, whether--“

“Captain! Body adrift ahead!” The shout of the first mate jarred everyone out of the tranquility that had settled upon them, and back to the reality of the present.

“Boatswain! Bring to!” the captain bellowed.

“Brail up the sails, you worms!” shouted the boatswain. A nest of thick brown hair blanketed his face so that his mouth was hidden, but the vociferation was not lost. The crew begrudgingly climbed the ratlines aloft, heads still reeling from the previous night’s drink, and shuffled along the horse to hand the sails.

As the vessel was slowly becalmed, the captain ordered the first mate and another into the yawl boat, which was lowered to the sea. Grabbing his speaking trumpet, he walked briskly to the prow as the small boat oared out before them. The captain could make out the silhouette of an unmoving form ahead, curled up on a large, bobbing piece of debris. The two passengers flanked him, and the three stared on past the jib at the recovery underway. The ocean waters were cold, and judging by the dispersion of the detritus, if there was indeed a wreck, it had happened some time ago. The captain’s unease was significantly lightened by this realization, for no man could survive for that length of time in such frigid temperatures. Instead of obligatory passage, after a Christian burial he could now return to the very sea which took the life the earthly husk it once animated.

The oarsman stayed the yawl as it pulled up alongside what now appeared to be a hatch cover. The figure on board was a man, hair long and black as coal, with a long curled mustache, similar to the captain’s, and a well-manicured goatee to complement. He wore nothing but boots, trousers, and a thin white shirt, which blended seamlessly with the color of his skin.

The first mate crossed himself in the presence of the dead, not out of piety, but superstition.

The oarsman, watching the other, decided it was in his best interest to do the same, and so followed suit, hesitant of which station upon his chest to place his fingers, due to inexperience.

The first mate reached out and grasped the ankles of the still man that were nestled up to his buttocks. Ligaments cracked as the body was stretched out and dragged upon the wooden surface. The imbalance in the buoyancy threatened to tip the man into the icy waters, and the rower had to drop his oars and assist in the retrieval.

Back on board, the captain turned to the old man at his right. "Pastor," said he, "I believe we have need for a burial."

The pastor crossed himself. "May Christ graciously receive his soul. I shall prepare." He disappeared below deck.

The captain stepped away from the bow as the yawl began its return trip and ordered the procurement of linens in which to wrap the body.

A deck hand accepted the charge and moved briskly to fulfill his duty.

The pastor reappeared, garbed in a black Geneva gown, with a white band tied about his neck, clutching a service book within his hand. The face of Frau Sorg emerged behind him, curiosity getting the better of her.

Approaching the main mast, the captain shouted up to the crow's nest. "Lookout, is there anyone else in sight?"

The lookout glanced around before giving his answer. "No, captain."

The commander turned back to the prow and demanded silence. "We must be certain," he said, raising his speaking trumpet to his mouth, glancing at Frau Sorg in his periphery. She stood enraptured by his every action. "Ahoy! Ahoy! Is there anybody out there? Ahoy!"

The crew all leaned over the bulwark, even Frau Sorg, their hands cupped behind their ears, listening intently after each petition, for any form of response. The only reply was the

gentle lapping of the waters against the hull, and the rhythmic splash of the oars of the approaching yawl.

Spying his wife, Herr Sorg stepped over to admonish her to go below deck.

She looked up at him, her mouth set with determination. "I am not a child."

Not desiring to enter a confrontation, the young man relented.

The yawl boat had returned astern, and was being hoisted aloft. A crewman was spreading the shroud across the poop deck as the head of the first mate slowly appeared. With a look of urgency upon his face, he called out to his superior. "Captain, he's still alive." As the yawl came to rest, the first mate jumped from the boat as others came to help extricate the survivor.

The captain turned to the man preparing the shroud, who had since ceased and was staring on in wonderment. "Go prepare a cabin; make ready an abundance of blankets."

The crewman nodded and ran off.

The survivor started to stir as he was gently lowered to the deck.

The captain stepped over and knelt beside him. "Sie gibt es, was ist passiert? Wo ist Ihr Schiff?"

The others crowded around him as he opened his eyes. He raised his head slowly and shook it in confusion.

"Try English," the pastor suggested.

"English, do you understand English?" the captain inquired.

The man nodded his head. In exhaustion, he closed his eyes and slowly lowered it back to the deck.

“I am Captain Otto Astor. You are onboard the *Lebenlust*. How did you end up in the sea, and what happened to your ship?”

“Fire,” the man whispered before losing consciousness, his head rolling limp to the side.

Captain Astor motioned to his crew. “Carry him below deck and get him warmed up.”

The ocean borne sat in the central saloon, his long black curls resting upon a fresh white shirt. He had slept for a complete day, and now that he had awakened, everyone was burgeoning with curiosity about this new arrival. He turned to Herr Sorg. “Thank you again for the fresh garments.”

Standing beside him, Sorg nodded in acceptance. “You are most welcome. I hope they fit well.”

The man wiggled his arms within the long, loose sleeves. “I feel as if I walk within you.”

The captain interrupted their exchange. “Now that we have a new passenger, let us all formally introduce ourselves.” He raised a hand and with an elegant flick of the wrist, motioned to himself. “I am Captain Otto Astor, and this is my packet, the *Lebenlust*.”

The man bowed his head. “I am most appreciative of your generosity.”

The pastor was the next to step forth. “I am Pastor Burkhard Schäfer, Franconian by birth, and passenger bound for the United States of America.”

The ocean man eyed him queerly, and made no reply but for the nod of his head.

The young man stepped up next, standing out from the rest by his outdated attire of yellow knickers and buckled shoes, which bore silent witness to his mean estate. “I am Wilfried Sorg,” the young man declared, “also passenger onboard for the New World, and this is my wife, Betlindis.”

As she smiled at him, the man noticed immediately--as he had an inborn ability to distinguish, though he doubted that anyone else could--the wanton gaze of a strumpet. He grinned. *Poor, young fool*, he thought, glancing at Wilfried. *The veil of love has blinded his eyes.*

“My name is Detremius Spaere,” he explained. He motioned his hands to stay any inquiries before they were posed. “An odd name, to be sure. My father and mother, the proper Englishmen that they were, had named me Demetrius, from a play in the annals of our country’s literature. A transcriptional error on my baptismal record, on account of an ill sighted scrivener, has ensured that I will ever be known by such a discomposed appellation.”

“What happened to your ship?” the captain entreated.

Spaere clasped his hands and channeled his nervous energy to his thumbs, which he proceeded to rub together, and stared at the grain of the wooden table. “I was on deck, getting fresh air,” he began. “The ship was loaded with priests and nuns, bound also for the United States, with plans, I heard, of starting a mission.” He fell silent for a moment before continuing. “Everyone else was gathered below for supper. That was when I started to smell smoke. It was wisping from the edges of the hatch cover. I ran over and attempted to open it, but it wouldn’t budge. It must have been fastened shut from the inside.”

Pastor Schäfer lifted a hand and covered his mouth, while Sorg wrapped an arm around his wife.

“As I knelt, desperately trying to pry it open, I could hear the voice of one of the nuns shouting, declaring to the others that they must all purge of their sins. I finally got the hatch cover off, but by then the flames had already engulfed the bowels of the ship, and I could do no other than to jump and entrust my life to the sea.”

“Did anyone else escape?” the captain inquired.

Spaere looked up to him and shook his head ruefully. “No. Not even the coxswain or watchman, who, I am left to suppose, must have entered the conflagration in a futile attempt to rescue those below.”

“We commend their souls to God,” Pastor Schäfer declared.

“It’s a miracle that you lasted as long as you did out there,” Captain Astor explained, shaking his head in awe. “I have sailed these waters many times, and never once heard of anyone surviving longer than a few hours adrift in these frigid parallels.”

Spaere grinned. “Words cannot be trusted.”

After an evening solemnized by silence in remembrance of those the sea had claimed as its own, and at the captain’s behest, in order to make Herr Spaere feel welcomed, it was declared a soiree would be thrown in the saloon. The gaiety of the occasion, replete with crew demonstrating their musical aptitude, as well as flowing spirits, brought a broad smile to Betlindis’ face as she and the captain stomped across the floor to the beat. With a sweep of his arm the captain twirled her lithe body, the folds of her dress fanning around her, while the soles of his boots slapped loudly against the floorboards.

Spaere spied Sorg sitting solitarily at the table while the others made merry, and he sat himself down at his side. “Not a dancer?”

Sorg followed his wife’s ever switching feet with a distant stare, while giving his head a slight shake. “No,” he replied, with a soft chuckle. “I am not very shifty. I stand as solid as a rock.”

“As am I,” Spaere admitted. “Why, I could not take up Sir Roger de Coverley if the Queen herself demanded it.”

Sorg merely nodded, withdrawn in his thoughts.

Spaere watched the dancing for a while before venturing another attempt at conversation.

“What compels your travel to the United States?”

Sorg, breaking free of his trance, turned to his inquisitor. “The Revolution. The political environment and civil unrest had me sorely troubled for my wife’s safety.” He stared down at his hand as he walked his fingers across the table. “It is truly hard to leave everything you have ever known behind and venture into the unfamiliar. But the call of duty must not fall neglected on account of personal fulfillment. Besides, we will always have one another. Therefore we have joined Pastor Schäfer on his calling to the Saginaw Valley, to minister to and evangelize the Chippewa.” He nodded his head, as if to reassure himself. “It will be a safe settlement, far from social upheaval and strife.”

Spaere glanced out to the dance floor at Betlindis, who was still romping about the floor.

“She is very beautiful.”

Sorg followed his gaze, and then brandished an expression not common to his general countenance--a smile. “My heart beats to the rhythm of her name.”

Spaere turned and caught a glimpse of his visage. “That is an expression I have but rarely seen from you.”

Sorg turned to him. “Smiling is a demonstration of weakness,” he explained. “By spreading the lips you bare the soul to assault.” He looked back to his wife. “But I guess she holds the lynchpin to my lucidity, to where I contradict even myself.”

Spaere clapped him on the back and grinned. “As you will, my friend, as you will. You must truly love her to grant her such a distinguished privilege.”

“I would walk the earth to satisfy her every desire.” Sorg leaned forward. “In fact, when we arrive, I plan on surprising her by stating my readiness to begin the family that she has always wanted.”

Spaere looked out to the floor as the number wound to a close. He noticed a clandestine exchange between the captain and Betlindis, a forbidden reciprocity lurking behind their eyes. He grinned. “Is that so? I’m surprised you waited this long.”

“Well, I never thought I was much suited for the office of father. I could never put a child through what I had to endure at that age at the hands of my own. But I am leaving the past behind, and letting the dead bury the dead. I am a German; I will not be governed by fear. I am not a prisoner, I am a free man.”

Spaere reached over and took Sorg’s hand within his own, giving it a light squeeze. He glanced up at him, still grinning. “Is that so?”

The calm sea gently rocked the ship like a cradle, coaxing Sorg’s eyes to a close. He placed the small candlestick holder down upon his nightstand and swung his legs, curtained by his white nightshirt, under the blankets. Leaning forward, he extinguished the only source of illumination in the cabin with a short breath.

He batted the end of his nightcap from his face as he gently leaned over to his wife and laid his lips upon her cheek, slowly kissing his way down to her neck. She remained in repose, her breaths coming in steady intervals. He tenderly stroked her cheek with the reverse of his fingers before settling down and allowing the ship to carry him the rest of the way to dormancy.

It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining bright and warm, and a summer's breeze swayed the fertile field's fruit, and gently kissed the skin. It worked itself between each follicle of Wilfried's hair, and the euphoric massage lulled him into a sort of standing sleep. Closing his eyes, he spread his arms to the wind and inhaled deeply, smiling as his small chest filled with nature's offering. The earthen scent lent him a sense of freedom, and he felt, at that moment, as if he could lift up as with wings and soar above the open fields and join his feathered friends in the revelry of nature that girdled the seasonal solstice.

Opening his eyes, he looked to the field in the distance. A strange grain grew there that he was not familiar with. He turned to the woods behind him. His mother would be upset if he was not home in time for supper, but curiosity dragged him forth, and he ran for the horizon as fast as his little legs would carry him. As he drew nearer, the thick, stubby, stalks began to take more of a shape, bending beneath the weight of the wind. His bounds retarded to steps as his idyllic sense of wonder slipped away, leaving him in horror that slowed his steps to a speechless standstill.

Furrows upon furrows were lined by the dozens with the squirming bodies of *him*, their heads buried in the dirt, legs and arms kicking and flailing as they struggled to free themselves. Wilfried's blue eyes widened with terror and his quivering jaw lost all strength to hold itself shut. Nothing in his six years of life gave him any means to process what now lay before him. He began to convulse, and wrapped his thin arms around himself.

The strains of a whistled tune drifted to him on the wind, and he looked up from the ground to find an old, stooped woman dragging a large scythe. "Who are you?" he asked, his voice wavering. "What are you doing?"

The beldam continued towards him, dragging her right foot behind her, her muted red, sun bleached dress caked with dirt and blood, the iron head of the scythe indenturing the soil behind her. “Reaping innocence,” she said with a weak wheeze.

Wilfried took a step back. He tripped over a leg and fell hard upon his rear. The cries of each double suddenly exploded in his ears. He clapped his hands hard over them to quell the terrified screams of lost innocence, but they seemed to be coming from inside his own mind.

The old woman lifted the scythe to her waist, blood falling from the tip of the blade to the soil beneath. She grinned, revealing a mouthful of crooked and rotting teeth.

Wilfried shook his head furiously as he tried to scramble backwards. His arms collapsed beneath him as he felt his youthful vigor go out from him. Glancing down, he discovered his skin had transformed to an ashen hue, had wrinkled, and became spotted with age. He tried to push himself backwards with his feet, not taking his eyes off his unfamiliar arms, but found he hadn’t the breath. He thrust his arms out, as if the gesture would keep her at bay. “No,” he whimpered, but the voice was no longer that of a boy’s, but the deep, chest drawn tone of a grown man.

Taking another step, the old woman dragged her foot forward for the last time. Tears streamed down Wilfried’s face as she pulled the scythe back. “Please,” he pleaded, his youthful eyes filled with fear behind their sagging lids. “What did I do to deserve this?”

The old woman offered no reply, and, still grinning, swung her blade.

About a half hour after her husband had lain down to sleep, Betlindis opened her eyes to a world of darkness. She listened for his steady breathing and, deeming that he was, in fact, asleep, slipped her slender legs out from beneath the covers, rose to her feet, and shuffled toward

the door, having memorized the layout of the room for easy navigation in the atramentous atmosphere that clung to the hour.

She grabbed hold of the knob and slowly pulled. Halfway open, the hinges screeched loudly. She froze, holding her breath. She allowed herself to relax when she heard the steady breathing behind her. She slithered out into the saloon and lighted for the aftercastle, to ride the bucking waves of a wild tempest all her own.

Spaere glanced up at the morning sun. The surrounding firmament spread clear of blemish as far as the eye could see, and the still surface of the ocean reflected its serene image and affability. Lifting a ruddy hand to the smooth shaved wood, he laid his knuckles upon the door to the captain's chambers in a rhythmic rapping.

There was a momentary interlude before the captain acknowledged his call. His build was more discernible due to the absence of his overcoat, which hung from a hook near his desk. He stared at his visitor over the top of spectacles that rested near the tip of his nose. "Yes?" he asked, impatience heavily lacing his words.

Spaere bowed deeply. "My gracious captain," he saluted, erecting himself. "It is a minor curiosity of mine to ascertain whether a man as well cultured as you, having sailed to the very bounds of the sea, might happen to own any literature written in my native tongue. The sea is a lonely place, and, set adrift upon its reclusive waves, I, during the tedium of my consciousness, pined for a good read." Spaere inhaled deeply and turned to the sky once more, grinning. "There is just something about words that soothes the soul, isn't there?"

Ignoring the question, Captain Astor stepped aside and swept his hand toward a bookcase that rested against a far wall. "Be my guest," he muttered.

“Much obliged, sir,” Spaere replied, bowing again.

The captain waited impatiently for him to step inside. He returned to his desk and forgot about him, poring, instead, over charts that lined the surface, the edges hanging limp from the sides.

Spaere wandered over to the bookcase, taking in the furnishings of the quarters as he went. Maps of the ocean hung from pins, and baubles from foreign lands lined shelves. A ceremonial sword rested unsheathed upon two wooden pegs. He ran a finger across a shelf cluttered with books, a thick layer of dust accreting at the edge. He pulled them out, one by one, searching for a tome printed in English. He came across a few, but they weren't from the pen he sought. He paused. Based upon the presupposition that the captain merely added a book to the shelves as he obtained them, and that he likely would have visited England early on, he fixated his attention to the top shelf. Six books in, he proved himself right. He pulled back the cover and glided his fingers over the title page as he read the words- *A Midsommer nights dreame. Written by William Shakespeare.*

Spaere clapped the book shut and took a step toward the captain's desk, where he noticed a map of the British West Indies. “Planning a voyage?” he asked.

Astor dropped his dividers to the desk and looked up to his visitor, removing his spectacles. “The matters of a sea captain are of no concern to a passenger,” he declared emphatically. “It appears that you have found that which you have sought, and therefore may take your leave. I am a very busy man.”

Spaere grinned. “That you are, my captain.” He waved the book in front of him. “My sincerest gratitude.” He bowed deeply once more before leaving.

Wilfried awoke in a cramped, dank cell and blinked repeatedly to adjust his eyes to the room until he realized its only source of illumination came from a lantern hung from a hook out in the hall. His nostrils were greeted by the overpowering stench of urine, and he lifted his hands to cover his nose, his fingers brushing the creases in his skin. He scurried back into a shadowy corner, pressing himself to the cold stone of the walls, against which he could feel his panic stricken heart beat violently. He hugged his short legs for warmth.

A brazen mouse emerged beneath the iron bars and scampered toward him, lurching out to bite at his foot. He kicked at it frantically, sending its small brown body reeling in contortions across the cobbled stones. It twisted to its feet, arched its back, and hissed at the boy before running back beneath the bars and out of sight.

Wilfried held his legs tight, wishing they were his mother. He didn't know where he was or how he had gotten there, but he was quite certain that he wanted to go home. *But would she even recognize me?* He stared down at his wrinkled, spotted arms, and all of the wiry, hoary hairs upon them, and knew he didn't even recognize himself. Dwelling upon his mother reminded him of the supper she instructed him not to be late for. How long he had been a prisoner within this foreign cavity, he knew not, but his belly grumbled, revealing to him that it most likely had been some time.

He leaned his head back against the stone wall and closed his eyes. The ceaseless trickle of an unseen drip steadily marked the passage of time, and he counted them until he could no longer think the number fast enough before the next drop fell, leaving him alone, once again, with his thoughts. *What happened to me?* The cerebration frustrated him, because he didn't know the answer, nor had any knowledge to even begin to formulate one. Tears sprang to his eyes, and

he wept. He moved his hands to hold his aching belly. He didn't know how long he sat there crying, the splashing of the drips disappearing beneath his sobs.

The scrape of sole against stone out within the hall brought his cries to an end. He slid an arm beneath his nose and stared at the bars, his heart galloping. Another withered hag appeared, holding a rusted pan in her gnarled hands. Her snarled hair had been pulled back, revealing a large 'S' upon her forehead that had been carved into the flesh. "Who are you?" he asked from the shadows.

She craned her head to the direction of his voice. "Sorrow," she replied, her voice hoarse. She stooped, her back cracking as she set the pan to the floor. Using a foot, she slid it beneath the bars, the curdled liquid within sloshing over the sides as it moved over the uneven stones. "Feed," she demanded, staring blankly down the hall.

Wilfried didn't budge. Instead, he analyzed the old crone, attempting to determine a motive. His smarting stomach eventually got to him, and he crawled out of the corner to the dirty pan. He nudged it, causing the surface to ripple, and sending congealed bits bobbing. He looked up to the woman, but she still stared forward to some unknown object. Carefully taking hold of both sides, he lifted the pan to his mouth. He jerked his head back as the putrescence assailed his nose. He twisted forward, and, counting to three, tipped the pan up, letting the foul fluid cascade down his throat. The taste was awful, and he burst into a fit of coughing, nearly spilling the remaining contents. Vomit climbed his esophagus, threatening to spill over his tongue, but he forced it down, and raised the pan once again to his mouth.

Sorg shot up in bed, violent coughs shaking his body. Once his lungs fell calm, he opened his eyes to nothing, the darkness of night cloaking his vision. He poked frantically beside him,

reaching for the warmth and comfort he found in his wife. His arm prodded the width of the bed, but felt no flesh, perceived no warmth, and he arrived at the cold realization that he was alone. “Betlindis?” he whispered, growing anxious. He rolled over and shot a hand out to the side table, fumbling for his candle. His fingers danced over a letter opener and a spare button before finding the small dish, the tips gliding across the smooth wax that had hardened on the bottom. Setting it on the bed beside him, he searched again for the friction tinder box of lucifer matches.

As if his short whispered inquiry had been a one word prayer, just as his fingers fell upon the rectangular box he sought, the door to the cabin squeaked open. He pulled his arm back, and tried his hardest to calm his ragged breathing. The door screeched closed, and silence fell over the room. Unfolding the small matchbox in his lap, he struck one, and held it to the wick of the candle. Weak light splashed over the bed, chasing away the abysmal blackness. He held it out before him with a shaking hand. The light of the flickering flame washed over the lissome figure of his wife. “Betlindis?” Sorg reiterated, this time out of confusion.

She froze in shock, her eyes wide.

“Where did you go?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Betlindis replied. “So I went above deck to look at the stars.”

Sorg’s eyes narrowed. “In your night clothes?”

Betlindis’ eyes quickly scanned the room as if a reply could be found lurking in the shadows. “Actually, I was thirsty, and went to the galley for a swallow of water, so nobody saw me.”

Sorg returned the candlestick to the side table, for it began to take on an overwhelming amount of weight. “Well, which is it? Did you go above deck or to the galley?”

Betlindis shifted her weight continuously from one foot to the other, while her fingers wormed betwixt themselves. “I—I--“ she stuttered, any reasonable explanation having been swept away by the flood of surprise that swept over her. Her shoulders slumped as she blew the breath from her lungs. “I can’t do this anymore,” she declared, exasperated.

Sorg’s heart quickened. “What do you mean?”

“This.” Betlindis waved her hands vigorously in front of her. “Us.”

Sorg’s heart didn’t sink--it disappeared altogether. He could feel it beating fast and hard within his chest, but the warmth had vanished, as if his very soul had fluttered off, leaving behind a cold vacuum. He shot out of bed. Now it was his turn to search for words, but, along with his heart, they couldn’t be found. “What do you mean?” he reiterated, his voice weak.

Betlindis’ voice fell cold, her face void of all emotion. “This marriage,” she stated flatly.

Sorg’s head spun in dizzying circles as he attempted to wrap his mind around this abrupt revelation. His heart beat so furiously that his vision shook. He placed a palm to his forehead in an impractical attempt to still it. “Why?”

“I don’t *feel* for you,” she replied. “Whenever I’m near you there’s no excitement, no *longing*.”

“When did this happen?”

“It has always been in the back of my mind since I’ve known you.”

Sorg blinked several times, hoping to draw himself back to reality, but the same vision reappeared every time. His wife, the woman whom he loved so deeply, more than his own life, stood mere feet away, yet they seemed oceans apart, as if she sat in some Mercurial chariot and was being carted away from him. “I don’t understand. Why, then, did you accept my proposal if you did not love me?”

Betlindis shook her head. "I thought you were going places, that you would make a name for yourself. And the excitement of the New World..." she trailed off. "But look at you," she spat, eyeing him with disgust. "You are going nowhere." She laughed. "What woman would want to reside in the wilderness of a foreign land amongst savages?" The stony seriousness returned to her face as she continued. "I do not. And I won't." She shook her head. "You are not my lord and master."

Sorg scrambled around the foot of the bed. "But I am your husband," he insisted. He reached out and gently took her by the shoulders.

She wrenched free of his grip. "Don't you touch me!"

Sorg shook his head. "You cannot do this. We are married. You made a vow before God. You gave me your word!" He grasped her by the arms again. She shrieked and slipped from his fingers, falling to the floor. He stood, bewildered, staring at the form of his wife laid out before him.

It was not long before the heavy falls of booted feet thundered through the ship. The captain cast the door open moments later. He glanced down and saw the limp body of Betlindis on the floor. His eyes met Sorg's and he stepped briskly across the room, arm extended, and grasped Sorg by the throat, dragging him with one hand until his body forcefully connected with the opposing wall. Sorg struggled for breath beneath the captain's vise, clawing futilely at the fingers that clenched his throat.

"What is the meaning of this?"

The captain released his grip at the sound of Pastor Schäfer's voice.

Sorg collapsed to his knees, his arms shaking as he held his breathless body up.

Astor turned to the clergyman who stood in the doorway, candle in hand. "I came upon him standing over the body of the young lady," he explained.

Sorg could feel the Pastor's eyes burning into him. "I did nothing," he wheezed, and after a few more breaths, continued. "She is leaving me."

"We are on a ship, you fool," Captain Astor declared. "She can't go far."

"No." Sorg rubbed his neck, and then climbed to his feet. "Divorce."

"What!?" the Pastor asked incredulously.

"I awoke from a nightmare to find her returning from an excursion of some kind," Sorg explained. "When I inquired for whence she had come, she was indecisive, before stating her disavowal of our love." His eyes grew bloodshot as tears welled up within them. "I don't understand what happened. It was all so sudden, so unexpected..."

Pastor Schäfer gave the captain an inquisitive look, from which he turned away. The captain stooped and gathered Betlindis within his arms. "From now on, to ensure her safety, Frau Sorg stays with me."

"This cannot happen!" the pastor cried as Astor stepped past him. "This is an outrage before God!"

The captain whirled around, Betlindis' head only inches from crashing into the frame of the door. "Listen, priest," Astor declared, taking an imposing step toward the old man. "While aboard this ship, *I* am God."

"I will not allow this to happen," Pastor Schäfer decreed defiantly, his white bearded jaw set with resolution.

"You will," the captain countermanded. "And you will stay below deck for the remainder of the journey." He cast his eyes toward Herr Sorg, who had returned to his knees, holding his

head in his hands. “And I suggest you tell your friend there to observe the same, unless you want him to wind up in chains.” He turned and disappeared, leaving the pastor to console the distraught man weeping on the floor.

“The Christian path does not mean that we are immune to sorrow, but that God will grant us the strength to overcome it, through Word and Sacrament,” Pastor Schäfer explained.

Sorg stared into his mug of cold tea resting on the saloon table, transfixed by the liquid within. “I just don’t understand what happened. It was all so sudden. I lay down to sleep at her side, and when I awoke, she was gone.” He lifted his eyes and met the gaze of the other, his eyes bloodshot, from a combination of lack of sleep, and frequent shedding of tears. “What happened? Please, tell me if you have the answer, for I long to know.”

“I am but a man,” Pastor Schäfer stated, “and certain things remain a mystery even to me. Mankind continues to plummet itself into the murky waters of sin, the weeds beneath the surface tangle our limbs and deprive us of air, the breath of life, the Holy Ghost. One of those vines that ensnare us is self-reliance. The idea that one has everything that they need within themselves is especially damning, for we ignore the blatant truth of the depravity of man, and we starve our faith. At the death of faith, selfishness will reign. I think Betlindis was in love with love and did not share in that Spiritual gift faith receives. The warm feeling that pervades the beginning of a relationship will, with time, fade away. A life cannot be built upon the desires of the flesh, for earthly wants are fickle, and quick to change. This foundation is weak, and cannot support a house. Instead, we must build upon the solid rock of St. Peter’s confession. Eros cannot sustain a relationship, only agape can.”

“What is love?” Sorg asked.

“A gift, the fruit of the Spirit. When the seed of faith takes root, it sprouts the tree of love, which bears the fruit of works. You see, that seed given her was sown in stony ground. Now the roots are rotting, and you unfortunately are forced to eat its bitter fruits--rejection.

“But that seed has been sown within you, too. From the fruit of works, partake of forgiveness. Know that even silver must pass through a furnace to be separated from the dross, and at the end, comes out purer than before. So, we, too, pass through many trials in this life. But are we to be consumed, or refined? It is our faith that decides.”

Spaere stepped up to the table, but, noticing the conversation, backed away. “My apologies,” he stated.

Pastor Schäfer rose to his feet. “Don’t be, I was just leaving.” He squeezed Sorg’s shoulder before returning to his cabin.

Spaere sat down across from the distraught man. “What swims behind those twin oceans of yours, Mr. Sorg?”

“Confusion,” Sorg responded, despondent.

“About?”

“The meaning of things. The purpose the past holds. How can something good and beneficial come from something so overwhelmingly sorrowful?” He drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. “I am haunted by my past. No matter how hard I try, I cannot forget it. It is chained to me, and drags behind me whithersoever I go. When I aspire, it is there. When I hope, it is there. It is the weight that presses the air from my lungs.

“I was robbed, Herr Spaere,” Sorg explained. “My childhood was pilfered from me. But unlike gold, which I can go out and work to replace, I cannot replace youth. It comes but once an eternity. An eternity!” Sorg slammed his fist down upon the wooden table, the tea in his

untouched mug sloshing turbulently over the side. “And so I live to die,” he continued. “Always have, for as long as I can remember. My stepfather sucked from me as a child all joy of living, so that I found myself welcoming the coming day of death. I only sought some form of comfort along the way, which I thought I found...” he trailed off, not wanting to cry in front of Spaere.

Spaere reached out and took Sorg’s hand. “Tears are only natural at times of anguish.”

“No!” Sorg exclaimed, ripping his hand away and spilling more tea. “I am a man!” he declared, thrusting his free forefinger into his chest so forcefully that a hollow thud was audible. “I am a German!” He shook his head. “This behavior is not becoming.” His temperament cooled. “But I am also a cuckold,” he added. “I am the very thing that society despises. Nothing emasculates a man quicker than cuckoldry.” He lifted his eyes to his companion. “Why does joy elude me? What is happiness? What is love?”

Spaere tapped his fingers in a soft, hypnotic rhythm. “You are confused because you are a man, but feel as if your manhood has been taken away. You positioned yourself to give your *life* in service to others, the very others who you feel will cast you out from their presence, because you have been unwantedly touched by a leper, and now bear a disease foisted upon you.” He flattened his hands to the table and looked down at them. “Confusion. The result of our thoughts, it is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Man tends to overthink, and therefore talks himself out of action,” Spaere explained. “That void is then filled with confusion.”

Sorg listened attentively as Spaere continued. “It truly is a shame that there are people in the world that would lead someone into a futile pursuit, offering them a false sense of security by accepting the key to their heart, and then search for a way to dispose of it, as if it unlocked

nothing more than a barren shed.” Spaere sighed. “There is no justice in this world, that such thieving goes unpunished. So you ask me ‘what is happiness?’ Is it not justice? The man that labors in his fields reaps a bountiful harvest. The man that would steal that harvest is taken to meet the hangman. Is there not happiness on both occasions, when both are given their just reward? What is love? Is it not the pursuit of justice?” He paused a moment to let his point sink in before tilted his head to the ceiling. “But I suppose it is for the best. We have forgiveness to blind our eyes to the true nature of this world, and to perpetuate our problems in a circuit of ceaseless sorrow.”

Sorg narrowed his eyes in concentration and turned again to his tea. “Then what do you suggest?”

Spaere leaned across the table and stared directly into Sorg’s eyes. “Reclaim your tears. Act. Don’t think--act. If God will not grant you justice, take it for yourself. Remember, even the angels fell first.”

Sorg pulled back. “I do believe you speak blasphemy, Herr Spaere.”

Spaere sat back. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. My apologies, Mr. Sorg. Forgiveness is the way of God. You must do what you feel is right, of course.” He rose to his feet and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out the tome he had borrowed from the captain. He set it on the table next to the young man. “Something to take your mind off things,” he told him, and returned to his cabin.

The radiance of the sun pushed back any clouds that would threaten with tempest, and so the day waxed pleasantly. Sorg lifted a hand to the captain’s door and landed his knuckles in succession. After his heart had beat what felt like at least a hundred times, the door swung open.

Captain Astor tucked his undershirt into his britches and smiled. “Herr Sorg, you truly are a thick skulled man, are you not? Despite the perfect clarity of my warning, you are neither respectable nor smart enough to heed it. Just like the worm you are, you always find a way to wiggle yourself back to the surface.”

A feminine giggle erupted from behind him, and Betlindis poked her head around his side. She cast a coy glance to her husband, biting her lower lip. Sorg’s chest threatened to cave in as his heart beat rattled the emptiness within himself.

Astor lifted a hand to her cheek. “Go back to bed, mein Schatz. I shall return in a moment.” She turned and walked away, the tail of her nightgown slithering over his boots before disappearing behind him. He turned to retrieve his overcoat. “Any last words before you are locked up?”

“Yes,” Sorg replied. “I wish to give my forgiveness.”

Astor stopped and returned to the door. “Your forgiveness? Are you insinuating that I need permission to act on my own ship?” He waved his hand out before him in a broad stroke. “Take a look around. A man steers this ship because I say so. Men trim the sails because I say so. Men climb high up in the masts,” he beat his finger against his chest, “because *I* say so.” He chuckled. “Your forgiveness means nothing.”

He stepped forward, closing the door slightly behind him so Betlindis wouldn’t overhear, and leveled a finger to his caller. “I will overlook your insubordination just this once. But do not disbelieve me when I say that if I ever see you above deck again, you will not speak to another living soul until you set foot on dry land. Have I made my judgment on this matter clear?”

Herr Sorg nodded. “Yes, Captain.”

“It is not right that he should have a married woman!” Sorg exclaimed, slapping a hand against the saloon table.

Pastor Schäfer shook his head in agreement. “No, it is not.”

“Action must be taken,” Sorg continued.

“What will you do?” the pastor posed.

Sorg paused to think. “I will tell the port authorities when we reach the United States. Surely they will not allow such injustice and piracy in their jurisdiction.”

“And who will believe you?” Pastor Schäfer shook his head. “The word of a foreigner will never stand against a false idol in the ears of its worshippers. Why, men in his position hold more esteem with the masses than their own President.”

“What about the truth?”

“Truth remains. Nothing can change that. You know it, I know it, and the captain knows it.”

“Then what about justice?”

“Who are we to execute justice?” Pastor Schäfer asked. “That is a responsibility the Lord has entrusted to the state and to the Church. The state will do nothing because it will not find sufficient proof. She will be excommunicated from the Church, I assure you, so let the denial of God’s grace be enough, for no greater devastation remains. Forgive, Wilfried. Forgive, for there is not enough room in your heart for vengeance. It forces out love, till at last we abandon our faith. And without faith, we have no hope.”

Sorg rose to his feet, staring at the clergyman incredulously. “Why are you defending her? Why have you turned against me?”

Pastor Schäfer was flabbergasted. "I am not defending her, nor have I turned against you." He ran a hand over his beard. "What is it about man that makes us always compete with one another? You are a creation of God's, there is nothing greater. You may not own a ship, but you still have your faith, and that is something no man can take from you. Take comfort in that. The world will fail you, people will fail you--I have failed you. I should have seen this before I married you, and I am truly sorry for that. But Christ will never fail you. Your life has been fraught with sorrow, but it has given you a profound ability to love. Don't forsake that. Don't allow the failures of others to dictate your own failure."

Pastor Schäfer clasped his hands together and turned his eyes to the table. "I think you should return to Franconia."

Sorg was taken aback. "What?"

"You are going through a very tumultuous time in life right now, and the hardships of a new land and life I believe will prove too much for you at this time. You need the familiarity of home. I will pay for your return passage. When we dock we can find a different packet service."

Sorg shook his head vigorously. "No, no, this is my dream, to serve--to serve--to..." he trailed off, unable to find the words to express himself.

Pastor Schäfer looked to him empathetically. "You are in no condition to instruct, whether heathen or German," he explained. "You want to serve? Serve yourself. Return home. Pastor Löhe will be happy to see you."

Sorg's mouth hung open. "You want to send me back in midst of revolution?"

"The political foundations are crumbling, but there is still a well-established society," Pastor Schäfer explained. "Then, in a couple of years, you can come to the Saginaw Valley."

Sorg stared at the man sitting across from him. He opened his mouth but couldn't speak. Tears welled up within his eyes. With a shake of his head, he left for his cabin without reply.

He slammed the door behind him, enveloping himself in darkness. Tears broke over his eyelids and coursed in rivulets down his cheeks. Groping for his nightstand he located the matchbox and lit the stub of a candle that remained.

Light washed over the small stand and the book there sitting, and he took it into his lap. He stared at the cover for a moment, tracing his fingers over its etchings before peeling it back, revealing the cover page. *Die Bibel nach der deutschen Übersetzung D. Martin Luthers*. The sight of Luther's name brought the life of the great reformer to mind. He had spent years mired in melancholy before the comfort of the tripartite truth of sola gratia, sola fide, and sola scriptura freed him from his torment, and sparked an international movement. Sorg took a deep breath and wiped at his eyes.

Brushing his side, he bumped the bulge in his pocket. *The book Herr Spaere lent me. Spaere...* He slammed the book in his lap closed. He had measured his life in pain, and he would mete his future with justice.

The candle on his nightstand, reaching its end, flickered, and went out.

"I take it off when I sleep, and I didn't have enough time to retrieve it the other day before you carried me off," Betlindis explained, stepping toward the door of the captain's quarters.

"I'll fetch someone to retrieve it for you," Captain Astor said, reaching a hand out to stop her.

She twisted away. "No, it holds too much value to me to risk it getting lost."

“Then I’ll go with you.”

She laughed, not the playful, coquettish giggle that charmed every man in her presence, but a cold, scornful cackle. “Don’t be silly. What could he do? He’s probably with Herr Schäfer, pining in pointless prayer.” She reached up, cupped his face, and kissed him. “I’ll be back.”

Betlindis threw open the door to her former cabin without bothering to knock. She found her husband sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall.

His head jerked toward the sound, and his face rose with hope. “Betlindis?”

She ignored his entreaty and continued to her bed stand.

“What are you doing here?” Sorg asked, jumping to his feet.

“I’ve come for my grandmother’s ring,” she stated flatly.

He circled the bed, coming up behind her. “I would just like to talk to you. Is that all right?”

She shook her head, picking up the small silver band and slipping it over her finger. “I don’t understand.”

“Let’s discuss our situation. Don’t you think you should think this through before making some sort of rash decision?”

She turned to him. “There is nothing to talk about.”

She took a step around him, but he moved and blocked her way. “Whatever your decision may be, should we not at least talk about it?”

“I have made up my mind.” She took another step, only to be stopped again.

Sorg reached out and gently took her by the shoulders. “Please.”

Betlindis slapped him hard across the face. “Don’t you touch me!”

Sorg slowly straightened his head, his face stinging.

Betlindis stared him in the eyes. “I do not love you.” She pivoted to his other side.

Without thinking, Sorg’s hands shot out and wrapped around her thin throat. “Then I want my tears back.”

Her eyes grew wide with panic and surprise. She squirmed desperately, attempting to wiggle her fingers under his, but he held firm.

“I love you,” he whispered.

She kicked him hard in the shin, but the layers of her dress deadened the blow.

Sorg stared into his struggling wife’s eyes as the life slowly drained from them. Her clenched fists landed softer and softer until they fell limp at her sides. He held her there, by the throat, looking over her, as beautiful in death as in life. But for every comely feature, every perfect line of symmetry in her face, her soul was riddled with disease.

A gentle knock landed on the door. “Wilfried?”

Sorg froze at the sound of the pastor’s voice, ceasing even his ragged breath, to remain as silent as possible.

The knock came once more. “Wilfried?”

Sorg glanced down to his lifeless wife. His tears blurred her image, distorting her beauty. He bent his head to his shoulder in an attempt to wipe them away, but he couldn’t crane his neck far enough. He adjusted his grip to transfer her weight to one hand. His thumb pressed deeply into the young woman’s neck as he released one hand to brush the tears away. Betlindis slipped from his grasp and crumpled to the floor with a thud.

The cabin door creaked open. “Wilfried?” the pastor asked once again, concern filling his voice. His eyes fell upon the body on the floor, and then travelled up to Sorg’s face. “What have you done!?”

Sorg’s heart beat furiously in panic. “I heard your voice in the hall, and I was afraid.”

Pastor Schäfer glanced out to the saloon before quickly closing the door behind him. “Your soul needs confession, Wilfried,” he said quietly, staring at the body on the floor. “Not only to God, but also to the captain. You must take responsibility for your action and surrender yourself.” He glanced up to the young man sorrowfully.

Sorg stared back defiantly. “Is she not to be held accountable for destroying my life through abandonment? Am I to let the wicked prosper?”

“Judgment will come,” Pastor Schäfer assured him, “but who are you to declare when and where? Confess. Then we can speak to the captain together. I will do everything in my power to ensure that you receive a fair trial. I can absolve you from eternal punishment, but temporal ramifications are outside of my control.”

Sorg turned away as every last ember of hope within him was snuffed out. He knew the captain’s wrath would be kindled against him, and that he could not expect to make it to the New World alive. *If God will not grant you justice, take it for yourself. Act. Don’t think--act.* Sorg spied the letter opener on his bed stand. He stepped over to it, and with his back turned to the pastor, placed it in his palm. “Dear confessor,” Sorg began, closing the distance between him and the other, his head penitentially bowed and hands clasped behind him. “I ask you please to hear my confession and to pronounce forgiveness in order to fulfill God’s will.”

“Proceed.”

Sorg lifted his head and looked his pastor in the eyes. With a swift, fluid motion, he swung his arm out from behind him and plunged the metal letter opener deep within the pastor's throat.

Pastor Schäfer's hands shot up as the smooth blade slid out, blood leaking through his fingers. He took a step back, tripped over his feet, and fell to the floor. Holding his throat with one hand, he used the other in an attempt to drag himself toward the door. Blood spurted vigorously from the wound, and his elbow slipped in a small pool, sending his chest crashing to the floor. He curled up on his side, reciting the Lord's Prayer the best he could before he was seized with coughing. Blood splattered the hard wooden floor as the old man's back hunched with each violent spasm, until there was no longer any room for air within his lungs, and he fell motionless and silent, the side of his face resting in the pool of his blood.

After stepping around the body, Sorg opened the door and shut it securely behind him.

Sorg grasped Betlindis' cold hands and dragged her through the silent saloon to the steep stairs leading above deck. He positioned himself precariously in the narrow stairwell, jutting his backside out for counterbalance as he pulled her limp body toward the sunlight above, her head striking each step with a sickening thud. The continuous slapping weakened the musculature in her neck, and her head caught the edge of a rise. Sorg tugged hard but the body wouldn't budge, her head refusing to crest. Grasping her hands firmly and straightening his body for leverage, he leaned back, utilizing his weight to force the body up. Her neck snapped as it slid over the rise before slamming hard into the next, the cracking of her bones amplified in the narrow way.

Sorg fell hard against the stairs and Betlindis slipped away, her head striking each again on the way down. He scrambled after her, tripping and riding the last few on his rear. Ignoring

the pain, he cupped her head in his lap, running his fingers through the golden strands of hair. “Oh, my God, what did I do?” He rocked back and forth, tears streaming from his eyes. “My God, what did I do?” He repeated the phrase to himself as the events of the past night flooded back into memory.

He had left his cabin and ventured to the captain’s quarters. Astor grew concerned with Betlindis’ absence and turned from him to retrieve his overcoat. Sorg grabbed the first thing he laid eyes upon--a sword hanging upon the nearby wall--and thrust it through the captain’s chest. He staggered around, and Sorg stumbled back in awe that the man had strength to come after him, but after a couple of steps forward, he faltered and fell backwards, the handle of the long blade forcing itself deeper in. Blood bubbled from his mouth as he cried out for his crew, but his voice came in a weak whimper.

The rest of the crew was relatively easy to dispose of. He simply waited until they passed out from intoxication, then went around, one by one, and slit their throats. Only one put up any form of resistance. He was young, new to sea life. He awakened as Sorg was poised to cut into him. The look of terror in his eyes reminded him of his own childhood, and that loss of innocence he perpetually struggled with. He stayed his hand, gazing at the young man, empathy washing over him. The crewman reached out and grabbed hold of Sorg’s forearm. In a fit of panic, Sorg batted it away and with a quick jerk, slid the knife that he held across the young man’s throat. He turned and walked away as the seaman rolled out of his bed and fell to the floor to die alone in the dark.

Now the stark reality of the situation struck him in all its seriousness--he had murder all the crew, and there was no one left to sail the vessel. Spaere was left somewhere, unless he had

jumped ship again, but he doubted that even between the two of them they could make any headway. Climbing to his feet, he took Betlindis by the hands and started back up the stairs.

Spaere stepped amongst the bodies that littered the deck, humming to himself, and positioned one foot cautiously next to Sorg's head, careful not to get any of his blood on his freshly shined boots. He kicked the gun from Sorg's hand, sending it clattering across the deck until it was slammed into the body of the first mate. He glanced down at the body. When the realization that all hope was lost, Sorg had dragged each corpse to the deck before retrieving the captain's hand gun and firing a bullet into his head from below his jaw. Spaere pulled the captain's deep blue overcoat around himself and fastened the silver buttons before stepping on.

He stopped near the body of Betlindis, and doffed the captain's hat. "Wie gehts, Frau." He took a couple of steps forward, and then stopped abruptly. He turned and stared at the dead woman. "Wie bitte?" He paused a brief moment as if listening to a response, then chuckled. "Oh, you are a saucy girl." He bent over and scooped up her slight frame. He slung one limp arm over his shoulder while entwining his fingers with her other hand. Arms outstretched, he stepped lightly, starting his tune once again, twirling around with her body held close, her head dangling back, bobbing violently with each step. He danced over to the bulwark before swinging his arm out and sending her overboard. Her body splashed in the placid waters.

He turned back to the others. *The silly lusts of man*, he ruminated, hoisting a crewman to his shoulders. It was always love he knew he could exploit, one of the most powerful forces on Earth, one even he feared, along with faith. *Yet they continually cast them aside*. He heaved the body over and watched it smack the ocean surface, arms and legs splayed out in a large X, as if marking the location of some hidden treasure lying deep beneath the waves. *Despite all their*

*power, the bridge between love and agony spans not even a stream, but a mere puddle. The distance between the two is but a small jump, and can easily be accomplished with a little encouragement.*

He continued tossing bodies indiscriminately overboard until he grabbed the last one, that of Herr Sorg's. He stepped over to the side of the ship. *Young fool, who loved not wisely but too well.* Grinning, Spaere released the body from his shoulder and it tumbled face first to the gentle waves below.

He took a few steps away before his grin vanished. "No." He patted his pockets vigorously. He darted to and fro, frantically searching the deck. "No, no, no!" He ran back over to the bulwark and leaned over. There, cresting each gentle wave, floated the copy of Shakespeare he had lent Sorg. He reached for it, as if his arm would stretch the distance needed to retrieve it. Reaching the conclusion that he would never see it again, he removed his hat and held it to his chest. The sea breeze rustled his hair, lifting strands of his ponytail in a lethargic dance. "To die, to sleep, no more," he eulogized.

He returned the hat to his head, and made his way to the ship's wheel. "I guess it's just me and my thoughts," he said dejectedly. "If I would have known that I'd have kept some body around to talk to."

*It's all too easy, twisting man's words, turning a vow into a curse. What are words anyway? Nothing but air leaving one's lungs and passing through their throat, over their tongue, and out their lips. Their silly race no longer grants them any true meaning; they are only to be taken as befits one's desires. Many a time they merely enter the ear and fall silent, never to be processed, trusted, or held dear.* It was his master's will to bring meaninglessness to purpose, sorrow to gladness, and perversion to purity.

He thought back to his last voyage. A shipload of priests and nuns wasn't exactly the condition to be hoped for, but once he discovered a young red-headed nun—Sister Rachel--on her novitiate who doubted her calling, he knew he had his chink in their armor. He got her to question whether she had chosen the right path in life, sequestering herself from all touch and romantic involvement and whether happiness was truly attainable. He could always prey upon loneliness. It didn't take long for her to succumb to his intimations, and she started a fire one evening during dinner at the hatch way, trapping the rest of her order below deck.

Setting the *Lebenlust* on course, he left the wheel in search of tools. Obtaining a length of rope, a scrub brush, a long wooden pole which he snapped in two, a lantern full of oil, and a box of matches, he walked to the bow. Tying one end of the rope snug around his waist, he fastened the other around the banister. Climbing over the bulwark, he set to scrubbing the painted name from the ship's hull.

Spaere guided the newly named *Rivenjoy* into the Nova Scotian port, the designation burned into the ship's prow. Disembarking, he made his way to the dock master, who was a rather portly man with a short patchwork of beard. He sat at a small table adorned with ledgers, thin framed spectacles resting at the tip of his nose.

"Name?" he asked flatly.

"Detremius Spaere."

"Name of ship?"

"The *Rivenjoy*."

"Land of origin?"

Spaere spread his arms. "I call the world home."

The dock master dropped his pen and stared over his glasses. “A mercenary? We do not provide harbor to such parasites.”

Spaere dug into his pocket and withdrew several silver denarii and tossed them upon the table. “I won’t be long.”

The dock master scrambled to collect them before they rolled off. Scooping them all into a pile, he picked one up and studied the ancient depictions etched upon the foreign currency. He flipped a ledger and proffered a pen. “Sign here, please.”

Spaere put his name to the page, merging into a list of hundreds of faceless voyagers. “By the way, where is the closest bookseller? I lost something very important to me and would like to replace it.”

“Just inside town,” the dock master replied. He glanced down at the freshly inked signature--*D. Spaere*.

He closed the book and turned to the sky, thick tufts of black clouds rolling in from the horizon. “Looks like a real quaker’s brewing.”

Spaere grinned. “To be sure.”