



BOTTLED NIGHTMARES

VOLUME ONE

SIX TALES OF THE MACABRE

&

SUPERNATURAL

DAVID DWAN

Bottled Nightmares

Volume One

David Dwan

Published by David Dwan

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DOLL

First came that discordant tinny chiming again, like a dozen tiny hand bells wheeled by approaching yet unseen nightmares. He didn't know much about who or what he was, but the man knew what was next.

The room shifted into soft focus for a moment, then a split second later everything around him was nothing more than a blur of light and darkness merging into a murky undulating mass, one thing indistinguishable from the next.

The chiming, which had started in low was now assaulting his senses like physical blows to his skull. He was pretty sure he was hyperventilating, but could not even hear his own ragged breaths as they escaped his lungs like cowards.

Hazy blotches of dull light, almost shapes, cutting through the gloom appeared before his all but useless eyes. Indeed, blindness would be a blessing now, but one he would not be granted. No, for whatever his sins were, he would not be afforded such mercies.

They darted around his throbbing head like insects, sometimes tantalizingly close so that he could almost register a sharp point here, a serrated edge there. But just as quickly they merged back into the unidentifiable. And just as before he instinctively knew they were each suspended from the ceiling on thin wires. Amorphous shapes twisting and dancing before him like hanged men.

He vaguely wondered as lunacy threatened, if they were demons come to drag him to hell for whatever half-forgotten crimes, he was guilty of. Or if this was indeed hell itself. Giving him these moments of clarity only to have them snatched away so that he once more was set adrift in this cacophony of jarring sight and sound.

Then just like a baseball bat to the back of his head, he was out like a light.

When he came to, the man was face down on the musty smelling carpet of the room. And it took him several fitful moments to realize where he was. Just a regular, nondescript hotel room and one he barely remembered booking in to.

He pulled himself to his feet using the large dresser which stood against one wall. And steadied himself there with both hands. He looked into the dresser's mirror and the haggard, haunted stranger looked back.

The stranger's name was John Spencer, he knew that much, or at least that's what the credit cards in the wallet he had found in the over coat he was wearing told him. He had spoken the words out loud to see if that would give them meaning, but it hadn't. They still meant nothing to him.

A stranger's name for a stranger's face.

And despite his recent unconsciousness. John Spencer desperately needed sleep. That much he did know.

He thought back to how he had found himself here. He had booked in, there was a receipt to this effect on the dresser's top along with the wallet, which had been the entire contents of his pockets when he had gone through them in hope of finding out more.

He had been wearing a smart enough suit, no tie, and the heavy over coat. The pockets of which only contained the wallet and nothing else. No keys, house or otherwise, just the simple black leather wallet. And that was all he had to go on.

He had picked this particular hotel because it was large and out of the way. The night clerk on the front desk didn't even seem to care that he didn't have any bags. He had the look of a man who had seen it all before. Lots of faceless guests coming and going, a place where one could easily blend in. John Spencer didn't know why, but he knew that was important.

Important because of that feeling that buried somewhere deep in the darkest recesses of his subconscious, he had done something terrible. Ever since he had come into consciousness, a lost soul wandering the city streets late at night that nagging feeling of dread was never far away.

Yes, John spencer didn't know much alright, but what he did know was that he was a monster. He glanced down at his hands, although he had washed them half a dozen times, he could still see traces of dried blood under the fingernails.

He moved away from the dresser and over to the single bed in the corner of the room. The sheets were still in a pile at the foot of the bed, but he didn't care. He kicked off his shoes and then spun on his heel and fell backwards onto the bare mattress.

And as he laid there waiting for sleep to overtake him, he looked up at the plain ceiling and was thankful that nothing was dangling there.

“John Spencer,” he said out loud.

It still meant nothing.

Paulo Mattei, the night manager of the ironically named Majestic Hotel slumped back down into his large comfy recliner chair in the back office and poured himself another drink.

It had been nearly two thirty in the morning when mister no bags had showed up requesting a room. And Mattei had instantly peg him as an office worker burn out type wandering the streets after blowing a gasket due to stress. That, or more amusingly to him, some poor sap who had been kicked out by his wife for being drunk and disorderly.

He sniggered at the thought and pondered, not for the first time, that the Majestic was a magnet for the lost and pathetic souls who could be found drifting through the city on any given night. Drifting, aimlessly, or so they thought. But drifting as they inexorably were, towards the always open doors of the hotel.

He took a large swig of whiskey and instantly regretted it. He was already on that fine line between drunk and downright paralytic. So much so, he had been amazed at how efficiently he had processed mister no bags, getting the right room key and everything. Drunken muscle memory he mused, as he focused as best he could on the small TV until the room stopped spinning.

A grim-faced reporter type speaking to camera appeared on screen and Mattei had to close one eye just to keep him from spinning off into oblivion. It took him a moment to realize the sound was off, but he couldn't be bothered to search for the remote, so the reporter would just have to open and close his mouth like a goldfish, until the latest wave of alcohol absorbed into his system so he could look for it.

The picture of a young boy appeared in a box to the right of the reporter. The boy was smiling at the camera and playing with a toy fire engine.

The picture then cut to a grainy CCTV clip of someone walking through a shopping precinct.

Now there was a woman at what looked like a news conference, flanked by two female police officers, each with the obligatory looks of concern on their faces. The woman was pleading directly into the camera now and Mattei tried in vain to read her quivering lips.

She suddenly broke down and a million flashbulbs went off.

‘There’s your front page, boys,’ Mattei thought in grim amusement.

The bell at the front desk went off making him jump a mile. He cursed to himself and pushed himself up to his feet. There he paused, to make sure he was steady, then when through into reception to meet the next unfortunate to grace the Majestic Hotel at this ungodly hour.

What Mattei didn’t see was the TV report cut back to the CCTV footage and slowly zoom into the pixilated face of old mister no bags.

If Spencer thought that sleep would bring a welcome respite to his malaise, he was sorely mistaken. It seemed he could not escape it whether awake or asleep.

Now that he was awake once more, he could still make out the vivid yet fragmented images when he closed his eyes for any period of time, as if they were waiting behind his lids.

For better or worse, his dreams had lent some nightmare kind of clarity to what he had seen and heard before. He had finally seen the floating blurs before his eyes for what they really were. Strangely shaped windchimes, hanging from the ceiling of some unknown room.

Although thankfully he could not hear them anymore now that he was awake, as their soft chiming awoke a quiet terror in him. In the dream their tuneless tinkling had given way to someone screaming.

As he closed his eyes again, he could see the chimes in his mind’s eye, and beyond that an open window with bright sunlight flooding through half opened billowing curtains, as if touched by a light breeze. He remembered drifting towards the window and the closer he got, the louder and harsher the screaming became.

“Christ,” he cursed softly and went through into the room’s small bathroom and splashed cold water on his face in hopes of washing the nightmare away.

When he came back into the room, he became aware of how gloomy the place was. He had no watch or phone but had figured it must be mid-morning, judging by the sunlight trying to force its way through the thin curtains covering the windows.

Sunlight, yes, that would surely help lift his mood. The last thing he needed was to be sulking around a strange room in the half light. He took a step toward the window then

froze. It looked for all the world like someone was sitting on the windowsill, silhouetted behind the curtains.

Had someone snuck into his room during the night whilst he slept? One of the other residents?

“Hello?”

He waited for the interloper to speak, but they didn't so much as move in response.

Spencer found he was striding over to the window before he realized what he was doing and flung the curtains open. He was immediately blinded by the sunlight flooding in through the window. He took a step back, shielding his eyes until they finally became accustomed to the light and his gaze fell upon the intruder.

A large doll, of all things, was propped up against the window. But this was unlike any child's plaything Spencer had ever seen before. It reminded him of an unfinished springless puppet. But this one was tall, perhaps three feet from toe to top of the head. It was made from highly polished dark wood of some kind. Its head bowed, its eyes shut. Naked, sexless.

Although at first glance, its joints were beautifully crafted, its down turned face was all but featureless, just the vague hint of a nose and mouth. But even with its lack of detail there was something unmistakably life-like about it.

He must have stared at the thing for a full minute. Why would someone leave something so unique behind? Surely not its maker, it must have taken an age to fashion, even to this early stage. The finish on the wood was flawlessly smooth, polished and lacquered to an inch of its life. It was undoubtedly a work of art.

He gingerly placed his hands under its arm pits and picked it up and the weight of it made him gasp out loud, it was much heavier than he had anticipated. And as he held it up, so he was face to face with it, its head lolled back slightly, and the eyelids opened with an audible 'click'.

It stared at him with cold lifeless black eyes. There was something unnerving about the way its limbs swayed as he held it there, too real, like the movement of its head. This thing's creator was a real craftsman, with an uncanny knack of recreating the lifelike in wood.

Spencer suddenly felt uncomfortable holding it and he hurriedly placed it back on the windowsill, where it slowly seemed to settle in place against the glass once more, its head lolled forwards and the eyes snapped shut.

It was dark when Spencer summoned up enough courage to venture outside. And he had been glad to get away from the doll, the thing had seemed to be watching him all afternoon, even when he had closed the curtains on it, he could feel its lifeless eyes following him around the room as he paced and pondered what to do next. But somehow having it hidden like that behind the curtains was worse as he could not make out what it was doing, so he had reluctantly opened them again so he could keep a better eye on the thing.

Once he could have sworn he caught a glimpse of it reflected in the dresser's mirror and its head had been up and its eyes were open, staring at him.

Then there had been the changes. Subtle for sure, but the doll was for want of a better word, evolving, little by little throughout the hours since he had discovered it. The wood, which had been so dark at the beginning that it was almost black, was now slightly lighter. Its face, once so minimal in its design was taking on the faint traces of human features. The nose ever so slightly longer, more defined. The lips fuller with the hint of red.

But it was the eyes that had chilled Spencer's blood. When he had caught it watching him in the dresser's mirror, he had gone over to it, sure its head was now down but he was sure it had been watching him.

Although it fair terrified him to touch the thing, he had prodded its wooden chest and it had slid down the window a little, the shift in its body weight had made its head tilt back and its eye lids had opened. And what he saw there had sent him wheeling away from the thing in a panic and he had fallen back on the bed where he pulled the pillow over his head and screamed into the mattress.

Those eyes now had a hint of blue in them.

That had been what finally drove Spencer out of the hotel. He knew he had to get out, into the fresh air, anywhere, even for a short while.

And for a time, it had worked. Away from that thing he began to let himself believe he could move it, perhaps dump it into the unused wardrobe. It had a key, and he could lock it away.

But deep down he knew that once he returned to the hotel and saw that silhouette in the window from the street. His bravado would desert him. He had even dismissed the notion of leaving the thing entirely, to escaping the hotel and find another somewhere else. Because, despite the horror he felt in its presence, he instinctively knew their fates were linked somehow.

As he wandered the streets, he absently wondered when it was that he had lost his sanity. Was it just before he had lost his memory? Had his brain overloaded as it tried to escape some forgotten atrocity?

Later, he found himself standing outside an off license looking in through the window at the rows upon rows of alcohol. Those tantalizing bottles of oblivion beckoned to him. And he reasoned that if he could not fall into a deep enough sleep to elude the dream. Passing out would be the next best option.

He had drunk the best part of a bottle of vodka by the time he found himself back outside the hotel and his head was pleasantly numb. Once he had stumbled his way back to his room, the doll was there, of course, waiting for him on the sill. But thanks to the numbing effect of the alcohol, he just didn't care.

He struggled out of his clothes and fell back onto the bed, and just kept falling.

He had no idea just how long he had been allowed to enjoy the bliss of a dreamless sleep, but however long, its end was signaled by the all too familiar sound of wind chimes drifting towards him through the nothingness. The darkness he had welcomed upon unconsciousness now gave way to a blinding light which surrounded him. He felt himself floating upright in it, borne up by the sheer energy as it swelled around him.

All too aware now, even in this fitful sleep, Spencer looked down at his feet to see an infinity of light below them. Then the windchimes were once again buzzing around his head, suspended by unseen wires. But for the first time their half-remembered tune soothed him, and he could feel his initial anxiety at their return fading away with each passing note.

Wherever he was, he was in a safe place, a million miles away from that doll and thoughts of forgotten crimes. And that, Spencer thought gratefully, was good enough for now.

A moment later he was floating through the chimes themselves and could feel them brush gently against his face then they would spin off into that bright oblivion, only to be replaced by a dozen more.

And for the first time he could make out exactly what they were. Many were animals but warped and disfigured almost to the point of being unrecognizable, as if they were made of wax and left too close to an open flame.

A light breeze caressed his face, and he looked up ahead to see the source was that same open window from before. Sunlight, even brighter than that which surrounded him came flooding through it, its fine lace curtains fluttered as the breeze passed through them.

But suddenly, seeing this image, the feeling of serenity he had been so enjoying gradually began to melt away as he approached it, replaced by one of absolute dread.

Spencer felt a slight tug in the center of his chest and with this began to drift faster towards the window. Panicking, he tried to grab onto something, anything to stop himself. But there were only the wind chimes, which simply spun away at his desperate touch, their once soothing tones now abrasive and painful in his head.

And so, he drifted helplessly on towards the window and what was waiting for him there. And somehow, Spencer knew what was coming.

The screaming started in low, almost indistinguishable from the wind chimes, but within a heartbeat of hearing it, the horrific sound was shredding what was left of his frayed nerves. He felt that pull on his chest again, this time it was so violent it knocked the wind right out of him. He had to fight for each shallow breath as something was weighing heavy on his chest.

Dark blotches appeared in the brightness as he choked, slowly sucking in the light around him like half a dozen black holes. The window disappeared as it was swallowed up by the darkness as did the chimes. The screaming faltered and faded to nothing but the blood pumping in his ears.

Then there was nothing.

Spencer was in darkness now, fighting for breath which would not come. He could feel the hard mattress of the bed against his back and the pillow behind his head. He managed to force his eyes open expecting to see the cracked ceiling of the hotel room.

He looked straight into the eyes of the doll as it sat on his chest, heavy beyond all reason, its half-formed hands around his throat.

Spencer screamed and jolted awake, gasping for air. He clutched at his chest, but the doll was gone. He cursed the dream and tried to sit up, but all he managed to do was knock the vodka bottle which had fallen into his lap as he slept off the bed. His head swam as he realized he was still blind drunk, gasping in the darkness like an idiot.

He was only vaguely aware of the bottle hitting the floor and rolling away. But he definitely heard it stop suddenly as it hit something wooden close by.

Spencer tensed and rolled onto his side to see the doll standing in the middle of the room with the bottle at its feet. It had forsaken its place on the windowsill and was watching him intently.

Even in the half-light he could see the changes, which had begun earlier and now continued with a vengeance. Its facial features were now more fully realized. It had cheek bones, and its nose and mouth were now more pronounced and exquisitely sculpted.

It also now had the suggestion of hair, wispy strands growing out the top of its wooden head. And its once naked body had taken on the faintest trace of clothing. A gossamer stripped t-shirt of sorts and the outline of shorts on its rigid legs. Ethereal creations at best, almost undetectable in the gloom but undoubtedly there.

"Christ, Christ," Spencer slurred and tried to push himself upright, but his arms gave way, and he pitched forwards and fell awkwardly off the bed and landed heavily on the floor.

Disorientated and scared witless, he tried to sit up and after some effort managed to rest his back against the bed. But the doll was back behind the curtains once more, its shadow casting a warped silhouette on the material from the streetlight outside.

It had tried to kill him, drunk or not the thing had tried to choke the life out of him whilst he slept. The adrenalin was starting to clear the maelstrom of thoughts in his head and as he sat there watching the thing, his head began to clear, and for the first time since all this began, a moment of clarity came to John Spencer, and he knew exactly what he had to do.

“I think I’ve done something terrible.”

The young woman at the Samaritans went silent on the other end of the phone for a moment.

“I really think you need to go to the police,” she said after a few rapid breaths. “I’m sure they will be able to help you figure all this out.”

The poor kid was obviously out of her depth, she had done her best up to now, but this was the third time she had given the same response, if phrased a little differently each time.

“You shouldn’t feel you have to face this alone,” she added, which was at least new.

Even with a gun to his head, Spencer couldn’t have said why he had called in the first place. Perhaps it had been the need for some kind of human contact, but nothing too intimate. He had seen the card for the Samaritans on the Hotel’s notice board by the pay phone and at the time it seemed like the right thing to do.

He had wondered absently as he waited for the call to connect just how many of his fellow residents had thought the same down through the years. It seemed, even to the casual observer to be a gathering place to all manner of human flotsam and jetsam, washed up here by life’s merciless tide.

“If I did something so bad,” he said. “Why is it I can’t remember?” It was a reasonable question.

“Because you are blocking it out,” the girl said with a little more confidence.

“Whatever happened, whatever you did... It’s overloaded your senses.”

Arh, a psychology student, Spencer mused.

“This doll, it’s all in your head,” she added.

He felt a sudden stab of fear, had he mentioned the doll? He thought back, he remembered rambling at the beginning of the call. Yes, his heart rate slowed, he had. He had told her about the changes it was undergoing, of that, he was sure.

“Oh, it’s real,” he assured her.

His free hand absently drifted to his neck. He could still feel the things hands around his throat, and that weight on his chest. It had tried to kill him, no doubt and no psychology degree would convince him otherwise.

“Look,” she said. “How about a name, it doesn’t have to be real, just so I can call you something other than sir.”

“My name is John, I think,” he replied, there was no reason for him to lie.

“John, good. Look, I can understand you are reluctant to go to the police. But how about a hospital? I can give to the address of one nearby?”

Spencer had to admit the thought of just giving himself up was an appealing one. Maybe if he survived the next few minutes and what he knew he had to do. Perhaps he would.

“You said you had just come back from shopping, John,” the kid said, trying to keep him engaged. “What did you buy?”

This made Spencer smile a little too widely even he had to admit. He kicked the shopping bag at his feet and the contents clanked together with the satisfying sound of metal on metal.

He was about to reply, when the sound of floorboards creaking at his back made the smile fall from his face. He turned and looked up the stairs behind him and to the first-floor landing.

The doll was standing peeking through the banisters, like a child eavesdropping on an adult conversation. It was silhouetted by bright sunlight which streamed through a large window behind it. It had a full head of messy blond hair. Its once ethereal clothes, like itself, were now all too real.

“I have to go.”

“No, please, John wait...”

He hung up before she could spout fresh platitudes.

He watched as the doll turned and walked away. Its gait uncertain like a toddler learning its first steps.

And Spencer knew this was it. He waited until it was long gone and then picked up the bag and ascended the stairs. Although he knew this had to happen, he felt conflicting emotions. Equal parts fear and excited anticipation of what was to come.

Was he a man taking the steps up to the gallows, or one to the door of freedom?

When Spencer entered his room, the doll was already back behind the curtains. But this time he noted it was standing and seemed to be peeking through the narrow gap

between the fabric. He made great play at ignoring it and put the shopping bag down on the dresser. But made sure he could see the thing at his back reflected in the mirror.

"I keep dreaming about a sunny day," he said to no one in particular. "I'm in a room, looking at a window. God it's beautiful, but someone outside is screaming."

He kept his attention on the bag but make sure he could just see the reflected silhouette out of the corner of his eye.

"I have blood on my hands, don't I Pinocchio?"

His heart skipped a beat as it came out from behind the curtains and hopped down onto the floor with a soft thud. It took three tentative steps into the room.

He lifted up the bag and the half dozen knives he had just purchased clattered loudly onto the dresser and the doll stopped dead.

"I was thinking. If I did kill you before, then maybe I can do it again."

He picked up one of the knives, a vicious looking carving knife with a serrated edge and theatrically ran his thumb down the sharp blade.

"Or were you hoping I was going to use one of these on myself?"

Spencer spun around on his heel, with the knife out, ready to lunge at the thing.

He froze instantly, seeing the doll for the first time in all its newly forged glory. The changes were now all but complete, a wooden boy, perhaps supposed to be five or six was standing before him in a stripy t-shirt, shorts and a full head of messy blond hair. Its facial features a perfect rendition but one he did not know.

Although he knew it was some demonic facsimile it was heart stoppingly life-like. So real, so alive! Seeing it out in the open like this, Spencer couldn't move, and he felt his murderous rage just melt away until he was left numb.

"What are you?" The question barely audible even to him.

The doll looked at him with beautiful blue eyes. It tilted its head quizzically to one side at the enquiry like a puppy learning its first commands.

After a moment the doll lightly touched a deep split in the wood to the side of its forehead just under the hair line with a now perfectly formed hand, as if in way of explanation. Spencer shook his head absently in response to the gesture.

"What did I do to you?" He asked, frustration making him angry. He raised the knife a little and the doll took a step back.

“Christ,” he felt instantly ashamed at scaring the bizarre creation and let the knife drop to his side.

“Please,” he begged softly. “Who are you?”

Then in response the doll did the strangest thing. It began to move its arms in a circular motion and rocked almost comically from side to side. And Spencer wondered if he had finally lost his mind for good.

Of all things, it was dancing. He almost laughed out loud at the sheer absurdity of it all but could not look away from the ridiculous spectacle. Now if his senses hadn’t completely left him, the doll was now miming holding a steering wheel. It even seemed to ‘beep’ an imaginary horn as it ‘drove’. All the while still rocking gently from side to side. Then it went back to moving its arms in a circular motion again, its wooden elbows tucked tightly into its sides.

There was something about this lunatic mime that made the hairs on the back of Spencer’s neck stand on end. He could taste bile at the back of his throat but still he couldn’t look away despite his growing distress.

His lips began moving, mouthing words to a long-forgotten song.

“The... The wheels on the bus... Go round and round...”

His stomach churned and he had a sudden overwhelming desire to breakdown in tears. To release all this pent-up anger and emotion that had been eating him alive throughout all this waking and sleeping nightmare. He could feel it building up inside him along with the oncoming nausea and feared he would explode before he could let it go.

But still he could not find that release he so desperately needed. That switch to flick and make it all come to the surface, even if it killed him, at least he would be at peace.

Then the image of the window from his nightmares flashed into his mind’s eye, clear as if he were standing before it. But this time he saw more of the picture. He was standing in a room and as he looked on, two figures, sitting opposite each other on the floor came out of the ether.

One was Spencer himself, sitting across from a young boy. They were both laughing and doing the actions to the nursery rhyme ‘the wheels on the bus’.

Spencer tried to shake of the scene as despite its serenity, it terrified him beyond words.

There was the doll, in front of him once more in his hotel room, still dancing. Now it was wagging its wooden finger at him, as if scolding. He was hoarsely saying the words before he realized he was speaking.

“The driver on the bus says too much noise... Too, too much noise.” His voice gave out in a strangled sob, and he staggered back a step, suddenly lightheaded as the wind chimes faded up again.

His vision bleached out and there was the window again, but like that dreaded nightmare the child and the room were gone as the window was just suspended there.

He felt that all too familiar tug in his chest as he was pulled towards the window once again and he could almost feel the breeze coming through it on his face. The chiming gave way, as always to that heart wrenching screaming coming from beyond its billowing curtains.

Spencer covered his ears in a vain attempt to block out the hideous sound, but it was inside his head as always, but louder than ever this time building with each moment to a hideous crescendo which threatened to split his skull in half.

Then just when he feared his head would shatter from the onslaught. It was gone, replaced by his own ragged breathing. He tentatively opened his tear-filled eyes to see that he was back in the hotel room.

The doll was still now, looking up at him with those counterfeit blue eyes. Those now all too familiar blue eyes.

Jake’s eyes.

The realization hit him like a ten-ton truck, and he gasped out loud.

“Oh, God...”

A feeling of overwhelming horror well up inside him, followed by a thousand long suppressed images and emotions. And just like that he remembered everything in horrifying crystal clarity.

It had been just another Friday afternoon, he had finished work early so he was home by two, ready to enjoy the weekend ahead. He had fair bounded up the street and into the

house like he had done a hundred times or more. Once inside he had thrown his keys and mobile on the table by the door and had gone up the stairs, two at a time, just like always.

On the landing, something made him stop, a gnawing feeling at the back of his mind buzzed there unbidden. Something strange. He remembered shrugging off the feeling and going into one of the rooms.

In through the door, he was immediately hit in the face by half a dozen wind chimes hanging from the ceiling. They were shaped like various animals they had bought them from Winsor safari park last year. The memory made him smile, Jake loved them, and he suspected the lad had deliberately decided to put them there to ambush him every time Spencer forgot they were there or was in a hurry.

He laughed at getting caught out yet again and felt a breath of wind caress his face. He looked across the room to see the window was open and that someone had dragged a toy box to directly underneath it, strange that.

This was when he had heard the screaming from outside and was moving towards the window before he realized it. In the dream, this was always where he had woken up just as the screaming became unbearable. But not this time, this time he remembered everything, even if it would send him over the edge and into madness.

Finally, after what seemed like an age, he reached the open window, and with his heart in his mouth he looked through the curtains and down to the garden below.

Of course, it all seemed so matter of fact now he was finally remembering everything. A boy, his boy, dressed in his favorite stripy t-shirt and shorts was sprawled awkwardly on the patio below the window. An impossible amount of blood pooling around his ruined head.

Spencer turned and ran. Down the stairs and through the kitchen and into the back garden. The images were coming thick and fast now, flooding his subconscious. He was in the garden, the screaming was all around him. It was Sarah, his wife, crumpled on the grass hysterical a few feet from where Jake was laid.

He stood there lamely in shock, trying to speak but nothing but strangled sounds came out.

Off to one side, someone was cursing loudly, and he turned to see Frank, his neighbor over the garden fence. Frank didn't look well at all and was frantically dialing on his

mobile. Funny time to make a call, Spencer thought numbly. Then, oh yes of course. Nine-nine-nine.

Spencer could feel the reality around him fading away as his brain went into overload and was thankful for it.

His sight had become blurred, the sounds muffled, then gone all together, at least the screaming had stopped. Spencer looked down at Sarah, the only clear thing in his myopic vision, she was still screaming but no sound was coming out, she looked oddly comical he thought.

He staggered slightly, disorientated and despite everything, he knew he was going into shock. He felt suddenly cold despite the mid-afternoon sunshine, and he began to shiver. His thoughts clouded and the very air around him became oppressive like he was in a vacuum, and he could feel it crushing him from all sides making it hard to breath and move.

He glanced around suddenly confused, why was he in the garden again? It was Friday, he was home early so why was everyone so sad?

Jake was laid on the patio with seemingly gallons of red paint all over him. Tut! He thought mischievously, your mum is going to kill you. *‘What have we told you about that window in your room? The child lock is bust... I’ve been meaning to fix it for weeks. Maybe I’ll get round to it this weekend.’*

“Stay away from the window, Jake,” Spencer thought he had said out loud. “If you fall and break your legs, don’t come running to me!”

The old joke from his own childhood didn’t seem quite so funny anymore.

Spencer was on his knees now, although he didn’t remember falling. And someone was laughing, he could hear it, clear as day and it took him a moment to realize it was him. Laughing so hard tears were streaming down his face. He crawled over to Jake to share the joke, but he was sleeping in the paint, his blond matted hair was covered in the stuff. There’ll be tears trying to comb that out when it dries, he thought vaguely.

“Come on sleepy head, time to rise and shine.”

Spencer took his son’s head gently in his hands and his young skull shifted sickeningly in his grasp distorting his whole head in the most disturbing of ways. He recoiled in horror and before he knew it, he was on his feet again. His hands were covered in the thick sticky paint now.

That was when everything around him just faded away and he was left with a moment of absolute clarity. It was an almost physical psychological ‘snap’, like someone flicking a switch in his head. Followed by a dreamlike sense of utter relief.

Don’t worry Johnny, this simply is not happening. The last thing he remembered was quietly walking away from the scene, from his house and grieving wife and into the ignorance of blissful denial. Then nothing until the hotel and the doll.

The doll.

Spencer couldn’t breathe, his legs gave way and he collapsed to his knees in front of the doll. It was almost human in appearance now, almost his son.

“Oh, my boy...”

Spencer held out a trembling hand and lightly touched the deep split on its head.

“Oh, my beautiful boy.”

The doll suddenly staggered forwards and into his arms and hugged him tightly. Spencer held onto it and sobbed his heart out.

John Spencer walked up the street hand in hand with the doll. It had only been an hour since he had found himself again and had his final farewell with his son. It wasn’t real, he knew that, but it felt close enough to start the process of grieving.

Almost immediately, he had started to notice subtle changes in the doll’s appearance. The vivid illusion of Jake’s clothes had begun to fade. Their cloth like visage now nothing but gossamer threads. Its wood had darkened again and was now much closer to the deep mahogany it had first been. The eyes not quite so blue anymore.

They were three houses away from home when the doll stopped and slipped its wooden hand from his. It looked more artificial now than ever and Spencer knew it could go no further.

This had been Jake’s Street, the house up ahead his home. The doll had no place here amongst all this reality and Spencer knew it had no desire to stay where it did not belong. It had never meant to be a replacement for his dead son. Just something to help point the way back from despair.

He could see the doll changing by the second now and he held its gaze until the very last trace of blue in its eyes gave way to a lifeless black.

“Thank you,” he whispered and turned and walked away. He didn’t need to look back to know it was already gone.

Spencer stopped at his gate, the relief of recognition tinged with the memory of the accident. He stood there, unable to open the gate and return to his life, to Sarah. To life without his boy.

The front door flung open and there she was, in the doorway looking at him in disbelief. She looked wrung out and her eyes were red from so many tears. Spencer suddenly felt an almost overwhelming sense of guilt. He had left her, disappeared the very moment she had needed him the most.

He'd had to deal with this on his own, in his own time, but she hadn't had that choice. She had lost her son and her husband in the blink of an eye. He tried to speak but couldn't find the words, after all what could he say?

Sarah rushed out and Spencer could see her sister, Kate clinging onto the door frame in tears. And a fresh-faced female police officer who put a comforting arm around the woman. Thank God, he thought, at least she hadn't been alone after all. She stopped just short of him.

“John?” Her voice was weak. It was as if she didn't want to believe he was real.

“Sarah... Sarah, God I'm so sorry... I, I just couldn't...” The rest was lost in tears.

“No, John, no, it's alright,” she said and flung her arms around him embracing him tightly as if she was afraid he would slip away again. “I thought I'd lost you too...”

They held each other for the longest time. How could he explain what had happened? Perhaps he never could, but for now none of that mattered. All he knew was that this was a start.

At last, the grieving process could finally begin. They both knew it would be a long and painstaking task. But at least every beginning would eventually, mercifully, lead to an end.

The Carriage

Although it was only eight months in, nineteen ninety-five felt to Jill Vallance like it had already been four times that length. Each day seemed to stretch on for a week, and it was as if the year somehow didn't want her to ever get beyond it.

A troubled year refusing to resign itself to history, instead intent on making Jill live every single second of it. Every minute stretching beyond its intended timescale. It was the year her once well-ordered life had changed forever, eight months filled with the full gamut of human emotions.

It had started, quite aptly enough on New Year's Day itself. Roger, her husband of twelve years had drunkenly declared at five minutes passed midnight, that he was leaving Jill and their two children, Tom and Daisy, for someone younger (weren't they always?)

He said that he could no longer live this lie of a marriage, and his tone had been so accusatory it was as if he was blaming her for being a part of this sham of a life as he saw it.

He hadn't come right out and said it, but it felt to Jill like he was blaming her for daring to, grow older, heavier, and for rejecting his sexual advances (not that there had been any for months at a time.) Even though he had done all these things himself over the years.

Roger had left that same day, even before the kids, who had gone to bed as part of a family, little knowing they would awake fatherless. Had gotten up.

Christ, was all that just eight months ago? Jill thought. Eight months of begging, cajoling and threatening the man she had sworn to grow old with, for better or worse. Only to have him betray those vows for the sake of younger, firmer and although it made her sick to picture it, more desirable flesh.

Oh, how she had tortured herself with visions of them together. Sharing the most intimate of moments, just as she and Roger had for so many years. Was she a whore in bed? Just how he liked it, didn't he? Lately, even her memories of the passions they had enjoyed together were merging with images of him with the other woman, replacing her in every way. Once treasured remembrances, now nothing more than carnal nightmares that would enter unbidden, sweating and writhing into her mind's eye at the slightest trigger.

"Penny for them?"

Jill snapped out of her self-flagellation. She looked at her baby brother, Daniel for a good five seconds before she remembered where she was.

“Christ Danny,” she replied with a thin smile. “Believe me, you don’t want to know.”

Daniel dumped the two large suitcases he was carrying at her feet.

“I know you’re on holiday, sis. But you could at least help, after all this is your shit.”

He grimaced at the swear word and glanced over to Jill’s car parked a few yards away. He was safe, her two kids, ten-year-old Tom and his nine-year-old sister, Daisy were too busy ‘helping’ Daniel’s wife, Béatrice empty the roof rack of their remaining bags and cases.

Jill laughed and pulled her brother into a warm embrace.

“Thanks again, bro,” she whispered.

“Aucun Problème, as they say in these parts,” he said as they separated.

Not for the first time, Jill thanked God for her little brother and his young wife of two years. It had been Béatrice’s idea for them to visit the pair, who had settled in Béatrice’s hometown of Lyon, France once they were married.

Daniel and she had met as part of his job working for the French company of Richemont based in London. He was a photographer whilst Béatrice worked for the PR department.

Daniel gestured to the large, converted manor house that would be home for the week.

“No bad, eh?”

“It’ll do at a pinch,” she joked.

‘Le Manoir De Carpentier’ to give it, its official title, was an impressive eighteenth-century manor house set close to the Brittany coast, that had been converted after the first world war into a twelve-bedroom hotel set in three acres of its own immaculately tended grounds.

“Béatrice practically lived here when she was growing up,” Daniel told her. “Her family would come up here from Lyon twice a year, that’s how we got such a good deal on the rooms. I’ve tried to get her to go on holiday abroad, but she always insists we come here.”

“It’s perfect,” she said.

Its idyllic setting would be an ideal place to escape to, even for only a week. The building looked to her like something out of a three musketeers or Marie Antionette movie. A beautiful snapshot of French history.

It would be easy to imagine a horse drawn carriage passing by, were it not for the subtle encroachments of twentieth century life. The string of electric lights framing the large double entrance doors. The inevitable TV ariel half masked by the roof's ornate balustrade. And of course, the several cars parked in the car park out front.

Jill couldn't remember the last time she felt so relaxed. Even the normally fraught journey over from England had been cathartic. And she had felt the weight of the last few months ease with each passing mile she had driven once they departed the ferry at Caen. She could tell the kids had picked up on it too and she hadn't seen them happier since this whole nightmare began.

A large cheerful looking woman, perhaps in her early seventies appeared through the open entrance doors of the house. She was dressed in a white apron, flowing floral summer dress and had her hair tied up with a red scarf. And Jill wondered if her attire was in part for the tourists as he couldn't have looked more like a matriarchal housekeeper if she'd tried.

"That," Michell announced. "Is the infamous Madam Besson."

Besson waved at them and came down the stone steps.

"Of course, it is," Jill said and waved as the woman approached.

"Madam Besson," Michell said as she reached them. "Is it possible you've grown even lovelier since this morning?"

She dismissed him with the flick of a hand then offered it to Jill.

"You must be Jill," she said in broken but understandable English.

"Hi, yes, pleased to meet you Madam..."

"Lucy, please!" Besson insisted and took Jill's hand in both of hers and shook it firmly.

"Hey! Why don't I get to call you Lucy?" Daniel said in mock protest.

"Because you are a fool and no good for my Béatrice!" She said with a look of playful disdain.

"Oh, I like you," Jill said, instantly warming to the woman.

Lucy then put her arm through Jill's and then her over to the car where Tom and Daisy were trying to climb all over Béatrice. Seeing them approach, Tom broke off his assault and came running over, waving his arms excitedly.

"Mum! Mum!" He shouted and began laughing.

"Tom, take a breath," Jill told him.

The ten-year-old double up and fell to his knees just in front of them, his face crimson.

"Blimey, Tom! You'll explode," Jill warned with a smile.

"Mum!" He gasped. "Guess what yes is in French!? aunty Béatrice just told us."

Both Jill and Lucy looked down at the boy, they knew what was coming.

"Well, I have no idea," Jill lied.

"Wee! Wee!" Tim just got out before collapsing in a giggling heap.

Lucy laughed out loud at his antics.

"Ah, to be young again," she mused.

"We'll it is to be fair," Jill had to admit.

"I must warn you," Lucy said as she watched Tom's convulsions. "I intent to spoil your children terribly."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Jill replied and squeezed Lucy's hand.

Yes, she thought, this is just what I needed.

And true to her word, over the next two days, Lucy doted on the two children as if they were her very own grandchildren. So much so that Jill hardly saw them from breakfast until the evening meal, where they would regale her with tales of that day's adventures.

Although it was a Vallance family holiday, (with one glaring exception.) Jill was grateful of her time away from the kids. Time she could spend with her own thoughts, but just as importantly with Daniel and Béatrice with whom she could talk freely about what she supposed would be an impending divorce.

"The guy always was a dick," Daniel said as the three of them sat in wicker chairs on the hotel's large patio having cocktails in the warm afternoon sun.

"You introduced us!" Jill reminded him.

"Daniel!" Béatrice lamented good naturedly. "You are such a poor judge of character."

"I chose you, didn't I?"

I think we all know it was the other way around."

Jill smiled contentedly as the banter and let the sun warm her face.

“Jill, can we take you and the kids on a picnic tomorrow?” Béatrice asked. “There’s a lovely, wooded area a few miles from here. It’s perfect, has a stream.”

“Sounds great,” Jill replied and took a sip of her ice cool Gin Sling. “That’s if you can pry them away from Madam Lucy.”

“Speak of the devil,” Daniel whispered and was rewarded with a punch on the arm from his wife. “Ow!”

Jill heard Lucy and the kids before she saw them. They appeared at the edge of thick woodland on her left that bordered the massive lush green lawn which stretch out like a bowling green below the raised patio.

Tom and Daisy were each carrying armfuls of freshly cut flowers, closely followed by Lucy and a man about her age, Jill hadn’t seen before, dressed in work clothes and pushing a wheelbarrow.

“Oh, there’s Henry,” Béatrice said as the procession started across the grass and over to where they were sitting.

“Does that guy ever smile?” Daniel asked.

“You know, I don’t think he ever does,” Béatrice replied. “My mother told me he’s been the groundskeeper here since just after the war, a permanent fixture you could say.”

Daisy and Tom ran over to the patio’s edge.

“My, you two have been busy,” Jill said sitting up.

“We’re taking flowers to the...” Tom paused and frowned.

“War memorial,” Lucy prompted as she and Henry caught up.

“War memorial,” Tom repeated.

“Oh, that’s nice,” Jill said.

She knew war memorials large and small were a common sight in France. They had seen many of them on the drive up here. The village close by had a large one in the main square she seemed to remember.

There was even a small one in the hotel’s grounds, they had come across it when Béatrice had given them a brief tour on that first day. It was an important part of recent French history. Béatrice had become unusually serious when she talked about their significance, even now, fifty years since the end of the war, most knew someone who had been affected by the German occupation.

Some of the grander memorials were for the fallen soldiers. But many, like the smaller one tucked away in the grounds, were for the thousands of normal everyday civilians caught up in the Nazi retribution killings that blighted so many French towns and villages throughout the war. And for those brave resistance fighters who never accepted the occupation and had died fighting it.

“Henry was a famous hero of the resistance,” Béatrice said.

The groundsman frowned and took his cloth cap off. He absently picked at the brims stitching.

“Oh, Je n’en sais pas,” He replied softly with a shrug of the shoulders.

Luck smiled warmly at him and squeezed his shoulder.

“Our Henry is just being modest,” she said. “We are all very proud of what he and others did during the war. Our very own mayor was one of the local leaders. They served together.”

“It couldn’t have been easy,” Jill said.

She could see the poor man was uncomfortable with the attention. It reminded her of her own father who had been wounded as a young soldier at the battle of El Alamein in Egypt during the war but wouldn’t say a word about it.

The old man shrugged and smiled clearly understanding English.

“Allez! Come on children,” Lucy ordered. “Let us get these flowers to the memorial before they dry up.”

She ushered Henry away and they set off towards the far end of the lawn where the memorial was situated in a clearing just behind the treeline.

“Wee! Wee!” Tom said with a giggle.

“Wee! Wee!” Daisy mimicked, barely getting the words out before laughing.

And they both set off after the grown-ups.

“My children, ladies and gentlemen,” Jill said with a shake of the head.

“Their French is getting better,” Daniel chimed in with a smirk.

Jill watched the quartet as they reached the trees and disappeared along a woodland path. Then she sat back and took in her idyllic surroundings.

It’s hard to believe this place was ever at war,” she said.

“Sadly so,” Béatrice replied. “I understand it was quite bad around these parts.” She gestured to the manor house. “The manor was a gestapo headquarters.”

“Shite,” Daniel uttered.

The three of them fell silent as they each thought about past horrors in beautiful settings. Finally, Béatrice clapped her hands.

“Enough of this, we must remember but we must not dwell. Who’s for another drink?”

Jill lifted up her glass.

“Me, I could get used to all this day drinking.”

Jill had always thought of herself as being a lenient, progressive parent. But she had to admit she had undoubtedly given the kids a new sense of freedom here in France. Perhaps it was the remoteness and size of the village. Indeed, once you were away from the centre you would be lucky to see half a dozen cars all day, so there were no busy roads to worry about unlike back home.

Or perhaps it was Madam Lucy’s coddling of the children that had set her at ease. Either way she felt comfortable letting them roam out of her sight, much more than normal. And it was a new side of her she liked.

Such was the case today, Béatrice had somehow managed to convince Madam Besson to let them take Tom and Daisy away for the day, although Jill secretly thought the poor woman looked a little relieved at the respite. Her sister-in-law had arranged a quite extravagant picnic in a lovely out of the way spot she had discovered as a child.

Jill laid back on the blanket and listened to the gentle babbling of the nearby stream and couldn’t remember when she had felt quite so contented. Béatrice sat next to her and watched Daniel, with his trouser legs rolled up comically to his knees as he tried in vain to teach Tom and Daisy how to catch sticklebacks with their nets in the shallow water.

The spot Béatrice had picked was almost impossibly idyllic. They had set up in a small clearing by the stream, surrounded on three sides by thick woods and a narrow track which led up to the main road where they had parked.

“I wish I could stay here forever,” Jill said as she sat up.

“I know,” Béatrice agreed. “But still, enjoy it whilst you are here.”

“Believe me, I am.”

The pair were sprayed with cold water as the trio came wading out of the water and over to them.

“Hey!” Jill shrieked as Tom shook his hair like a dog over her.

“They wear me out,” Daniel declared and flopped down next to Béatrice.

“Oh, come on!” Tom protested and started jumping up and down on the spot.

Daisy was soon imitating her brother.

“Don’t you two want to rest for a bit?” Jill asked more out of hope than expectation.

“No, no!” Daisy said.

“Mum, can we go for a wander?” Tom asked.

Jill looked at Béatrice, who nodded.

“There’s a path that runs right through the woods over there,” she said pointing to her right.

Jill could just about see the partially overgrown path at the edge of the trees.

“As long as you two don’t go far,” Béatrice continued. “I have only ever been as far as the middle of the woods. When I was younger, I got too scared, it can get quite dark in there, even on a day like today.”

“So, no hidden mine shafts or caves they can fall down?” Jill asked playfully.

“Definitely not. I think there is an old railway track at the far end. That’s where they used to keep the old trains back in the sixties. All gone now though.”

“Okay.” Jill turned to the children. “Not too far, and if you come across any old buildings or anything like that. Out of bounds, understand?”

“Not too far,” Tom said. “Come on Daisy chain,” he grabbed his sister’s hand and they set off towards the woods.

“Stick to the path!” Béatrice called over to them. “That way you can follow it back here again.”

“And Tom, keep an eye on the time!” Jill shouted.

Tom tapped his wristwatch, and they headed into the trees.

It wasn’t long into their jungle adventure, when Tom Vallance spotted a pair of rusty railway tracks just visible through the undergrowth. He knew well enough not to venture anywhere near railways back home. There was a busy line that ran close to his school, and they’d had many lessons about the dangers.

But these were old and almost completely covered by grass and weeds. Still, as he approached, he instinctively looked both ways. To his left, the tracks only ran for a few

metres before they stopped at a mound of bricks and rubble. No way a train was coming down these tracks. The tracks to his right were more promising. They ran off and around a bend and out of sight beyond the trees.

He stepped onto one of the heavy rails and held out his arms for balance and waited for Daisy to catch up. He looked past her to the path they had come down. It would be easy to double back along the track to this point once they had finished exploring. Then they just had to follow the path back to the picnic and his mother. He took no little pride in his, what did they call it? Yes, orienteering skills.

“These look old,” Daisy set as she stepped up onto the opposite rail.

“Hmm,” Tom checked his watch. They had been wandering for a good twenty minutes, but it had only felt like twenty seconds to him.

Still, he was drawn to the bend in the tracks and what might lay beyond. He had his bearings, so what could be the harm?

“Let’s see where this leads, okay?”

Daisy, as always nodded in agreement.

They would have to be quick, but Tom just couldn’t shift the feeling something interesting awaited them. He pictured an old, abandoned steam train, long forgotten and left to rust. Now *that* would be an adventure.

“Come on,” he urged and jumped off the rail and began to jog up the tracks. Daisy gave chase.

As they rounded the bend, that adventure started much sooner than Tom could ever have hoped for. Someway off, the track came to a stop at a bordered-up railway tunnel cut into a rocky hillside.

In front of which, half obscured by a thick tangle of bushes stood what looked like an old railway carriage. It sat on its own behind an old black and white striped barrier which stretched across the track. This had what looked like an old, smashed lantern dangling from it and a faded sign with a word Tom had never seen before painted in dirt flecked, faded red.

Verboten.

The carriage's distressed metal work was brown with rust. Its long windows were covered on the inside by thin wooden slatted shutters, most of the glass missing or cracked and covered in grime. The wooden body work was warped and splintered in parts and its weather worn painted surface was all but gone. It had perhaps once been blue but now only mouldy patches of faded paint.

It wasn't the locomotive Tom had hoped for, but the carriage looked old and had an irresistible draw to a curious ten-year-old. He remembered seeing similar ones at York's railway museum, but they had been restored to former glories.

He felt Daisy's hand slip into his as they approached, and he slowed his walk.

"Remember what mum said," she cautioned.

He remembered and smiled impishly. 'Not too far,' they weren't. 'And no buildings,' this wasn't.

"It's alright," he reassured her. "We'll just take a look. Don't you want to see inside?"

"Not really," she replied sheepishly.

Tom moved slowly towards the carriage and despite herself, Daisy gripped his hand tighter and went with him.

They had to fight their way through the tangled limbs and thick undergrowth to get to the carriage, but as difficult as it was, this made the lure of the vehicle all the more enticing to Tom. He felt like an adventurer making his way through dark Amazonian jungle in search of a lost city.

Once through the other side, they came to the back of the carriage. Tom ran his hand along the wooden panelling which was bowed and cracked with age. Tom let go of Daisy's hand as he moved further along, having to squeeze through here and there where the foliage had grown right up to the side of the carriage. Finally, he reached a rusted metal door.

"Tom," Daisy was hanging back a little.

"It's alright."

She came over to his side, all the while glancing at the carriage as if something might leap out from inside and attack at any moment.

"Good girl," he said.

Tom tried the door handle, but it was so rusted it didn't budge at all.

"It's creepy," Daisy announced with a frown.

“I know!” Tom replied with glee.

He peered down to the other end of the long carriage and saw another door.

“Let’s try that one,” he said and set off.

He didn’t look back but could hear Daisy muttering, then the crunch of her shoes on the gravel underfoot as she followed.

Tom counted his strides as he walked in an attempt to judge just how long it actually was.

He tried to peer in through the shuttered windows as he went, but they were too high up, even when he tried tiptoes and despite the dilapidation of the thing and the smashed glass the shutters were mostly intact except the odd missing slat here and there. His frustration evaporated as he reached the next door. It was slightly ajar.

He tried the handle to open it further, but the hinges were rusted solid. He pulled at it with all his might, but it didn’t move so much as a millimetre.

“Damn it!”

He looked back along the carriage. He had counted twenty-two strides so at a rough estimate the thing was about thirty feet long as long, if not longer than modern. He examined the door once more. There was a metal step on the bottom so he put a foot on it and using the handle he hoisted himself up so he could look inside through the gap.

He pressed his face into the space and peered inside, but due to the angle he could only see the wood panelling of another door at the back of the carriage to his right, which if it was connected to another you would use to go between the two. He strained to see to his left and inside the carriage interior proper, but it was useless.

He stepped back down onto the gravel and weighed up his options.

“Mum’s gonna kill you,” Daisy said in a sing-song voice.

She gestured to his t-shirt which was covered in rust and mould. He brushed it off as best he could.

“I’ll be fine,” he replied tersely.

He turned back to the gap in the door. It would be tight, but he calculated he could just about squeeze through. He thought about it for a split second then turned sideways and pushed his left shoulder into the gap and began to wriggle through.

“Tom!” Daisy protested.

“You can stay here if you want,” he grunted with effort, he was now halfway in.

Daisy clutched her hands together and her face was set in a concerned frown as he finally managed to manoeuvre himself through.

The interior of the carriage was as dim and damp as Tom had expected, as he stood there his young eyes gradually became accustomed to the gloom. Thin strips of sunlight were visible through the gaps in the aged wooden slats covering the windows. And here and there shafts of light came filtering through narrow gaps in the roof catching moats of dust tumbling in the air like snowflakes.

“Oh,” Tom said with disappointment, as his vision finally adjusted.

The carriage was empty, except for oddly a heavy wooden table down at the far end which did not fit with any railway furniture Tom had ever seen.

There were no seats, compartments or tables, the interior had been completely stripped to its bare bones. He scanned the floor in the vain hope of finding an old discarded conductor’s hat or ticket machine he could claim as a souvenir, something, anything worth the effort of entry.

The light at the door behind him shifted and he turned to see Daisy coming through the narrow gap. She barely had to struggle at all to get inside she was so small.

“Phew!” She said pinching her nose. “It stinks in here.”

He nodded, the place smelt of rotting wood and mildew and he wondered just how long it had been since anyone had ventured inside. Béatrice hadn’t mentioned having seen anything like this on her adventures as a child, then he remembered she had been too scared.

Daisy moved past him and began to walk down the carriage, which was most unusual for her. Then he heard her humming some tune he hadn’t heard before. He was about to ask her what it was when the simple melody sparked off something deep within him. He felt a sudden prickly sensation wash over his body, A split second of fear which dissipated almost as soon as it had come replaced by a warm, soothing feeling.

It took his young brain a moment to process the strange conflicting emotions. Then it came to him, he was filled with an overwhelming sense of calm. Like when his mum would climb into his bed during a thunderstorm and whisper in his ear. Banishing in a few words any terror caused by the storm. The way that feeling of fear gave way to one of absolute security.

Tom closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around himself without realising it.

He opened his eyes again hearing Daisy giggling down the other end of the carriage. She was definitely feeling it too, as normally she would have been as quiet as a mouse in such a strange place and would be glued to his side in terror the whole time.

She was spinning like a ballerina in a shaft of bright sunlight coming from the roof above her. Her face as bright as he could remember it, since the whole mum and dad thing.

He skipped down to join her, laughing as he went. She was standing under a long metal pole which stretched across the width of the carriage. Four rotting pieces of thick rope were wrapped around it at intervals. Tom's first thought in his euphoric state was that perhaps they used to attach a pair of child's swings. But that fantasy, nice though it was only lasted a moment.

His foot kicked something, and he saw it was a tangle of the same type of rope which must have fallen from the pole over time. He bent down and picked it up.

Daisy had gone over to the side of the carriage and was running her little fingers along the panelling. Tom could see, where the light caught it, that there were scratch marks in the wood, like an animal, perhaps a dog had been clawing to be let out. She ran her nails delicately along them as if pretending she was clawing them herself.

Even though Daisy was giggling contently as she did this, something deep down in Tom made him shudder, he felt a stab of fear, it might have been a trick of the light, but he thought he saw blood dripping from the gouged panelling like claw marks in flesh. Then an instant later, just as before the fear was gone replaced by that warm feeling of all enveloping safety.

He laughed as Daisy came away from the side and broke into a little dance of joy. Then he realised he had been untangling the rope all the while. It was a length of course rope ending with a wrapped knot with a loop on the end big enough to fit your head through. He held it up by the end and it swung before his eyes and the motion was familiar somehow.

Daisy had now moved off to the far end of the carriage and climbed up onto the odd table and laid down on it. Tom followed her down, as he reached her, she closed her eyes and began moving her arms up and down with her palms against the wood like she was making a snow angel.

Tom touched the wood and was shocked at how cold it felt in the clammy air of the carriage. There were rusty bolts on either side which must have attached something to the wood. He didn't know why, but the image of heavy leather straps came to mind. The sort used to strap someone's wrists down. Where the image came from, he couldn't say, perhaps he had seen it on tv or in a film.

Whatever it was, Daisy must have seen the same thing, because she stretched out her arms out from her body like Jesus on the cross. She was too small to reach where the straps would have been, but the inference was clear.

Her little face seemed to suddenly run through a dozen or so expressions in rapid succession. Tom saw fear, pain, confusion, anger, all a blur and so utterly alien to her normal sweet features. An instant later, her face melted back into one of utter peace and contentment. Then she was plain old Daisy again. It was all so fast, Tom wasn't sure he had seen it at all.

She let out a long sigh and squinted up at a shaft of sunlight which played across her face.

"We should go," Daisy said reluctantly as if resigned at having to leave this strange place of unexpected wonder.

Tom nodded, he felt it too, like the end of the day at a fair when the excitement dips to sudden fatigue. He was dog tired but deep down wanted to stay here all day.

"Yeah," he finally relented and absently tucked the rope under his t-shirt.

"You two alright?" Jill asked after supper that evening.

They had been unusually quiet since the picnic, at first, she had put it down to over excitement. But they had hardly touched their food and had both been somewhat subdued.

"Just tired," Tom had replied before asking if they could go to bed.

It had been the first time on the trip that they had actually asked to go to bed without being dragged upstairs.

Jill instinctively felt Daisy's forehead for fever as she helped her get into the bed she was sharing with Tom, who was already snuggled under the covers. But she was cool.

"Busy day huh?"

"Uhuh," was all she got in reply as Daisy slipped under the covers, already half asleep.

She tucked them both in and kissed them goodnight.

“Remember, I’m just downstairs if you need me, okay?”

“We know,” Tom replied lazily.

“I’ll leave the light on, don’t forget to turn it off when you go to sleep.”

Neither child replied but just gave her a wave.

“Love you,” she said as she closed the door and was rewarded with two muted ‘love you’ in response.

As he trudged on through the familiar, yet ominous trees, he looked up, perhaps in the hope of divine guidance, telling him that despite his gut this was the best option for them. But instead, he was greeted with dark and twisted tree limbs meshed together over head like the spindly hands of dead men, intertwined against a brooding sky. It was daylight, but the dense foliage blocked out much of the sunlight, so it may as well have been twilight.

Although he knew he was dreaming, Tom felt Daisy’s hand squeeze his as they followed the man leading him and his sister through the forest. As they came to the edge of the trees, he could see the train tracks up ahead, snaking off in either direction. But unlike today, these tracks were shiny and freshly travelled upon, with no hint of undergrowth that had all but swallowed them up.

He looked at the man just a few paces ahead. And it was only now he realised that, although he was a fully grown adult, both he and Daisy were almost as tall. There was something vaguely familiar about his unshaven gaunt face but try as he might Tom could not place him. Despite this he wasn’t scared, and neither was the normally timid Daisy. They both unconsciously knew him from somewhere, but more importantly that it was safe to go wherever he led.

They were walking along the train tracks now which rounded a bend up ahead. The sky darkened a little as they walked and with that came a slight stab of fear, as if it were mirroring some terror to come.

“Franz?” Daisy said and Tom turned to her as if he had been called that his entire life. Stranger still, he wanted to call her Marie.

“Now, now,” the familiar stranger said. “The rendezvous is just up ahead. You’ll be safe soon, just as we promised.

Tom knew he was speaking French but understood every word all the same.

Safe, yes that was it! The man was taking them somewhere safe. Somewhere the bad men in black uniforms couldn't find them. Promises had been made, after all, they were heroes, Daisy... No... Marie and him.

It was increasingly hard to tell which was which.

But despite the reassuring words from their guide, he couldn't ignore the growing trepidation he was starting to feel. Their lives were in this man's hands. They had, in their desperation, given themselves over to him completely.

The 'hiss' of some massive beast, echoed around them, just around the bend in the tracks. And with it the day, such as it was, turned to night in the blink of an eye.

"Almost there," the stranger said.

"Franz, are you sure?" Daisy asked, her voice oddly low, not that of an eight-year-old, but like aunty Béatrice. Older, French, but still he understood.

"Don't worry," he replied in perfect French himself and squeezed her hand.

She was humming some tune to herself as they walked, an old song a child called Maire had learnt long ago to ward off childhood monsters. Its usual soothing melody sounded more like a funeral dirge out here in the oppressive darkness.

He glanced to their guide, but his face was in near shadow and was turned to the bend ahead. Tom instinctively reached into the back of his trousers with his free hand and found the hand grip of the pistol he knew would be there.

Again, that sharp 'hissing' from up ahead and Tom jolted in shock.

"Almost, there," the man said again, and Tom caught a hint of regret in his voice.

The three of them came around the corner and the source of the un-nerving sound came into view. A small floodlit locomotive was sat idling on the track at the mouth of a tunnel cut through the hillside. It was attached to a carriage, Tom recognised it at once, only like the tracks it sat upon it was new and without a hint of damage or weather worn decay. And judging by the sharp intake of breath, Daisy recognised it too.

Two shapes, tall, uniformed, appeared from behind the carriage. They were soldiers and although Tom didn't recognise the insignia they wore, the shape of their helmets alone was enough to send a bolt of terror through the man called Franz.

The traitor at their side looked at Tom with tears of shame in his eyes. Now that the light from the floodlights illuminated his face, he looked so familiar to Tom, someone he had seen before, but younger here and less weighed down with guilt and age.

Tom tried to place the man, but the sheer flood of emotions and images conjured up by this all too vivid borrowed memory made it impossible for his mind to focus on one thing.

He looked from the approaching soldiers to the man who had led them here. His face was not so familiar now, not so trustworthy and he knew with a deep sinking feeling that the man had betrayed them. Daisy felt it too.

“Traitor,” Daisy hissed at his side, her voice low and almost animalistic in its hate-tinged tone.

Hate and rage, such as he had never felt before built up inside Tom also. He was vaguely aware these emotions were not his own but an echo of this man Franz’s experiences. But still it burned into his very being.

He moved to pull his pistol from the back of his trousers but was instantly set upon by three soldiers who came out of nowhere. One hit him hard with the butt of his rifle he fell to his knees, his vision blurred, a moment later someone had him by the hair and two of them dragged him over towards the carriage.

Despite his panic, and the bells ringing in his head. Tom thought of Daisy, no Marie! Damn it he just wasn’t sure of anything anymore. This was a nightmare, but one he could feel every blow in, feel the fear this man Franz felt for his own sister which was mirrored all too clearly in Tom’s fear addled brain for Daisy.

He wanted so desperately to cry but some revenant, fuelled by decades of hate, deep within him, wouldn’t give the bastard’s the satisfaction.

However, this inherited resolution was sorely tested when Daisy’s scream was met with ghoulish laughter from the other soldiers.

As he was dragged to the steps of the carriage, his vision cleared just long enough to see a half-silhouetted figure standing in the open doorway. It was a man in a long black trench coat. He spoke in an oddly familiar, dread inducing language Tom did not understand.

The figure stepped aside, and Tom was bundled into the growing darkness beyond. This was where the real nightmare would begin, inside the carriage of tears.

‘Wake up! Please let me wake up!’ He begged the custodian of these horrors.

But the dreadful visions came thick and fast in a disorientating montage of fractured images. Vivid if thankfully fleeting moments that his host and later, he was sure, his poor sister Marie, had witnessed and endured.

An oil lamp hanging from the carriage roof, its sickly glow illuminating three empty nooses hanging from a metal bar. The body of a man in his fifties hanging from the fourth. His sightless eyes bulging fit to pop out of his skull, the skin of which was blackish purple and splattered with blood.

The table was close by, and Tom could see it was drenched in fresh blood, dripping off the edges like an abattoir.

One of the soldiers pushed him forwards and he had to turn away as he bumped into the hanging dead man. His heart broke as he could hear Daisy screaming outside. Then a stab of real guilt as he felt a flood of relief when he realised it was the older voice, the other sister, Marie. A luxury poor Franz did not have.

A figure emerged out of the darkness from behind the hanging man. Barely human, dressed in a long white coat with black and red insignia on the shoulders. Eyes as dead as his victims.

The nightmare man's jet-black hair was plastered to his skull with sweat. He wore a cloth mask Tom recognised from hospital tv shows. But as he approached Tom could see the mask was made of flesh and not cloth, which merged with the pallid skin of his face like it had been long since grafted there.

Franz and Tom screamed as one, this hideous butcher would have been all too real to the Frenchman in his grasp, all too human, and not this child's nightmare version, but something much, much worse.

Despite the thing covering his ghoulish face, he could see the doctor was smiling even though the expression never reached his lifeless eyes. He stepped forwards and a flash of light glinted off a thin blade in his hand. He gestured to the table with his other and Tom was hauled up onto it. He could hear Franz screaming in defiance and was at once proud and terrified.

Tom Vallance was ten years old and so had no earthly concept of what madness truly was. But as the carriage began to fade around him and the darkness crept in. Even a young boy knew this was it.

Tom jolted awake in bed, the room was still in darkness but he wasn't afraid. The memory of what he had dreamt faded away with every rapid breath he took. Until he was

left with nothing more than the feeling that, although he couldn't remember a thing, he was thankful for that fact.

Muffled cries drew his groggy attention to Daisy who was tossing and turning in the bed next to him. She suddenly sat bolt upright and clasped a hold of her teddy bear.

"Daisy?" He whispered to her in the gloom.

"I had a nightmare," she whispered back.

"Can you remember what it was about?"

He could see her shake her head.

"Me neither," he said.

He had been scared out of his wits, hadn't he? But even the slight feeling of unease had gone, if it had ever been there at all.

They both lay back down for the longest time, trying to remember in vain what had awakened them. But there was nothing and eventually they drifted back off to a contented sleep.

They awoke in the morning with no conscious recollection of what had happened that night. But subconsciously, they both knew it was just the beginning of something.

"What are those two planning?" Daniel asked at breakfast.

He gestured to the kids who were on a nearby table by a window in the dining room, hunched over a litter of paper and crayons spread out in front of them. They had been intently drawing and whispering conspiratorially since getting up this morning.

Jill shrugged and nursed her coffee, she took a sip and not for the first time regretted just how much she had drunk the night before.

"At least they are being quiet," she said gratefully and took another sip.

"Morning mes amours!!" Béatrice called to the children as she bounded into the dining room, bright and breezy despite Jill being sure she had drunk more than any of them last night. She kissed Tom and Daisy on the top of their heads and came and sat down next to Daniel.

"It's not natural," he said with a scowl.

"English light-weight," she shot back and eyed Jill. "You too?"

"I think there's a bug going around," she offered in response.

"Definitely," Daniel agreed. "Summer flu or something."

Béatrice laughed and pinched the half-eaten pan du chocolat off Daniel's plate.

"Wine flu more like!" She said and took a bite of pastry.

"So, what's the plan of attack for today?" Daniel asked.

"Nice lazy day," Jill replied. "Let the kids play around here, maybe take a trip into the village after lunch?"

"Oh, there's a great little craft market they have on Thursdays," Béatrice said. "Give us a chance to pick up some interesting stuff."

"Useless crap more like," Daniel interjected.

"Sounds good," Jill said, ignoring her idiot brother. "Hey kids!" She called across to them. "Fancy a trip into the village later?"

Tom looked up from his drawing.

"Is it okay if we stay here?"

"You guys okay?"

"Maybe it's the wine flu," Béatrice chipped in with a smirk.

"Yeah, Tom replied. "Just a little tired from yesterday."

"Don't worry," Madam Besson said from the dining room doorway. "You three enjoy yourselves. I will watch them. Oh, and Béatrice, can you pick me up some of Madam Allard's honey? She should have a stall there today."

"Oh, Dieu oui!" Béatrice exclaimed and turned to Jill enthusiastically. "You have to try it, it is out of this world! Arh memories."

Jill couldn't help but laugh even though her disproportionate enthusiasm made her head pound.

"Okay, d'accord, d'accord!" She replied.

The small coastal village of Bais De Veuves, put words like idyllic and picturesque to shame when describing its simple yet breath-taking beauty.

It stood just a mile from the Brittany coastline and the sea could be seen here and there through gaps in the buildings and parklands.

They had to park at the very edge of the village as the whole main square and surrounding luscious greens were chock-a-block with small quaint stalls and throngs of shoppers and day trippers who had come for the weekly market. Which, Béatrice informed Jill was quite famous in these parts. It had been a regular fixture for nearly two hundred

years, interrupted only by the second of the two world wars. When like all of France, it had been occupied by the Germans.

The very centre of the square was dominated with a large, very moving war memorial which Jill had first noticed when they drove through the village when they had first arrived. It had the stone statue of an angel with its arms raised to heaven atop a marble base.

Jill had stopped for a breather by the memorial whilst she waited for Béatrice, who was still shopping for France. And now that she was close, she was amazed and moved at how detailed and soulful the face of the angel was. Its creator was a true artist, the angel looked genuinely distraught at the many names of the lost at its feet.

She scanned the heart-breaking number of names engraved on the marble base, so many for such a small area. And worst still the ages of many of the fallen. These weren't just the names of soldiers in the traditional sense, young men sent off to war only never to return.

The majority it seemed were civilians, woman and younger men who should have had no place amongst the war dead. Ordinary people caught up in the violence, those killed by the Nazis during the occupation. According to the inscriptions by their names, many were heroes of the resistance, but many more still were everyday folk murdered in reprisal killings.

The youngest she could see was eight years old.

"Christ," she uttered seeing this.

Béatrice came to her side and stood with her for a moment.

"Eight years old," Jill whispered.

"I know, Emil Carbone. Lucy told me years ago, he was a runner for the resistance. They shot him for passing notes from one person to another. Can you imagine?"

"Terrifying," she agreed.

Back home, all the memorials and cenotaphs were for fallen soldiers, nothing like this. Being an island, mainland Britain had been spared occupation and the inevitable horrors that would bring.

"Come on," Béatrice said taking her arm. "Enough, let's enjoy the freedom we have today."

She dragged Jill across the square, and they weaved their way in and out of the shoppers and over to a rustic looking stand with a long wooden counter and a row of barrels stacked neatly behind a woman in traditional French dress.

“Madam Meunier’s world famous homemade cider!” Béatrice said pointing at the barrels and approached the counter.

“Ca va?” The woman said cheerfully.

“Salut, deux s’il vous plaît,” Béatrice said holding up two fingers.

“Bon,” the woman turned and drew off two glasses of honey coloured cider.

“More booze!” Jill explained. “You’re a nation of alcoholics.”

“Merci,” the woman placed the two glasses on the counter and Béatrice paid her.

“Merci,” Béatrice replied and handed Jill one of the glasses. This is the first alcoholic drink I ever had.”

“A votre sante!” Jill said and held up the glass.

“Spoken like a true local,” Béatrice said and tapped her glass. “Cheers!”

Jill took a tentative sip and was surprised at just how smooth it was, just like drinking apple juice.

“Ooh, this is dangerous stuff!”

“I know! I got sooo ill the first time.”

Daniel could be heard, in turn cursing, and then apologising in terrible French and Jill turned to see him struggling towards them through the crowd carrying a crate with twelve jars rattling inside.

“I got the bloody honey,” he said as he reached them and gently placed the crate on the floor by his feet.

He eyed the stall and their drinks.

“Madam Meunier’s cider! Where’s mine?”

“Sorry my love, Béatrice told him with no little pleasure. “You are driving.”

Much to Jill and Béatrice’s amusement, Daniel grumbled the whole journey back. It had been the perfect afternoon and not for the first time, Jill thought she could quite easily move here with the kids and to hell with Roger and his bimbo.

As they pulled up outside the manor house, Jill could see Madam Besson had come outside and was lingering by the entrance, clearly waiting for them to return. Seeing them

approach, she made her way down the stone steps leading down to the car park just off the front of the house.

“She looks even more sour than usual,” Daniel said and got a punch on the arm from Béatrice for it.

It was true however, she did look worried and agitated as she waited for them to park up, and Jill realised it was the first time she had seen her without a smile.

“Something’s wrong,” Jill said as they pulled up.

She got out just as the car stopped and Besson gave her a half-hearted wave.

“Jill...

Jill’s heart was in her mouth, the woman actually looked scared. She was about to ask where the kids were, fearing the worst, when she heard a yelp of delight coming from off her left.

Tom and Daisy were on the lawn just in front of the raised patio playing catch.

“Jesus Christ,” she uttered in relief. Then remembered Besson was right there. “Sorry Lucy.”

The woman didn’t register the curse.

“Everything alright, Lucy?” Jill asked.

Besson glanced at the kids.

“Jill, please, come inside,” she said and went back up the steps before Jill could reply.

Béatrice came up to Jill’s side.

“What’s wrong?”

Jill shook her head. Béatrice slipped her arm through Jill’s and the two women followed Besson inside.

“What about these?” Daniel called from behind holding the crate of honey.

“Kitchen!” Béatrice shouted back not looking around.

“In here,” Lucy said as they came through into the entrance hall.

She was standing by the dining room doorway and went inside as they approached. She went over to the table the kids had been drawing on earlier. Béatrice said something to her in French and she shook her head and gestured to the piles of paper strewn all over the tabletop.

“I came in to clean up,” Lucy said as if in way of explanation. And Jill could see the woman was actually close to tears.

Béatrice came around the side of the table and took a hold of the old woman's hand and whispered something to her and rubbed her shoulder reassuringly.

"What is it?" Jill asked suddenly cautious.

Béatrice shrugged and then looked at the papers on the table. Her face dropped and her brow furrowed in confusion.

"Jill, take a look at these."

Logic tried to take a hold as Jill moved closer. Had the kids scrawled swearwords in crayon as some childish joke? Yes, she reasoned. Kids being kids, after all she had given them some pretty lax bounders on this trip. Maybe they were pushing them even further.

But reason is one thing, the look on Béatrice's face was another. She solemnly pushed one of the papers over to her as she stopped on the opposite side.

At first, Jill saw nothing but childish scribbles. A nonsense mixture of multicoloured shapes scrawled over half recognisable images. He made out what could have been a house or something longer, maybe a caravan with no roof?

Then her breath caught in her throat as she made out what could only be four nooses hanging from a crude line inside the vehicle. The last of these had the unmistakable drawing of a figure hanging by the neck. And it wasn't some impromptu game of hangman amidst the chaos.

Confused, she looked away, then back again hoping this was like some sort of Rorschach effect she was projecting onto it. But no, now she couldn't unsee it.

"What...?" She gasped.

"Look at these others," Béatrice prompted.

Another picture had a group of grey men, almost stick figures but more detailed on closer inspection. They looked to Jill like soldiers, wearing familiar shaped helmets she couldn't quite place. They were standing around a large bonfire wrought in gaudy red, yellow and orange crayon, with dark twisting shapes within.

"Good God."

As he looked closer, she could make out several twisted bodies in the flames.

"What is this?" She asked, as much to herself than anyone.

"And here..." Béatrice said and handed her another picture with a shaking hand.

A figure in a long black coat, face distorted into a horrific screaming bloody mess. Eyes burning with hate, looking directly at the viewer, so lifelike in a nightmarish way, Jill

felt actual fear as if it could see into her very soul. Its black maw of a mouth was spewing a torrent of black and red swirling colours.

Jill had to look away, if only to break the intrusive contact with the figure. Her head was pounding from the shock, and she fought back tears. She glanced to Béatrice and Lucy in turn, their ashen faces mirroring she imagined her own. She tried to speak but couldn't formulate a single word.

There must have been nearly twenty similar crudely drawn, but hauntingly vivid pictures. Bodies, soldiers, and what looked like a surgeon but with a bloody mask for a face.

"That one," Lucy said softly and pointed to yet another picture.

At first Jill didn't want to look. How had her babies drawn such abominations?

"Christ, Christ," her head swooned.

And despite herself she did look at the picture. It was a skull and cross bones of sorts, but not like any pirate's flag she had ever seen. The bones were protruding out of either side of the skull and not crossed underneath. Like the soldier's helmets it was a vaguely familiar image.

"What is that?" She asked.

"SS Death's head," Lucy replied weakly.

"Nazis?" Now the helmets made some kind of lunatic sense.

Lucy put the picture of the soldiers around the fire over it. He pointed and Jill reluctantly followed her finger which was pointed at the arm of one of the crude soldiers. At first it looked like just a red and black smudge, but as she leaned in, the shape became all too clear.

It was a Swastika armband.

"Hello Mum!" Daisy's excited voice called out.

The three women jolted as if caught in some clandestine meeting and turned to see Tom and Daisy in the dining room doorway.

Béatrice let out a sharp torrent of very harsh sounding French. And judging by her reddening face, apologetic cringe, and Lucy's disapproving side eye it was clearly laden with expletives.

Daisy ran across and hugged Jill's leg. Tom skipped across to them, his smile as sweet as ever. What had she expected? Jill thought, a little ashamed.

“Hi mum,” Tom said.

“Had a good day, sweetheart?” Jill asked weakly.

“Yep.”

Jill knelt down and pulled Tom over to Daisy’s side.

“Did you two draw these?” She asked pointing towards the table.

Daisy nodded enthusiastically.

“Yeah,” Tom replied a little distracted, he glanced around the room, looking for food no doubt.

“Guys, they are a bit,” she paused. A bit what? “Strange,” was all she could come up with.

This won a shrug from Tom.

“Did you see this on TV?”

“They’re just pictures, mummy,” Daisy replied, like she was talking to an idiot.

“I know, I know,” she said reassuringly. “They’re just a bit, nasty.”

Tom gave her a look of confusion and went over to the table. He picked through the pictures and gave another shrug.

“Are they?” He clearly couldn’t see what all the fuss was about.

Béatrice came around the table and picked Daisy up.

“Been watching war movies, munchkin?” She asked playfully.

“What war movies?” Daisy replied wrinkling her nose.

They both seemed convinced the adults had all gone mad.

Finally, Lucy clapped her hands, breaking the tension.

“Who’s for the world’s best honey on fresh bread?” She asked lightly.

“Me! Me!” Daisy said excitedly and was transferred from Béatrice to the older woman.

Lucy gave Jill a reassuring wink.

“Should probably tidy those away though, eh, mum?”

“Yeah, and thanks,” Jill replied gratefully.

“How about you, Tommy boy?” Béatrice said.

“Sure!” Tom replied brightly and took her hand.

“I’ll be a long in a minute,” Jill said and began collecting the pictures without looking at them.

She turned to watch the kids go with a slight sinking feeling. She wondered if she had been fooling herself into believing the spilt with Roger hadn't really affected them all that much.

As they reached the door, Tom looked up at Béatrice.

"You know, you really shouldn't swear, aunty Béatrice."

Béatrice threw a look of incomprehension back at Jill and then Tom dragged her out of the room after the others.

"Fuckin' hell," was all Jill could say in response.

"Where the hell did they come up with these?" Daniel asked with a look of distaste on his face.

He passed the pile of pictures back to Béatrice, who was sitting on his lap, and she in turn almost threw them to Jill, desperate to get rid of them. And Jill couldn't blame her.

They were sitting by the fireplace in the hotel's lounge. Where they had convened after Jill had put Tom and Daisy to bed. Whilst tucking them in, she had quizzed them again about the pictures, but neither child could see what all the fuss was about.

And although she was desperate to ask Tom about what he had said to Béatrice, she let it go, perhaps fearful of what he might say.

"God only knows," Jill finally replied. She inadvertently looked at the top picture. Nazi soldiers around a funeral pyre and shuddered.

"An old war movie?" Daniel pressed.

"Christ!" Béatrice exclaimed. "Have you seen any war movie like that?"

"No," he relented.

"I just wonder," Jill said as she put some of the papers in the fireplace and lit them with a match. "If maybe the separation has had more of an effect on them than I thought."

"Have they said anything?" Béatrice asked.

"Just the usual, where's dad, why doesn't he live with us anymore, that kind of thing. I've always made sure, no matter how I feel about the bastard, to never say anything bad in front of the kids."

"Kids process things in different ways," Daniel said. "I bet they saw some old war movie. Lucy has the TV on all the time in here. Or maybe a documentary and they just... Embellished what they saw."

“Embellished?!” Béatrice asked.

“You know, made up more than they saw.”

Jill shook her head, not convinced. Whatever was happening, it wasn't healthy. She screwed up one of the pictures and tossed it into the fire and watched it burn.

The next picture was one she hadn't noticed before. It showed two figures, little more than stickmen really, but still haunting in their own way. One appeared to be on its knees, the other, wearing that grey uniform, was standing behind them with what looked like a gun pointing to the back of the prone figures head.

“Christ.”

She screwed it up and threw it into the fire, silently hoping that in doing so, the power of the picture and the seemingly unconscious thought behind it, would somehow disappear up the chimney with the smoke.

Henry Baudin had been the head groundskeeper at Le Manoir de Carpentier for almost forty years. In that time he had never married and for the most part he had kept to himself.

During the late forties he had tried to leave his birthplace of Bais Des Veuves, when he had joined the merchant marines. But this hiatus hadn't in the end lasted more than a few years as he had felt the irresistible draw of the old place as if pulled back there by ghosts of the past. It was as if his return and subsequent sedentary lifestyle had been in some kind of penance for his time during the war.

‘Hero of the resistance,’ Madam Besson had called him the other day, and it had left that familiar bitter taste in his mouth. Most days, weeks if he was lucky, Baudin could forget about the war and his part in it. But others, like today, it weighed heavy on his sloping shoulders.

Memories would come unbidden to his mind's eye, when the spectre of the war raised its head. Sparked by a seemingly innocent remark or a face in the crowd that looked all too familiar from decades ago. Sometimes even a smell would send him into a spiral of guilt and depression.

He had never spoken to anyone about this over the years. How could he? And had certainly never sort help, professional or otherwise. Not even from mayor Hubert who knew all too well what the pair of them and others had done during the war.

Hubert, that unapologetic, shameless narcissist. Unlike Henry, Hubert had flourished after the war. He had gone to Paris, hailed as a hero and had returned years later, a wealthy lawyer and had used his lauded past to run for mayor of Bais De Veuves and the surrounding villages, which of course, he had easily won and was now its longest serving politician, and most famous son.

Baudin and the mayor would on occasion exchange glances if their paths did happen to cross, but whilst Hubert would politely smile and even wink. Henry would turn away in self-disgust and the nightmares and bouts of heavy drinking would begin again.

“Pull yourself together!” He admonished himself sharply and took another swig of brandy from his hip flask. He has hidden away in the potting shed which was situated at the far end of the estate and out of bounds to the guests and most of the hotel staff, so had no need to worry about being disturbed.

The shed used to be part of the stable block back in the last century and was big enough, so he had everything he needed if he wanted to disappear for a while with his thoughts. It was made up of several storerooms filled with the clutter of everyday gardening equipment, a decent sized kitchen, and a garage for repairing the various tractors and mowers needed to keep the estate’s vast gardens pristine. There was even a small bed in one of the back rooms where he had spent the night on many times before.

There was an unwritten rule amongst the other estate workers that if Baudin was in here, everyone left him well alone. Especially, like now, he was in ‘one of his moods.’ He knew deep down madam Besson and the manor’s management only kept him around out of a sense of duty because of his supposed war record. Still, it paid enough to keep him in cheap brandy and a place to sleep when he had drunk too much of it.

It had been the trip to the memorial with Lucy and the two English children that had triggered his melancholy again. Besson had been full of his heroics that he had felt obliged, despite himself to accompany them to lay the flowers. It was a place Baudin hated and normally avoided, leaving any gardening duties there to one of the others. It had been a mistake, he knew that now, but it was too late, the damage had been done.

“Stupid,” he hissed to himself.

He crouched down by the large lawn mower he had been cleaning and tugged the last clump of grass stuck under the blades. He enjoyed the simple task of mowing the lawns here. The owners had suggested they get one of those ride on mowers, but Henry liked the

meditative solitude of just walking up and down. Also, the drone of the small two-stroke engine was a welcome distraction to the dark thoughts that sometimes ran around his head.

He had seen the two English children playing by the patio, and now that he had finished with the grass, they were out on the lawn, running, playing, he envied them their innocence. It would be a nice distraction, he thought to sit in the shade and watch them play, so despite being quite drunk now, he wandered out of the shed and along the winding path which led from the grounds keeper's compound to the lawns in front of the great house.

Baudin could see the two children up ahead through the trees sitting on the grass, he stopped, and half sat half slumped down onto a tree stump, just on the edge of the wooded area that flanked the lawn.

He didn't know if it was the warming effects of the alcohol or the simple sight of two innocents whispering away and laughing, lost in their own little world, but Henry could feel the dark cloud which had been ever present of late fading away and he was left in a pool of welcome sunlight.

As he sat there, Baudin found himself straining to hear what the pair were talking about as both their young faces took on an oddly serious look. But he knew, that although his English wasn't bad, he would struggle to understand much in his current inebriated state.

The girl, Daisy jumped up and began to run around as if she was scared. The boy, Tom got slowly and deliberately to his feet and adjusted his jumper in a very grown-up manner, smoothing the front, straitening the collar of his shirt underneath in an oddly fastidious way and then began to stroll calmly towards his sister.

Daisy, seemed in a world of her own and began to run around, and looked to Baudin like she was miming searching for something, glancing frantically this way and that. Oh, how he envied a child's boundless imagination.

"Isabelle!" Tom called out.

Daisy stopped and turned as if noticing Tom for the first time. She had a look of such utter relief on her face that Henry found the hairs on his arms raise as if touched by a light breeze. He shifted uncomfortably on the stump, regretting that last drink of brandy that

was now clouding his thoughts. He had to lean forward and concentrate hard on what they were doing.

The girl seemed suddenly years older in the way she moved and the almost haggard expression on her young face. It was at once mesmerising and un-nerving to watch.

“I can’t find my husband, Paul,” she called out to her brother. “I think they have him.”

“Don’t worry,” Tom called back in a reassuring tone. “I know where he is. Come with me, I will get you both to safety.”

Henry became aware of a strange gnawing feeling at the base of his skull.

Tom held out his hand and Daisy came running over to him as though her life depended on it. They embraced and the old gardener was sure he could hear Daisy actually crying in relief.

Henry Baudin felt the alcohol in his stomach turn to acid as he watched. What kind of childish game was this? The pair walked hand in hand for a few paces and Baudin had to fight the urge to get up and leave as they were getting closer to him.

Tom stopped and Daisy walked on for a few paces more.

“Just up that way, Isabelle,” he said.

“If you’re sure,” Daisy replied tentatively.

She cocked her head, listening.

“What is that I hear, Henry?” She asked.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a train, in the siding up ahead.” Tom called out. “It will take you to safety, just like we did with Marie and her brother before you. Paul and the others in his unit are there too.”

Baudin got unsteadily to his feet, but he couldn’t take his eyes off the surreal performance. That slight gnawing at the back of his alcohol-soaked brain was edging towards a dark terror. Something about all this had a horrible familiarity to it. Daisy began walking in a circle, miming covering a great distance. Then she turned to look back at Tom, who was now crouched down as if hiding.

“Henry?” Daisy shouted in real tangible distress. “Where are you... Anyone there?”

“What the hell?” Baudin whispered. He could feel the fear building up inside him, he so desperately wanted to turn and run back to the compound, but he just couldn’t tear himself away.

Tom then stood up dramatically and Daisy screamed in genuine terror ‘seeing him.’ He marched over to her, his whole demeanor different somehow, his gait, the way he held himself. A completely new character. When he reached his sister, he grabbed her roughly by the arm. His face twisted in disgust as he looked at her. It was an expression that didn’t suit a ten-year old’s fresh face, it was dark, malignant and it chilled Henry to his very core.

He pulled her close.

“Did you think you could get away from us, you French bitch!?” He hissed in perfect German.

Baudin staggered back a little until his back hit a tree, he had to cling to it to avoid falling over completely. Tears of shock came to his eyes, his breath threatened to stick in his throat and choke him. His English was passable at best, and he understood enough German from his time in the war, but he now realised in sheer horror why he had been able to understand the nuances of their conversations so clearly.

It was as if he had been in a trance this whole time, watching this monstrous reconstruction, for he knew now that’s what it was. The sudden change in language had brought it crashing into his consciousness.

They had been speaking French.

Tom pushed Daisy to her knees and mimed pulling out a pistol from a hip holster. She bowed her head and Tom put his index finger to the back of it. His thumb up like the hammer of a gun. He brought it down and jerked his hand like the recoil of a gun. Daisy’s head snapped to one side, and she slumped lifelessly into the grass, where she lay motionless.

“Oh, God, God...” Baudin groaned. He could almost hear the shot.

Faces flashed before his eyes. Faces of those names carved in marble on the village’s memorial. Names and faces he knew only too well.

The scene that had just played out depicted the fate of Isabelle Fontaine. She had been just nineteen when Henry had led her into the woods, during those dark days near the end of the occupation. He had told her they would meet up with her husband Paul, who was a member of the resistance, and whom Hubert and the others were sure knew of their

collaboration. But Paul was already a victim of the railway carriage the Germans used to ‘interrogate’ their prisoners.

Henry hadn’t seen Isabelle’s execution itself, he had fled once the gestapo officer had her in his hands. He had only hoped it was quick.

Isabelle and Paul Fontaine, just two of so many he and the others had betrayed.

Henry tried to move away, but instead pitched forwards and onto his knees. He was sobbing now, tears of guilt and disbelief blinding him. He gasped in air, desperately trying not to pass out. A blur of movement out of the corner of his eye made him raise his head, to see Tom and Daisy through the tears standing no more than fifteen feet away, staring intently at him, their eyes burning with hate.

“Please...” Was all he could manage.

“Henry Baudin,” Tom said. It was an accusation more than anything, his voice was oddly low and guttural. That of a child but laced with unimaginable malice. “Hero of the resistance.”

“God...” Baudin uttered.

“Henry Baudin,” Daisy echoed with just as much hate. “Hero of the resistance.” Her once sweet face twisted into a mask of loathing.

“Children?” It was Madam Besson calling way off from the house.

She was on the patio shielding her eyes from the mid-morning sun. Baudin could see her through the bushes, she was looking across the lawn to where Tom and Daisy were standing. But she couldn’t see him from where she was.

Neither child moved, they just watched Henry as he awkwardly pulled himself up using a low branch.

“Children!” Besson called again. “Lemonade and cookies if you’re interested?”

When he looked back at the pair, it was as if a dark shadow had passed from both their young faces. They were smiling sweetly, their once cruel eyes now bright and clear.

“Cookies!” Daisy squealed.

“I’ll race you!” Tom said and turned and set off running across the lawn.

“Hey!” Daisy protested and set off after her brother.

Henry Baudin, hero of the resistance, watched them go in disbelief.

Somehow, Baudin had made his way back to the shed, but he had no memory of the journey. He came around, stinking of brandy, sprawled out on the hard stone floor of the old stables. As he sat up, his head pounding, an empty bottle of brandy rolled off his lap and spun away.

He'd had many, many vivid nightmares before, but had always escaped those accusing ghost from the past upon waking. But this was something else, the terror he had felt seemed to cling to his psyche now that he was awake, like smoke from a bonfire. He tried to gather his thoughts in hope of processing what had happened with the children, but he was still so drunk he could barely think.

Like smoke from a bonfire. Why did that metaphor sting him so?

He could see from the dim sunlight coming through the sheds grimy window that it must be close to evening. He must have passed out after finishing the rest of the bottle when he had fled back here. But he still had no recollection of anything after watching the children run across the lawn to the waiting Madam Besson, innocents once more.

The clock on the stone wall told him it was nearly six-thirty PM.

"Christ," he slurred in shock.

He had been unconscious for hours. He dragged himself to his feet and over to the large sink by the wall. He turned on the tap and held his head under the water, gasping at the shock of cold water. When he came up for air, Baudin had to grasp the side of the sink to stop himself toppling backwards.

"It's not real," he told himself. "Just another nightmare, too much damn brandy."

Yes, he tried to convince himself. That always exacerbated his black moods, he knew he shouldn't drink when he was so low, but sometimes it seemed like the only thing that stopped him from slashing his wrists.

Perhaps you should slash your wrists, Henry Baudin, hero of the resistance. The voice was so clear in his head that he had to look around the gloomy building half expecting to see the children there, taunting him. There were many places to hide in here. But he was alone.

"Come on man!" He shook his head to dislodge the growing paranoia.

Just another nightmare, seeing those kids playing must have triggered something in his subconscious. He had been too drunk and melancholy to think straight, they were just

playing cowboys and Indians, he told himself. An innocent child's game his guilt-stricken mind had distorted.

It was a lie he happily told himself, and one he could almost believe.

"Home, idiot!" He said out loud and made his way over to the door at the far end of the shed. He took his nap sack off the nail it was hanging from on the back of the door and stuck his head through the long strap. He stopped at the sound of paper rustling. Someone had pinned a piece of paper to the door which had been covered by his bag. Baudin was about to reach for the paper when his blood shot eyes managed to focus on what was drawn on it.

A child's picture, drawn in crayon of a railway carriage in the middle of a wood. Surrounded by spindly trees and with several men in grey suits or black uniforms dotted around, all standing looking at the viewer. Looking at Henry Baudin.

A slow methodical knock, knock, knocking at the door.

Baudin took a step back, then another as the heavy door handle slowly moved downwards and he heard the click as the door opened an inch. He held his breath waiting for it to open further. A beat, still nothing the anticipation hung heavy in the air.

'*Go away.*' He silently begged.

Then the door burst open as if hit by a hurricane.

Baudin cried out in shock and staggered backwards away from the door, he caught his heel on a workbench leg and was sent sprawling onto the hard stone floor, rattling his old bones and knocking the wind right out of him.

"Jesus, God!"

"Not quite."

Tom and Daisy came slowly inside, their steps slow, deliberate. Their young faces once again twisted into that awful expression of hate and disgust. Baudin shrieked and tried to shuffle backwards. But he knew the door was the only way out. They were just children, he thought frantically, weren't they? But he was old, drunk and terrified.

"Stop this!" He snapped but he had no authority here.

"Henry Baudin," Daisy said. "Hero of the resistance."

"Stop saying that!"

She came forwards and held out another piece of paper in her hand. No doubt a fresh rendering of his past crimes.

Tom moved to his sister's side.

"Henry Baudin..."

"Stop it!"

"... Hero of the resistance."

"Bastards!" Baudin was suddenly filled with a real sense of anger. These were just children after all. He needed to take control of the situation, despite his age and alcohol ravaged health.

"Get out!" He ordered and lunged forwards as if threatening to get up. "You don't scare me."

"We should," Daisy replied coldly.

She pushed the picture closer, but Henry refused to look at it. He needed to get the hell out of here, but any thought of escape was cut short when the boy spoke again.

"Adrien Reno, Marc Reno, Jean Hubert."

This stopped him dead, the anger drained away as quickly as it had risen.

"What?" He was barely able to get the single word out.

Three names from the past, three people damned just as deep-down Henry knew he was damned. And as tied to that hateful trio as he had ever been. No amount of alcohol could drown their collective sins.

The betrayals, the deceit, and yes in some cases, murder.

"Adrien Reno, Marc Reno, Jean Hubert," both children said in unison.

"Please..." Baudin sobbed. He could feel his sanity slipping with every word. How could they know? How could anyone know?

"Where are they?" Tom demanded.

Daisy shook the paper.

"Look at this!"

"No, no!"

"Where are they, Henry?" She asked sweetly, which was ten times worse than the harsh tone of her brother.

He did his best to think. They knew, somehow, they knew so there was no point in denying it. How they knew would have to wait for another day, when he was away from Bais Des Veuves and all its ghosts of the past. Ghosts that were not so hidden as he had hoped.

“Where are they!?” Tom shouted.

“The, the Reno brothers are dead.”

It was true, Marc had died not long after the war. Officially it had been an accident, but upon learning about it when he returned to the village years later, Henry had always suspected suicide.

His car had driven off a bridge in forty-nine and had plunged thirty feet into a dry riverbed. It had been the middle of a clear day and the road conditions had been perfect.

Then there was Adrien. Henry had heard from a relative of the brothers that the older Reno had died of cancer in Italy, where he had emigrated to in the early fifties. Again, on hearing the news, Henry had been filled with the morbid certainty that the guilt had eaten him away.

Sometimes, Henry envied them.

The two children studied him for any sign of deception, then nodded, satisfied he was telling the truth. Daisy seemed genuinely disappointed at the news, which was chilling in of itself.

“And Hubert?” Tom asked.

“Jean Hubert,” Despite his distress, a bitter laugh escaped Henry’s cracked lips at the perversity of it. “Jean Hubert is the mayor of Bais Des Veuves.”

“Mayor!?” Tom exclaimed.

Henry nodded.

Daisy’s face turned sour.

“Isn’t that just like him?” She sneered.

“How did you know what we did?” Henry asked after long pause whilst the two children pondered the fate of the others.

“Hate and lust for revenge are powerful energies,” Tom said. “They linger, fester, bide their time. Growing evermore poisonous with each passing day. With each breath *you* take.”

“You betrayed so many,” Daisy said. “And for what, money?”

“No, never money,” Henry insisted. “I was a good soldier for the resistance, I was! But I was scared, Hubert and the other threatened me, they got caught, it was the only way for them... And me to survive. We did a deal with the devil so to speak. I have suffered since then, if that’s any consolation?”

It wasn't. The children gave him a look of utter disgust at this.

"Please! What can I do to make amends?" Baudin asked weakly.

Daisy took a step forward and thrust the picture into his face.

"Look at the picture, Henry."

Henry looked. It was like seeing a photograph from another life. Impossibly well drawn considering its artists. It was a scene he remembered all too well.

It was unmistakably a drawing of him, some fifty years ago, standing in the forest close to the railway carriage where they took the captured fighters, many of whom he had himself betrayed to save his own skin. He was holding a can of petrol in his hand next to a pile of perhaps ten bodies dumped close by.

"Oh, Oh, God, no..." Henry felt sick to his stomach.

"Look closer!" Daisy demanded.

And as he did, he felt a soft breeze play across his face, the smell of stale brandy and the dank air of the shed gave way to pine trees and the rich perfume of woodland flowers. His surroundings shifted focus and he screwed his eyes shut.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing in the woods, out in the open air looking down at the pile of bodies, just as he had done all those years ago. He let out a desolate sob as he recognised several of the dead faces amongst the twisted corpses.

He could hear bird song overhead, high up in the trees, but also the harsh shouts in German someway off and the odd gunshot.

The can of petrol felt heavy in his hand, just as it had done that day, worse still, although he hadn't known it then, this would not be the last time he would carry out this odious task.

"So many," Daisy said, standing to his right.

"Friends and comrades," Tom said to his left. "All innocents."

Tom pointed into the pile.

"Look, there's Gerald. You went to school together, remember?"

Henry began to move towards the pile, pulled by some unseen force. He tried to fight it but still put one foot in front of the other all the same. He began to sob.

"Did you know, Marie was still alive when you burnt them?" Daisy asked.

Her young voice was so matter of fact it made him sob all the more. But still, he stopped by the pile and unclasped the cap of the can.

“Please...” Henry begged.

He tried to turn to the children, to beg his case, but instead he doused the bodies in petrol.

“I... I didn’t know they were going to kill them,” he pleaded through the tears.

“Hubert and the Germans said they were prisoners of war, they would be taken to prison, that’s all.”

“You fucking lair!” Daisy snarled with real venom. “Do you want to know what they did to Marie before they shot her?”

No, Christ no he didn’t.

The smell of petrol filled the air around him and it was all so real he could have sworn he was right back there again. He tried to turn his head to avoid the fumes, but they filled his lungs and burnt the back of his throat.

He felt the faint tap, tap, tap of rain drops hitting him as he tossed away the empty can and took out his lighter. The petrol was stinging his eyes now, making it all but impossible to see, he wiped his face with his sleeve, but this just made it worse.

It must have been pouring down with rain because he was soaked from head to foot. Which was strange, because as he remembered it, it had been a clear evening all those years ago.

He flicked the lighter, but it didn’t spark. He shook it and tried again. The smell of petrol was now overwhelming. He rubbed his eyes.

It took Henry Baudin a moment to realise he was back in the shed, alone and soaked in petrol, there were two empty fuel cans laid as his feet.

The children were gone, but he had Daisy’s picture clutched in one hand. He peered at it through a haze of petrol fumes. It was a simple child’s drawing, the type any eight-year-old would draw, despite the subject matter.

He took a deep breath but got nothing but petrol vapour in his aching lungs. He flicked the lighter one more time, because at the back of his deranged oxygen starved brain, it seemed the right thing to do.

And if it were not for the white-hot seeing pain, it was almost a relief.

Jill watched from the open patio doors as an ambulance weaved its way around two parked police cars and sped off towards the gardener's compound at the other side of the estate. There was a thick column of black smoke drifting up into the evening sky, and bright orange flames were just visible through the shrubs and trees.

"Christ," she said with a shudder and came back inside.

Béatrice was in the kitchen comforting Madam Besson and the other staff, Jill didn't know exactly what had happened as Béatrice had rushed off when one of the kitchen staff had said something in French, but it was clear someone had been seriously hurt if not worse.

One of the buildings over there the estate gardeners were based was well and truly ablaze. She had seen two fire engines racing down the road to the compound and judging by the flames it was bad.

Tom and Daisy were sitting at one of the tables in the dining room playing 'snap' with Daniel was a way of distracting them from the commotion outside.

It was only now as she came back into the dining room that she realised that neither one of the kids had wanted to go see what all the fuss was about. Back home, Tom would be sent into fits of excitement if a fire engine just drove passed with its siren on. Perhaps that was for the better she thought and sat down next to Daisy.

"Who's winning?" She asked.

"Me!" Tom announced.

The red lights of a fire engine outside splashed across the walls of the dining room as if to entice young minds outside, but this fell flat with the two children. And they concentrated on the next game, blissfully unaware of the drama unfolding outside.

Breakfast the following morning was a sombre affair. The other guests at the hotel whilst not privy to the details of last night's fire as Jill and the others were, thanks to a tearful Béatrice last night. Were in no doubt something bad had happened yesterday evening.

The serving staff, for their part that morning, had assured everyone that it had been an electrical fire, which had been extinguished with minimal damage and no one was hurt. And that Madam Besson's absence was entirely unrelated.

They had acted the part admirably, which Jill knew could not have been easy, considering what had really happened.

Lucy was in bed with what Béatrice had described as shock. She had been in fits of hysterics last night after the news of the fire and its sole victim had come through. Béatrice had been so concerned about the woman that she had called the doctor who had prescribed a powerful sedative.

Poor Henry the gardener, Béatrice had told them, had been killed in the fire. Although the investigation was just beginning there was already a rumour going around that he had been drinking and the amount of empty petrol cans and brandy bottle found amongst the smouldering debris all pointed to a tragic drunken accident.

One of the other gardeners had confided in the head chef that he had seen Baudin tinkering with a petrol mower earlier and despite his best efforts to hide it, he was clearly drunk, which as everyone knew wasn't unusual.

"How's Béatrice?" Jill asked her brother as he sat wearily down at the table.

He poured himself a glass of orange juice, he looked shattered.

"She's okay, considering," he said. "She was up all night with Lucy, she's sleeping now."

Jill eyed the two children at the next table, but they were too engrossed in their breakfast to be listening. She was thankful all this drama had gone right over their heads. If anything, they seemed extra cheery this morning.

"I can't believe it," she said softly.

"I know, poor so-un-so."

"Can we go see the fire?" Tom suddenly asked leaning over the back of his chair.

"What? Certainly not!" Jill replied flustered by the sudden interest.

"Please," Daisy said.

"No," Jill told her firmly. "Besides, there's nothing to see and the whole area is taped off anyway."

Tom shrugged and bit into a slice of toast.

"Shame, thought it might be fun."

Fun? Jill took a breath, she had to remind herself they had no idea just how serious the fire had been.

“Tell you what,” Daniel said. “Why don’t the three of us do something today? Give your old decrepit mum a rest.

“Yes!” Daisy approved.

“Can we go into the village?” Tom asked.

“Sure, I know a cake shop even aunty Béa’ doesn’t know about.”

This won a cheer from the pair.

“Okay mum?” Tom asked.

“Sure.”

The kids jumped down from the table and set off towards the door.

“Get a shower, both of you!” Jill called after them, but predictably got no response as they exited.

“They’re feral those two,” Daniel said. “I blame the parents.”

“Ha, ha,” Jill said and tried half-heartedly to stab him with a butter knife. “I’ll check in on Béatrice later.”

“Thanks.” He got to his feet.

“And Danny, keep an eye on them.”

“I’m not going to lose them!”

“That’s not what I meant! No, it’s just what with last night, and those pictures...”

“I know, don’t worry, they’re great kids,” he reassured her. “All down to the uncle, I’d say.

He just managed to dodge the bread roll she tossed at his head.

“What’s that building, Uncle Danny? Tom asked and pointed across the street to a large building just off the village square.

Daniel squinted at a plaque on the wall by the entrance door. “Mayor’s office, local town hall.”

Tom nodded his face blank.

Now that Daniel thought about it, the pair had been making odd enquiries like that all morning. About the history of the village, about how things had changed since the war. It was like they were preparing a school report on the place or something.

It was a little odd he had to admit, but he was quite happy to put it down to childish curiosity. They were bright kids and he had even caught them practicing French to one another.

The two kids seemed particularly captivated by the town hall, they had been here for a good ten minutes already as they watched people coming and going as if waiting for someone they knew.

“Béatrice knows all about the history of the village,” he said. “Maybe come back with her another day, I’m sure she’ll give you the grand tour.”

“Nar, no need,” Tom said dismissively.

“Can we go back to the hotel now?” Daisy asked.

“Sure, getting tired?”

She nodded.

“En avoir assez,” she said absently.

“Tout sera beintot fini,” Tom added.

Daniel had no clue what that meant, but he made a mental note to ask Béatrice later.

Jill awoke with a start to a room in darkness. She pulled the covers back and sat bolt upright and frantically looked around the room until she got her bearings.

Gradually her heartbeat began to settle as she realised where she was and that it had only been a dream. Although the vividness of the nightmare was fading fast, the feeling of horror lingered a little longer.

“God’s sake!” She hissed.

She was almost in tears as she tried to push the residual images of the dream back into the ether or wherever they had come from. It was a common horror for any parent, especially when going through times of stress. And since the break-up she had dreamt something similar time and time again. Usually, it was a variation on the kids choosing Roger and his ‘new family,’ over her out of the blue and she would never see them again.

This one, had been different, she had been wandering through the hotel, or some harsh angled impressionistic version of the building. Following two sets of children’s bloody footprints. All the time calling out to the kids. But this being a nightmare, she couldn’t for all the world remember their names. Even their faces were little more than thumb nail sketches in her mind’s eye.

So, all she could shout was, ‘children? Children?’

She had eventually found her way through the twisting shadowy corridors to their bedroom, but when she had gone inside, their beds were empty.

She had screamed blue murder, but when Danny and Béatrice had come to her aid, they had told her that the children had died, years before in a fire. Remember?

Jill got out of bed and ran a shaking hand through her sweat matted hair. Christ, she thought as her head cleared a little. That had been one hell of a nightmare. But still, half asleep and with the last tendrils of the dream clinging to her addled thoughts, Jill had the overwhelming need to go check on the kids.

So, she pulled on her dressing gown and padded across the room and over to the door. She reached for the handle but stopped. She wasn’t sure if she imagined it, but she thought she heard footsteps moving passed and off down the hallway.

She paused, and listened, but after a moment dismissed this as all part of her nervous fatigue. After all, judging by the dark sky outside the window, it was still the dead of night.

Jill came out of her room and indeed the corridor was empty. She made her way as softly as she could to the next room and gently opened the door a little. She peered through the gap, the curtains were drawn so what moonlight there was did little to illuminate the room.

Still, she could make out the bed the kids shared, and a diminutive figure curled up in the middle. She heard Daisy sigh softly in her sleep and Jill let out a breath of relief.

A shadow moved over by the window and Jill nearly screamed out loud in shock. A familiar silhouette was standing by the window framed by the soft moonlight on the curtains.

“Tom?” She whispered.

“Hello mum,” Tom replied softly and moved over to the bed.

“You scared me kitten. Where you outside just know?”

Although she couldn’t see his face, the tilt of his head suggested he was studying her.

“Tom?”

“I needed the loo,” he replied after an excruciating amount of time.

“You okay?”

Tom got into bed next to his sister and pulled the cover up under his chin. Jill had to fight the urge to turn on the light so that she could look at his face for some reason. But

she put this down to her nightmare. Perhaps the sound of Tom wandering though the corridor had set off the dream in the first place.

“Night mum,” Tom said in the darkness.

“Night love.”

Jill slipped from the room, but for some reason found herself listening at the closed door. She could hear muffled voices coming from inside but tore herself away. They were both in there, they were both safe and she desperately needed to get back to sleep.

Jean Hubert, mayor of Bais De Veuves and the surrounding villages watched through the open door of his office as his secretary Madam Le Roy, who was at the best of times a nervous woman, was speaking to the policeman.

They were in her office having just finished a cursory search of all the offices in the village’s small-town hall building. Le Roy shook the officer’s hand, who Hubert for the life of him couldn’t remember the man’s name. Then the man put his hat back on, pocketed his notebook and exited. As he passed Hubert’s door, he gave a quick salute to which the mayor gave a nod in response.

“Thank you, officer,” Hubert said as he disappeared down the hall leading to the front door.

Le Roy appeared in his doorway a moment later, she was he noted looking a little less flustered.

She had been the one who had discovered the break in this morning when she had opened up at eight o’clock. The intruder, or intruders had broken a small window in his office sometime during the night to gain entrance.

“Any news?” Hubert asked, but he already knew the answer.

“It’s strange,” she said. “At first glance, they don’t appear to have taken anything.”

He frowned feigning surprise.

“But we will get someone to do a full inventory just in case,” she added.

“Perhaps they were disturbed before they could take anything,” Hubert offered.

“Perhaps,” Le Roy said. “I’ll get someone to repair your window.” She gestured to the glassless window frame at his back.

“Thank you,” Hubert replied. why don’t you get yourself a coffee, it’s been quite a morning.”

“I will, thank you.”

She turned to leave.

“Please close the door, would you?”

“Of course,” she replied and pulled the door closed.

The police could scour the building from top to bottom, Hubert thought bitterly, and they still wouldn’t find anything missing. On the contrary, it wasn’t what the intruder had taken that concern him. It was what they had left.

He pulled his desk draw open and took out the ratty old noose that had been left on his desk. Carefully hidden under his framed medal of honour he had received for his war time heroism, which they had laid on top. He had noticed the frame was out of place when he had been called in by Le Roy about the break in and discovered the noose underneath.

It was a nice touch, he had to admit.

Then there was the odd note which had been left with the noose. Hubert unfolded it and read it once again. It was written in crayon of all things, perhaps to hide the author’s handwriting.

It stated in a childlike scrawl:

We know what you did, twelve noon at the scene of your crimes. You know where.

It had taken Hubert a good while to decipher the accompanying drawing underneath. Then it came to him with a genuine shudder, and he knew exactly where they wanted to meet.

The carriage. *The scene of your crimes*. Christ, it had been decades since he had even thought about that accursed place.

And thought the manner of the invitation had unnerved him. The intention behind it was a familiar one.

Blackmail. In truth, it had been years since the last threat to expose what had actually occurred during his time in the resistance during the war. But it was something he was always prepared for.

And as always, this new threat could be dealt with in one of two ways. In the past, depending on the evidence his accusers had provided and their intentions. He would either buy them off, if greed was their motivation, which it nearly always was. Or, if they had a misplaced but righteous desire to expose him for no other reason than ‘justice.’ He had a more permanent solution.

He folded the paper and put it in the inside pocket of his suit jacket. So be it, he thought with a shiver of anticipation.

This latest incident had made Hubert realise just how complacent he had been over the last few years, and that life here was becoming too comfortable for an old rouge like himself. He thought back to his return, years ago now. He could have gone anywhere in the world, but instead had chosen to come back here. To the scene of his crimes as the note had put it.

Back then, he had thought his return home was nothing more than an act of hubris, brought on by his later years. He remembered almost wishing that the truth had been discovered in the decades since his absence and that he would be pilloried by the locals upon his return.

Not out of guilt and the wish for condemnation. Never that, he had done what he had done and slept well at night. Perhaps just so he... Felt something akin to excitement again.

But it had been the exact opposite, the people here had welcomed him with open arms and hailed him the conquering hero, and what was more they insisted he took up the then vacant position of mayor. That had always seemed like a sick joke to him, but one he was all too willing to indulge in.

Hubert traced a finger over the curious drawing. His initial concern had gradually given way to a strange sense of euphoria. He was actually glad the old ghosts from the war had surfaced once more. He was rotting away here in Bais Des Veuves, and in his more melancholic moments missed his old nefarious life. Oh, he knew he was too old to go toe to toe with the new breed of gangster Paris now enjoyed, but God how he missed it.

But now? He felt alive again.

He checked the clock on the wall, it was already five to eleven. He did a quick calculation and although it had been years since he had walked those haunted woods where that carriage had festered for so long. He figured it would only take twenty minutes to get home, collect his pistol and what cash he might need from his safe and drive there.

No, forget the cash, there was only one way he was going to settle this particular dilemma. He would only need the pistol.

“Where are the terrible twosome?” Béatrice asked from behind Jill.

Jill had been lounging on a patio chair watching Tom and Daisy playing football out on the lawn. They seemed to have even more boundless energy this morning and she was just glad to see them enjoying themselves after last night's dream. The pair had now gone off exploring, but with a promise to stay close to the hotel.

"Hey, how are you?" Jill asked and got up from the chair to give her a hug.

"I'm good, shattered, but okay, thanks."

"And Lucy?"

Béatrice gave a grimace.

"She's gone to stay with her sister for a few days. It really hit her hard."

"God, I can imagine. Have they any idea what happened?"

"Between you and me," Béatrice said. "I heard Henry was drunk and trying to fill up the lawn mower or something."

"Christ."

"So, the kids?" Béatrice asked.

"Oh, off exploring, I'm just glad they have no idea what happened."

Béatrice nodded in agreement and both women sat down.

"Arh, my two favourite ladies!" Daniel exclaimed and came out through the patio doors with a tray of drinks.

"Christ Danny," Jill said. "Are you trying to turn me into a drunkard?"

"Don't be so judgemental," he replied. "Non-alcoholic thank you very much. Not all Frenchies are al-keys."

"Although we try," Béatrice said.

The three of them sat sipped their drinks in silence for a moment, enjoying the sunshine.

"Good to see the kids playing," Daniel said after a good while.

"Yeah, none the wiser about the accident," Jill replied.

"Yeah," Daniel agreed, then. "Oh, almost forgot. Béa', what does..." He had to think for a moment. "What does En avoir assez, mean?"

"What makes you ask that?" Béatrice said.

"Just something Daisy said yesterday."

"Hmm, it means... Sick and tired," she said with a frown.

"Odd," Daniel said. "Then, hang on... What about... Tout sera beintot fini?"

“It will all be over soon.”

“Weird,” he said.

Jill looked to the treeline at the far end of the lawn for any sign of the kids with a growing sixth sense of unease only a parent could feel.

Jean Hubert had been surprised just how much the news of Henry Baudin’s death had affected him. Madam Le Roy had mentioned it, almost in passing, just as he was leaving for home before his meeting with the blackmailer.

The woman had no way of knowing his connection with the gardener and in truth he had barely seen the man since his return. They had exchanged the odd glance in passing here and there. At which Baudin would always look away first. With his hang dog expression and his drink problem, Hubert would have despised the man if he had any opinion of him at all, which he didn’t.

The man had always been weak, easily threatened or cajoled. But in the end just as guilty as the rest of them. Whereas Baudin wore his guilt like a heavy chain around his neck all these years, Hubert had wallowed in it.

So why did he care that the man was now dead? Now that Baudin was gone, Hubert was the last remnant of that four-man duplicitous cabal they had formed during the war. The last to know what they had done or turned a blind eye to.

Not counting this new development of course. Whoever had left that strange note and the noose, knew something, from a relative perhaps? That had been the case before. Some relative or other sorting through a dead uncle’s belongings, no doubt in search of hidden wealth only to find half formed conspiracy theories about the lauded mayor and others, scribbled down on long forgotten note pads with faded war time papers, amongst the rest of the junk.

But now there was this nagging doubt, had they been involved in Baudin’s death? Was it revenge and not financial gain that was the motive here? It was one hell of a coincidence if not, and he did not believe in such things.

He would find out soon enough, Hubert mused as he pulled his car off the main road and into the picnic area car park by the stream. He knew, despite the decades that had passed, that there was a trail which led through the woods and to the railway siding, where he pictured with a shudder, the carriage would be waiting.

The picnic area was thankfully empty, Hubert killed the engine and checked his watch. Twenty to twelve, it was a short hike to the siding, so if he set off now, he would be early, which was always an advantage.

He took the pistol out of the glove compartment and popped open the cylinder. Six rounds, more than enough to get him out of any sticky situation he might come across. Also, he knew he could rely on his outer appearance he looked after all like a man in his late-seventies, and a crusty old politician at that.

Little did they know he had more than a few drops of blood on his hands, and that wasn't taking into account his time in the war. You didn't get as rich as fast as he had by playing nicely by the rules. He put the pistol in his jacket pocket and got out of the car.

Despite the warm summer sun, Hubert felt a distinct chill as he took in his surroundings. Everything seemed at once familiar yet sinister at the same time. The smell of flowers, the sound of birds overhead, just audible over the babbling stream. Normally idyllic sensations that grated on his nerves somehow.

Hubert put his hand in his jacket pocket and felt the reassuring cool metal of the pistol, and pushing any lingering doubts out of his mind, he set off across the picnic clearing and into the woods ahead.

Still as he made his way further into the darkening woods, he couldn't help but think back to the last time he had made this short journey. It had been when the German's had made their final retreat, and he had come back with Marc Reno to ensure the Krauts hadn't left any incriminating evidence.

They had come across three German stragglers, who having recognised them didn't put up a fight, they figured would help them avoid the oncoming group of resistance fighters who were also in the woods mopping up any enemy forces left.

Ironically, with their fellow resistance fighters close by themselves, when Hubert and Reno had gunned the three men down and were hailed as heroes for it. Hubert had found that perversely amusing whereas Marc Reno had nearly confessed to them then and there. Hubert had talked him around, but he later suspected this had tipped Reno over the edge and he'd heard later he had killed himself after the war.

The further he got into the darkening woods the more the memories resurfaced, unbidden but so vivid he almost felt like he was back there in forty-four, entering this place a traitor to save his neck, exiting a hero.

A large oak tree, just off to one side of the trail, he pictured bodies swinging from nooses, not unlike the one in his pocket. A mound of brush covered dirt just visible amongst the trees. Hadn't there been a pit close by, where the German's had burnt and buried bodies after execution?

There was a knot of guilt twisting in his stomach as foreign to him as the emotion of love, but there nevertheless and it shocked him. He did his best to suppress the unwelcome memories forcing their way back into his mind after all these decades.

She strode on with renewed purpose along the overgrown path which wound through the trees. This time he made sure he just concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other and not glancing off at his surroundings for fear of what ghosts might be lurking there.

But still this unexpected rush of raw guilt had shaken him, he gritted his teeth and pushed through it. That wasn't an emotion for strong men like Hubert. That was for weaker men than he, men like Baudin and Marc Reno.

He could feel the guilt giving way to anger as he walked. He could almost hear the inner monologue raging in his head out loud. As if his younger self was walking by his side, whispering encouragement and justifications in his ear.

A voice fuelled as it always had, by his remarkable ability to justify any and all of his actions, not just in the war, but also his brutal post war years where he had forged a bloody path through the Paris underworld. All whilst hiding his true nature from those politicians and police chiefs he couldn't threaten or bribe.

He could feel his anger subsiding now as the voice whispered on. He even chanced a look around him as if daring the ghosts of those who died here to show their spectral faces. There had been a war on, he wanted to shout to the trees. They had lost, they were under occupation before many could react. It would have been suicide to fight on, they did what they did for the greater good. After all, hadn't they saved more than they had led to the slaughter?

(It was in times such as these *he* would often become, *they*.)

Those idiot commanders had wanted to fight on, but Hubert had more than done his part during the invasion, he was well known, and he and the Reno brothers had been

picked up in the first weeks of the occupation. They would have been shot and what good would that have done anyone?

Besides, they had saved so many ordinary villagers from the German reprisals. All they had to do in return was give up the odd resistance commander or the location of a proposed attack.

Hubert's mood was improving with every step now, which was helped as he came to a clearing and back out into the sunlight. His foot kicked something hard in the undergrowth with a metallic 'clang' and he looked down to see the top of a rusty rail at his feet. It snaked off to the right and around a bend which he knew led to the railway siding in front of the old tunnel, and of course, the carriage.

That nagging fear sparked for a moment, but he pushed it back down into his subconscious with the rest of the redundant emotions that he had suppressed during the short walk. He set off along the rails at a pace.

Despite his bravado, when Hubert came around the bend, he stopped dead and was hit by an almost physical sense of déjà vu.

There it was half obscured by thick bushes like some predatory beast lurking in the undergrowth. It seemed much longer than he remembered. Whenever he'd had the misfortune to go inside, it had always seemed so cramped and oppressive and in his memory, it was half the actual size.

He approached the carriage with caution and peered into the woods to his right for any sign of potential advisories. He paused as he reached the black and white barrier and strained to see through the thick bushes to the carriage beyond. Still no sign signs of life, but he knew they could already be inside. He took out his pistol and pulled down the sleeve of his jacket to obscure the weapon in his hand and cocked the hammer.

His heart was pounding more than it had done in years and he felt that old familiar hit of adrenaline as he moved forwards. He picked his way awkwardly through the bushes, it was harder than he had anticipated but he powered through, not caring as the branches ripped at the expensive material of his suit here and there. He scanned his surroundings as he went, he cursed the sheer amount of noise he was making as he crashed through, but that couldn't be helped.

Finally, he staggered out the other side, breathing hard and soaked in sweat, he rested his free hand against the harsh metal bracket which secured the carriage's coupling at the end. And paused whilst he caught his breath.

"You have gotten old, Hubert," a voice called out.

Hubert straightened and swept the pistol left and right as he strained to see into the woods beyond the tangle of bushes. Then two things hit him about the speaker.

One, it was, of all things a boy's voice. And two, it was coming from inside the carriage.

He wiped the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his jacket. Surely, he had misheard and tried to reason that it was the blood rushing through his ears from the sheer effort of getting through the bushes, coupled with the acoustics of the carriage's interior, that had distorted the sound.

He began to slowly edge his way along the carriage to the door, he tried the handle, but it didn't so much as move. He could see there was another door at the far end so, making sure he kept below the shuttered windows, he moved off down towards it.

"I got your message," Hubert shouted.

As he approached the door, he trained his pistol on the opening he could now see.

"Come on, you bastard," he whispered. "Show yourself."

He stopped some five feet from the door, which he could now see was buckled and actually hanging off its hinges as if it had been wrenched open with great force.

"I'm not coming in, if that's what you're thinking," he shouted.

He glanced to his right again and through the trees, he cursed to himself. If there was someone hiding in there, he was a sitting duck. He held his breath and strained to listen, but he couldn't hear any movement from inside. Then he realised the error his tormentor had made. He was in an enclosed space, with only one exit, which Hubert had covered. And if he indeed didn't have someone in the woods, the man was an idiot.

He sneered to himself, once again the enemy had underestimated Jean Hubert. Sure, physically he looked like a man in his eighth decade, but he still had that same sharp mind that had helped him flourish his whole life.

"You don't know who you're dealing with," he said defiantly.

"Oh, don't we?"

There was no use blaming his hearing this time. It was the voice of a boy coming from inside.

“Mister mayor,” the boy added with contempt.

A girlish giggle erupted from just inside the open door ahead.

Two children!!?

Hubert himself was renowned in certain circles as a callous bastard, but had the blackmailer brought two children as cover? That had caught him off guard and he didn't like it.

He shuffled closer, gun at the ready.

“Christ!”

He jolted in shock and nearly fired as a young girl appeared in the open gap. She was smiling sweetly and didn't look at all distressed to have a gun pointing at her.

“Hello Jean,” she said. “Come on in, it's a reunion.”

He took a step closer, then lunged forwards without really thinking, and took a hold of the girl's arm. He pulled her violently out and put his arm around her neck, pressing her to him like a shield.

“Now, Jean, that's not very nice,” the boy said from inside, without a hint of fear in his voice.

“What the hell is going on here!?” Hubert demanded and shook the girl.

“We trusted you,” the girl said. Her young voice was thick with a strangely adult accusation. “You said we would be safe, but you and the other traitors led us here, like lambs to the slaughter.”

“All the others are dead, Jean,” the boy said. “Just you now.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Hubert wanted to know. “I've never seen you before in my life.”

“How quickly he forgets,” the boy said.

The girl suddenly ducked under Hubert's arm and jumped up onto the step and into the carriage, without thinking, he gave chase. He stumbled up the step and into the gloom of the carriage. The drop in light blinded him for a moment and he swung the pistol left and right anticipating an attack.

As his eyes adjusted to the meagre illumination from the sunlight filtering through the gaps in the shutters and roof, the carriage interior slowly came into view.

He cried out in shock at the sight of a dozen or more spectral figures dotted around the carriage, faces he knew from past crimes, looking, pointing at their betrayer. But an instant later they were gone. Leaving just the two children standing under a shaft of light coming from a sizable hole in the roof. He couldn't quite believe it, but they looked no more than ten years old. They were holding hands but not out of fright but kinship.

They were alone, his frenetic thoughts screamed, no adults skulking in the shadows, or trying to use them as a human shield. He took a breath, he had imagined the other figures, he tried to tell himself, just a trick of the light. No ghosts, other than those in his overactive imagination brought on by the walk over here. But as reasonable as that was, it just wouldn't stick.

He realised he had lowered the pistol to his side but was too distracted to bring it back up again. The image of those figures, Christ, some had once been his friends, comrades, he was sure! Was seared into his mind's eye like a crime scene photograph.

It had been a terrible mistake, coming back here, but it was too late now. The memories of this place came flooding back like a physical assault. He could almost see the Gestapo interrogators milling around, inflicting casual acts of violence. Bodies strung up against the walls of the carriage or worst still hanging from the ceiling like broken marionettes.

He screwed his eyes tight shut, just memories, he wanted to scream out loud. He opened his eyes again and they gradually focused once more. Reality had been restored to the scene somewhat he was relieved to see, albeit a surreal one.

The children were standing in front of the heavy table at the other end, where the Nazis had chained people as part of their interrogations. A place where unspeakable acts of sadism had taken place. It was all the more obscene juxtaposed with these two fresh faced innocents.

"Get away from there!" He shouted but neither child moved. "Who are you," he pleaded. "How did you know about this place?"

"We lived it, Jean," the boy replied. His face was set in such a look of utter disdain it shamed the old man.

All Hubert could do was shake his head in incomprehension.

“Lived it, and died here,” the girl said with a sneer that looked all the more horrific on her angelic face.

“What are you...”

“We are the dead, Jean Hubert,” she girl said, cutting him off. “We are at once a single victim of this place and every single poor soul who perished because of your treachery.”

“We are every emotion, every lingering fragment of pain and suffering, endured here,” the boy added. “Watching, waiting for retribution.”

“That time is now,” they said in tandem.

Hubert spun on his heel at the sound of screaming metal as the door slammed shut and lodged itself at an odd angle, blocking his exit. He ran to it and shoved his full weight against it, but despite the awkwardness of the mangled fit, it was wedged tight.

“So much blood spilt in here...” The boy said.

Hubert heard what at first he thought was rain coming in through the roof, but as a smattering fell at his feet, he could see it was red. Blood began to run down the walls of the carriage and through the gaps in the roof. He could smell it in the air as he breathed.

“No!” It was a demand not a plea.

This was impossible, he was just overwhelmed by the memories of this place. And yes, although he was loathed to admit it, the guilt of what he had done was threatening to undo all reason. He had to fight it!

“We have waited so long to see you again, Jean,” the girl said as she took a step forward.

Hubert instinctively raised the pistol, but she had already stopped.

“Sometimes memories fade,” she continued. “Or they die when those who remember pass on.”

“Or they can be distorted into something milder, when they are too traumatic to take,” the boy said and moved to the girl’s side.

“Or,” the girl added. “Like you, Jean Hubert. Memories can be manipulated into misremembering past deeds, turning horrors into heroics.

Hubert was pitched forwards as the whole carriage began to shake. Pooling blood sloshed against his ankles as he tried to steady himself.

“This is impossible!” He screamed.

But his words were drowned out as the wooden walls of the carriage began to splinter and come away from the metal framework. The panels buckled and snapped as if the whole construction was in the grip of some giant hand, crushing it like a child's toy.

"Jesus! Jesus!" Hubert exclaimed.

The children huddled together but neither looked afraid.

The carriage began to contort and bend with a near deafening, nerve shredding cacophony of splintering wood and twisting metal, as the separate parts of the structure formed themselves into a multitude of crude hands which began clawing at Hubert's clothing.

He fired at the floor, barely missing his own foot, then a rust covered metal hand grabbed at his wrist and twisted it violently and he dropped the pistol with a scream of pain.

Others grasped at his arms and legs, crushing the bones and tearing open the flesh. The wooden floor at his back splintered as a long arm like mass came up through the deepening pool of blood and snaked up and clasped a hold of the top of Hubert's head. The splinters dug deep into his scalp and blood flowed down his face and into his mouth.

The roof above the children was ripped away as if hit by a hurricane and they were both lifted up as gently as babes in a mother's arms by the transforming carriage all around them. And they were whisked off into the trees and away, laughing as they went.

Hubert watched them go, just as the blood filled his eyes, blinding him. And he was in the grip of madness now, he had come here expecting to bully or even murder his way out of this new threat to his equilibrium.

He had come to face the ghosts of his past once more. But not in his wildest nightmares had he expected those ghosts to have purchase in the real physical world. Their collective trauma and lust for vengeance able to manifest into this writhing, twisting tool of retribution.

But places have memories too, he now realised in a horrifying moment of clarity amongst all the pain and oncoming madness. Memories that can fester over decades fermenting into a desperate need for release.

The carriage should by rights have rotted away years ago, if it were not for the sheer psychic power of the multitude of crimes it had witnessed. That power seeping into its very structure, into every atom like so much spilt blood. The inanimate made animate by the

overwhelming hopelessness, rage and suffering from within its walls, growing more malignant and cancerous with each passing day.

A once dormant instrument of justice that just needed one more life to be snuffed out in order to end its unnatural existence.

His.

Hubert, blind and in extremis was dragged, kicking and screaming to the torture table. The wood of the table itself cracked and splintered as it bound him in its jagged embrace, forming itself into a perverse facsimile of an old medieval iron maiden. But razor-sharp metal spikes replaced by dozens of dull wooden chards and splinters that slowly pieced his flesh as it enclosed the pulverized remains of his body.

Jean Hubert gave one final death rattle and died. And this final release of life was the trigger for the carriage and all of its pent up rage to collapse in on itself. The years of decay, held in suspension whilst it waited patiently to fulfil its unspoken promise to the dead, suddenly undone in mere seconds.

The structure caved in like it was made of paper and soon was nothing more than a smouldering crater. In the coming days and weeks, the trees and undergrowth so long kept at bay would take over and the natural order of things would forever erase this once cursed spot.

Life where there had only been death, and a fitting monument for those who had died there.

Jill felt a stab of panic as she called the children's names for the umpteenth time whilst frantically wandering the grounds, and again got no reply. They had gone off to play in the trees by the lawn, but that had been way before noon, and they hadn't returned at lunch time which was so unlike either of them.

Béatrice and Daniel had volunteered to help her look, but she could tell from their faces, they thought she was overreacting. And maybe she was, what with the accident, the stupid dream, and that lingering feeling she'd had that the kids just hadn't been themselves over the last couple of days. The spectre of the separation loomed large in her mind again. Where they just playing up?

She tried to reason in her growing panic, that it was more likely she had been so worried about how the break-up had affected the kids that she hadn't taken time to process it herself. That she was projecting her uncertainties and catastrophising the most innocent of situations.

Yep, I'm going mad she thought. But still, where were the kids?

"Jill!"

Sure, it's state of the art. But it's still a tomb

There were two main reasons why Hadden University kept their new experimental survival bunker project, out of sight of the general university population. Why they had decided to build the prototype structure deep within the dense woods, located at the farthest edge of the main campus' vast grounds. Away from prying student and faculty members eyes.

One: Simply enough, seclusion. When they ran their tests, which basically amounted to three or four hand-picked volunteers not connected to the University. The last thing for these tests to work correctly was for a bunch of students to come wandering into the test area whilst searching for magic mushrooms or a place to copulate. The subjects had to truly believe they could truly be the last people on earth.

These lab rats would be accompanied by at least one of the senior scientists from the project who would monitor their reactions to being so isolated from the outside world, and also be able to complete certain tasks within the bunker and maintain any running repairs that might pop up.

This was then complicated by the occasional assault on the bunker by an armed group of 'marauders' trying to gain access by force or pleading for entry as they 'died' horribly from the after-effects of whatever weapon of the week was chosen.

These so-called marauders consisted of a group of amateur actors recruited from a local theatre company. Who would take great delight in dying with ever increasing histrionics and homemade special effects, whenever called upon to do so.

And two, (unofficially): Sheer embarrassment. The bunker, especially when in the midst of a bad actor onslaught, looked like the set from a low budget sci-fi movie.

It had looked good on paper, the design schematics were very impressive. But once the structure had been built, its clunky steel exterior, especially when set against the backdrop of the lush green and brown foliage of the wood, looked utterly ridiculous.

Their fears had been compounded when, to add architectural insult to injury, one of the older actors had said that it looked like a bad late nineties live action roll playing location.

The aesthetics of the bunker however were lost on the two project leaders and the engineering supervisor who had birthed it. It worked, and despite still being a work in progress, worked well. It still had a way to go to be perfect but if push came to shove any one of its proud creators would gladly call it home if the end of days came anytime soon.

It had an effective air filtration system, cctv cameras offering a three-sixty view of outside. Storage space for nearly a year's supply of canned and freeze dried foods. Running filtered water and two chemical toilets.

At present the water supply, which was connected to a local river, had to be hand pumped and purified with tablets. But that was a small price to pay for survival. Soon, once the next round of funding came through, everything would be automated.

And in due time, all of this would be powered by solar panels, which would be fitted in the next stage of construction. Then they could do away with the noisy petrol-powered generator they currently used.

The whole project had been reluctantly (at first) hosted by the university nine months ago. After being approached (and yes bribed) by the UK military who closely supervised the university's highly admired engineering department.

The team was headed up by Major Masie Kamen, a brilliant engineer in her own right, who herself had graduated from Hadden eight years previously before choosing a career in the military.

Once the cash began to flow, the university now gladly lent out their staff for the project. All of whom worked on the bunker with an enthusiasm bordering on the obsessive. To most it was a well-funded great game where no idea was off limits.

But to Major Kamen, it had always been so much more than that. And lately she was increasingly aware of its absolute relevance.

Global tensions of late were at an all-time high, so much higher and precarious that any civilian was allowed to know. As the saying goes; 'Ignorance is bliss.'

Behind the scenes, superpowers were at each other's throats. Old alliances were in tatters as the rhetoric became more and more vitriolic with each secretly held crisis summit.

And just for good measure, throw in the odd rogue failed state and its dubious weapons programmes. Times were grim.

And so, Kamen and her team worked on. Hoping for the best but preparing for the worst.

Last month after another successful test (four volunteers surviving five weeks without any outside assistance.) The chief engineering team stood in front of their pride and joy. Sipping champagne and slapping each other on the back.

Professor Miles Adams PHD who was only second in the team to Major Kamen. Turned to his eight colleagues, puffed out his pigeon chest and announced.

"Bring on the apocalypse!"

"Be careful what you wish for, Miles," Kamen had told him after the self-congratulatory cheer had died down.

Major Masie Kamen was, as usual, absolutely right.

Even though the build-up of tensions and violent rhetoric had gone on for months. The end, when it came, came fast. Governments had screamed foul, claiming red lines had been crossed, innocents slaughtered.

It had all played out just under the radar of Joe public who had been drip fed just enough info to make them feel informed without causing the panic the actual facts would induce.

Besides, no one would ever be insane enough to go to war over it... Would they?

So, that morning for whatever reason, someone blinked first. Someone's trigger finger was just a little bit itchier than the others. In the end no one knew who, or why really.

But in the end, none of that mattered. No one in the real everyday world had paid that much attention to the global ‘tensions’ as they grew. But they sure as hell did when people started to drop over left, right and centre all around them.

When the world started ending, Kyle Easterbrook had been on a photoshoot.

Just a normal day in his up until then charmed life. Four hours of being pampered, photographed and told just how amazing his bone structure was. Just, ‘stand there, tilt your head slightly to the right so those baby blues catch the light just so.’ ‘Move here, smile that perfect smile.’

Four hours, fifty grand. Nice work if you can get it. And Kyle could.

You see Kyle Easterbrook was handsome as hell, beautiful really. He had been dealt a full house in the genetic card game and had used it to his advantage his whole life. Today at twenty-five it was modelling. And when he hit the dizzy heights of thirty, a career in acting would surely follow. He had even started lessons.

Not that Kyle was thinking about his career prospects at that very moment. No, Kyle was hitting a hundred and ten in his Audi R8, screaming down the dual carriageway.

Death was all around him, silent, tasteless, odourless. But there all the same. The people he tore passed, those poor ignorant fools would soon be dead, they just didn’t know it yet. They would be the first victims in what would turn out to be the shortest, most deadly of the now three world wars.

How did an over paid, narcissistic, pretty boy model know? Two words from his girlfriend Masie.

“It’s started.”

He didn’t remember much of the frantic phone call after that. He had protested, pleaded, threatened even, but she had cut him off with her customary authority.

“Get to the bunker,” she ordered. “I’ll meet you there.”

Chances are, if Kyle was the most beautiful person in Britain, (Europe at least surely! He would have argued.) Then Masie Kaman was the smartest.

To say they were an odd couple was an understatement. Kyle was the young superstar model whereas Masie was twelve years his senior and a Major in the royal engineers. They had met just over a year ago at an army veteran’s charity fundraiser. Kyle, whose

grandfather who had been a retired colonel in the marines, had recently died, and his mother had put on the gala in his memory.

Despite his grandfather's numerous decorations throughout his long and distinguished service, everyone knew Kyle was the real star of the show. It had been a cynical ploy by his mother to invite him to the event. As it had concluded with an auction, where the main prize was a dinner with her famous son.

Major Kamen had won the bid, and much to both of their surprise, they had hit it off immediately. Certainly, they both knew it could never be anything too serious. But as time passed there had developed a sort of unspoken pact between them.

Kyle knew, but would never admit it to anyone, that he was the stereotypical dumb pretty boy, all beauty and no brains. And although he loved himself more than was probably healthy. This was the 'ugly' part of him that no amount of beauty treatment or surgery could fix. And he secretly loathed himself for it.

It was as if being with Masie he had hoped some of her impressive intellect would rub off on him. And he suspected for her part, Masie enjoyed the envious looks she would get from other women when they were out together. She was quite a plain woman, truth be told, even in her uniform. Well, plain in comparison to the man on her arm or the women he usually dated.

But in the end, none of that mattered. Because as the world was teetering on the brink of the abyss. That relationship might just have saved Kyle Easterbrook's life.

He found himself smiling to himself, despite his panic. Yes, Kyle had a charmed life indeed, and to think he had moaned like a teenager on the several occasions Masie had dragged him along to see her pride and joy take shape.

On one such clandestine visit, they had spent an unexpectedly passionate weekend in the bunker. Against all protocols, but when you are the project manager you can write your own rules. It was out of character for Masie, and he suspected it was the place itself that fuelled her passions those days and nights.

Well, what do you know, he had mused to himself at the time. Science can be fun.

Seeing his exit up ahead, Kyle dropped his speed just a little and swung the Audi onto the slip road. He took the roundabout at the bottom without breaking and turned effortlessly onto the A road that would take him all the way to Hadden Uni's engineering campus and hopefully safety.

The sports car ate up the five miles to the campus in no time and before he knew it, he was turning off the main road and onto the long winding road that weaved through the lush countryside and up towards the large main campus building.

It had once been a stately home he vaguely remembered Masie telling him once (yawn) and had practised his burgeoning acting skills by feigning interest.

He rounded a corner, and the building came into view, vast even in the distance. Just up ahead there was a small security guard kiosk with a red and white striped poll across the road. As usual there would only be one guard on duty as it was half term and only the most diligent faculty and students would be on campus today.

As Kyle didn't have a pass of his own, he would have to sweet talk the guard into letting him in. He gunned the engine as he approached to get the guard's attention and he pulled up by the kiosk window.

"Mister Easterbrook!" The guard said in surprise and stuck his head out of the open window.

Bollocks! Kyle knew the man but couldn't for all the world remember his name. The guard leaned forwards and Kyle caught sight of his security ID badge. Bill Rogers.

"Hi Bill," Kyle said as brightly as he could, and the man seemed genuinely touched he had 'remembered' his name. "And it's Kyle, please."

"Okay, Kyle," he replied, and did he blush?

It was clear from his manner and the fact half the British army wasn't already here, that Bill Rogers had no idea he would be dead soon.

He grabbed a clip board from inside and came outside, flicking through a sheet of paper pinned to it as he did so.

"I'm afraid the major isn't in today," he said with a frown.

"Oh, it's okay, she asked me to meet her here."

Tick, tick, tick! The doomsday clock in Kyle's brain echoed as the man seemed to be moving in slow motion. Taking an age with every action. And he had to fight the urge just to speed straight through the barrier. Calm, he told himself, calm.

"She wanted to show me something she was working on, thought it best to come during half term, y'know?"

His voice sounded strained, but he would just have to front it out. He knew technically he would have needed prior permission as he wasn't faculty or a student.

Bill Rogers re-read the list at a glacial pace.

For Christ sakes! Kyle wanted to scream at him, this is a fucking university not Area 51!!

“You know what she’s like,” Kyle ventured calmly. “She’s really passionate about all this stuff.”

“Yeah,” Rogers replied with an amiable smile. “Must say it’s all very exciting, having the military collaborating on something here. Don’t suppose you could give me a hint about what it is?”

“Sorry Bill, I could, but then I’d have to kill you.”

Rogers guffawed at the old joke and went back inside the kiosk. Kyle felt sick at the banter, he could tell him and wouldn’t then have to kill him. Whatever was coming would take care of that.

“Wouldn’t want that!” He said cheerfully after a moment and pushed the barrier release button. “It’s my lad’s eighteenth on Tuesday.”

Kyle tried to reply as the barrier slowly opened but he feared if he opened his mouth he would throw up.

“I’ll tell the major you’ve here when she arrives,” Rogers added.

“Cheers,” Kyle managed to choke out and sped away.

Suddenly it was all real now, real people would really die. And little Bill junior wasn’t going to make it to eighteen.

“Fuck,” Kyle felt a wave of nausea wash over him and his polo shirt was instantly soaked in sweat. It was like something out of a bad war movie. ‘Here, have you seen this picture of my wife and kids?’

The location of the bunker wasn’t sign posted but Kyle remembered the way. He turned off the main road leading to the campus car park and onto a smaller road with a ‘private road, no entry,’ sign at the beginning.

Then onto what was little more than a dirt track which led through the woods and to a makeshift car park further in. His Audi complained endlessly as he approached the parking area, muddy dirt tracks were a sports car’s nemesis and he ended up abandoning it some twenty metres from his destination as it slid into a ditch by the side of the track.

He didn't even wonder if he would ever get to drive the thing again as he set off running along the track towards his salvation. His famous love of all things material dissipating with every stride. The fact that he didn't even care he was ruining his brand-new Balenciaga trainers in the mud was testament to that.

He only had eyes for that ugly metal bunker he had in the past been so eager to avoid. And as he ran, he thanked Christ for Masie's obsession with the place.

A flash of sunlight glinting off metal through the thick trees ahead caught his eye. Just like a photographer's flash gun from one of his shoots. He had always loved that sight, but never so more than now.

As he approached the large clearing at the front of the bunker, he slowed his pace. Masie wasn't here yet and there hadn't been any vehicles in the woodland car park her team used. But still, could any other the others know about the impending disaster and beaten him here?

He stopped at the very edge of the clearing and scoped his surroundings. But was greeted only with the wind blowing through the trees and his own panicked breathing.

"Hello?" He shouted, winced, waited. "Hello, is anybody there?"

He held his breath for what seemed like a full five minutes and listened. Still nothing. His phone went off and he screamed out loud.

"Jesus!!" His voice was shrill, like a frightened child and he was doubly glad he was alone.

He checked the caller ID: 'Masie.'

"Maze! Where the fuck are you?" He whispered and suddenly hoped she was going to say it had all been a false alarm.

"On my way," her normally calm professional tone was tinged with genuine fear, and it chilled him.

"Babe, what's going on?" He said weakly.

"Kyle... This is all real." There was a finality in her voice now, which was so much worse than the fear.

He bit back tears and felt his stomach flip.

"Kyle?"

"I'm here," he croaked. "At the bunker."

"Thank Christ. Is there anyone else..."

“No,” he replied cutting her off without meaning to. “I’m the first.”

The first, his mind whirled. The first what? What was this, some kind of race? He felt sick, yes of course it was. A race for survival.

“Good, good,” she said, sounding calmer now. “You’ll need today’s code to get inside.”

Of course! He remembered now. The door lock was controlled by a four-digit code that they changed every day.

“Okay, just a sec’,” he broke cover and ran the twenty or so yards across open ground between the treeline and the thick steel door.

“Okay, I’m here,” he said.

“Right, okay,” she paused, and he heard papers shuffling. “Ready? Two, nine, zero, zero.”

“Got it,” Kyle snapped open the hard plastic cover of the keypad.

He raised his hand to tap in the numbers, but his fingers suddenly weren’t his own. His whole hand was shaking like an alcoholic before that first drink of the day. He looked at his rebellious digits in disbelief and could not stop his hand from shaking. Not even if his life depended... He shook both hands and the tremors abated somewhat.

Even so, he had to wedge his phone awkwardly between his cheek and shoulder so that he could use his left hand to hold his right wrist just to keep it steady enough to use. Christ it was like a nightmare, his phantom limbs unable to do even the most basic task. He slowly, fighting against the shakes, managed to move his index finger up to the pad to punch in the code...

Shit! What was the code again? Suddenly the twelve buttons on the keypad looked like ancient alien hieroglyphics.

“Maze...”

“I can’t hear you, something’s wrong with your phone,” her muffled voice said.

“What’s the code again?” He almost sobbed it.

Christ, he was so fucking dumb! He couldn’t even remember four fucking numbers! Couldn’t even read them!

“Kyle, calm down,” Masie told him, her voice slightly clearer as he shifted his shoulder slightly. “Two, nine, zero, zero.”

He screwed his eyes shut and took a long breath. When he opened them again, the numbers. Yes, ten numbers plus a hash tag and a star symbol were as clear as day.

He punched in the code and was instantly rewarded with a loud metallic ‘clunk’ and the door hissed open on hydraulic pistons.

He took the phone out from under his chin before he dropped it.

“Maze! Maze, I’m in!” He could have burst into tears then and there.

“Good,” she said.

He waited for more, but she had fallen silent on the other end.

“Masie?”

“I’m here,” she finally replied. “I’m sending you over a PDF. It’s got the basic operating procedures for the bunker. It’s the one we give to the volunteers, should be easy enough to follow, that’s the idea.”

At least she didn’t call it idiot proof, Kyle thought.

“Okay, but you’re gonna be here soon, right?”

“Yes, Christ yes!” She reassured him. “But look, it’s going to take me a while yet to get to you. You’ll only need to power up a couple of things to get you up and running before I get there. Nothing too complicated, locking the door, turning on the generator, checking the air filters and shit. Just follow the PDF and you’ll be fine.”

“Nothing too complicated?” He asked as his phone ‘pinged’ with a new message. He checked the screen. “I got the file.”

“Cool. Kyle, just stay calm and follow the instructions. The bunker is just a prototype, but it all works,” she said, and he was only too happy to believe her.

“Okay, okay.”

He heard her take a long forlorn breath.

“And I’m going to need you to change the entrance code.”

“Change the code?”

“Yeah,” the guilt was heavy in her voice. “Kyle, it’s only going to be a matter of time before Professor Adams and the rest of the team figure out what’s happened. They’ll come, bring others. I know it’s a shitty thing to do, but the bunker can’t sustain us all. Just you and me, babe. Just you and me.”

The statement and its implications hung heavy in the dead air between them.

“Fucking hell, Maze,” Kyle felt lightheaded and had to lean against the side of the bunker and let that sink in. Suddenly the thought of all those amateur actors laying siege to the bunker didn’t seem quite so funny anymore.

“I know,” she said softly. “Change the number, just in case. You’ll be able to let me in from the inside, there’s a door release button. But no one else will be able to get in if the code’s changed. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” he replied, his voice gossamer.

“And don’t let anyone in until I get there,” she said as clinically as only a soldier could.

Kyle had been standing there with the phone still to his ear for a full minute before he realised she had gone. The next moment he was on his knees vomiting up his very expensive lunch.

The harsh automatic overhead fluorescent lights flickered for a moment and Kyle closed his eyes and waited for the strobing to stop.

Once the audible click, click, clicking had stopped he could hear a soft whirring, which he took as the air filter coming on and he opened his eyes. He pushed shut the heavy metal door, which was much easier than he’d thought, and it locked with an ominous yet reassuring metal ‘clunk’.

He turned and took in the bunker’s interior. Hadn’t it been bigger the last time he had been here?

The truth was that he hadn’t paid that much attention to the guided tours Masie had given him. He had been too eager to get her out of her uniform and into one of the bunks.

The main part of the bunker was open plan and was dominated by the control centre, six side screen computer monitors, stretched out on a long table against the back wall. Three keyboards and a console with a dozen or so lights and switches complete with what looked to Kyle like the old computer game joysticks from back in the day attached.

A mass of tangled multi-coloured wires snaked out from the back of the electronics and into five large grey metal boxes on the floor. And no matter how sensitive he was about his intellect, Kyle knew enough not to go anywhere near any of that shit.

Thankfully three of the monitors flickered into life. Their screens split into four boxes each giving him a black and white view from the various cameras placed around the bunker and some into the trees themselves. One was pointing to the makeshift car park, and he could just make out his abandoned Audi at the very edge of frame. That camera would make it easy to see if anyone else drove up the track.

He could still taste the bile at the back of his throat, so he went through into the modest living area, which consisted of two three-seater sofas, a four-chair dining table and a plasma TV on top of a cabinet complete with computer games set up. It all put Kyle in mind of a student's flat, basic but practical.

A small kitchen was set up was at the back of the bunker. Again, nothing special. A sink, worksurface, several cupboards and on the end a hand pump with a black plastic handle, for pumping water.

And that was it for the open plan living and working area. There were two doors leading to the remaining parts of the bunker. One wooden, and one steel like the exterior.

A sign on the wooden door read; 'Bunks.' And the metal door was marked; 'Storage/Generator room'.

Kyle opened the heavy metal door and went inside. Like the main area, the overhead lights flickered on automatically. This room was much longer than he had expected. It had wall to floor racking on each side, which were half filled with military issue canned and dried foods.

Kyle walked down the narrow gap in between the racks, there was another metal door at the very end, marked; 'Generator room.' Which he noted for later.

As he walked, he ran his hands over the various tins and food containers. Until he came across a dozen packs of bottled water. He gratefully ripped into one and took a long drink water. It was tepid at best, but he was grateful for it all the same.

He swilled his mouth out with the remaining water and grabbed another bottle before making his way back to the living area. He turned on the TV, more for comfort than anything and drank down the second bottle.

He glanced back over to the monitors and was reassured to see nothing but nature and the ugly sides of the bunker on them.

He flicked through the TV channels and came to rest on a news channel. The report was nothing special, a woman, pitch side at a football stadium talking to some pundit or another.

The normally banal scene set his heart racing. Didn't they know what was coming? Not yet but they soon would, everybody would know. But still it seemed the outside world was more interested in the price of petrol and Leeds United's five game winning streak to care about the end of the world. Maybe that was for the best he thought forlornly.

He began pottering around the bunker, more to pass the time than anything. His initial panic on the journey over here had thankfully abated a little now that he was locked inside. It was clear, even to his untrained eye that the place was still a work in progress. Wires sticking out of the walls, stacks of boxes containing more electronics to be fitted at a later date.

But even in this chaotic state, it worked. Masie had assured him of that. So, for now he was content enough that although, it might not be the Ritz, it would save their lives.

Change the code.

Kyle swivelled on a chair in front of the monitors and peered at the screen showing the clearing and woods. No sign yet of Masie, and thankfully no one else.

He chewed his lip, it had been nearly an hour now since he had arrived and still Masie hadn't shown. A hundred scenarios had played out in his agitated brain as he had been rattling around the bunker waiting, waiting.

Each scenario more catastrophic than the last, from a crash on the motorway to Masie dying from whatever the hell was coming. Something he still had no idea of. Nuclear? Germ warfare? Fucking zombies!?

And what's more, the keypad on the inside of the door had begun an incessant intermittent beeping, which wasn't helping his growing anxiety.

Change the code.

Back in the living area, the TV was still spewing banalities, ignorant in its bliss.

He sat down and channel hopped and checked his phone for the umpteenth time. Still no message from Masie, *dead in a ditch*, his hyped-up imagination told him. Shut up! He told it back.

He settled on an old seventies cop show, he remembered his late dad loving. And for the first time in his life, he was glad both his parents had died young. Better that than what was coming (whatever that was!) One less thing to worry about at least, he thought grimly and rightly got a twinge of guilt for it.

He turned up the volume to drown out that annoying beeping coming from the door.

Change the code.

He tried Masie's number again, but for the fourth time since they had last spoken it went to voice mail.

He hit the call end button with an expletive she would have kicked his arse for if she'd heard. Then he opened the PDF and tapped idly through the pages.

Change the code.

It started with a bullet point list intituled; 'Upon entry.' But he hadn't had the courage to read it yet. Just in case, his old insecurities told him, it made no sense at all pretty boy.

It was easy to convince himself he should wait another half hour and if Masie wasn't here, then he would attack the PDF instructions with renewed confidence.

Change the code...

Much to the relief of his shredded nerves, ten minutes into that half an hour the door keypad finally stopped beeping. He was about to thank God for small mercies when the power went out.

He cried out in shock and leapt up from the sofa. The bunker was in near darkness, no TV, no monitor and no lights. It took him a moment to realise, the only illumination was coming from a small emergency light above the door. He scrambled across the bunker, catching his knee on the monitor table, and hobbled over to the door.

The keypad, whose buttons had been illuminated before was dead.

"Fuck!"

Then, to his horror, the door hissed and opened slightly. Probably some safety measure in the event of no power.

Kyle pushed against the door, but it barely moved. It was on hydraulic hinges which aided its closure. If there was power!

"Oh, no, no, no," he uttered and pushed harder. "Come on! Please, Christ."

Fuelled by a much needed hit of adrenaline, he planted his feet firmly on the floor and pushed against the heavy steel door with all his body weight. It moved an inch, then another as it slowly began to close.

“Yes! Come on!” He shouted in rage and gave it one final push.

The door swung the last few inches more under its own weight than his strength, but it closed nevertheless with that satisfying ‘clunk.’

Kyle howled in relief and staggered back. He was now in total darkness, so he fumbled in his pocket for his phone. He was about to turn on the flashlight app when...

‘Clunk!’

The door opened slightly, and he was hit with a sliver of sunlight.

“What!? What?” His head was spinning in panic, he moved over to the keypad, the small digital display above the buttons had the symbol of a battery icon with a line through it.

“Shit! Shit.”

Kyle frantically opened up the PDF on his phone, then paused. He let out a long deep breath. *Calm down.*

He tapped the screen and the front page changed to the bullet point list he had not yet read.

Upon entry. One: Start the generator. Emergency battery power is very limited and under no circumstances should it be used to power any appliance within the structure. Its main function is to power the entrance door keypad and hydraulics. When the emergency battery is dangerously low it will omit an audible intermittent tone and must be recharged immediately.

Note: ****The entrance door will not lock without power.****

It was even in bold.

Dumbstruck, Kyle gawped at all the appliances, the lights that had switched on when he had arrived, the fucking TV.

It would have been funny if it wasn’t so fucking tragic. And he could only imagine what Masie would have said. ‘It’s a good job you’re pretty. You dumb fuck.’

He just stood there and didn't know whether to laugh or cry. So, in the end, he did both.

The sound of a heavy diesel engine someway off outside snapped Kyle out of his hysterics.

He held his breath and listened. Yes, there it was again, drifting in on the breeze. He instantly knew it wasn't Maise. She drove an electric, something he often teased her about.

Whoever it was, they were still in the distance and although it was hard to judge, might not actually be coming this way at all. He tried to think, wasn't the A road he had come in on just on the other side of the wood?

He knew he couldn't take that chance. He moved swiftly back into the bunker using the meagre light from the door opening, until he came to the storeroom door. He flicked on the torch app and went inside.

He ran down between the racks until he came to the metal door at the end. Generator room. He tentatively tried the handle, half expecting it to be locked, but it opened, and he went inside. Thanking Christ as he did so.

The room was small, little bigger than a walk-in closet, with walls of plain brick. The generator sat by the back wall connected to a grey metal electrical junction box. A jerry can was standing next to the grimy machine, so Kyle took two strides inside and gave it a kick. It toppled over, empty.

"Shite!"

He knelt by the generator and rested his phone on the top, so the light was shining on the petrol cap. The smell of petrol stung his sinuses. He could see a thick exhaust hose coming out of the back and into the wall behind.

He unscrewed the fuel tank lid and gave the machine a nudge and could see fuel lapping right up to the rim. It was full.

"Thank Christ," he breathed with relief. At last, something was going his way.

The generator looked easy enough to start. There was an on/off switch and a black pull handle like on an old lawn mower. He flicked the switch to the 'on' position and took a hold of the handle.

"C'mon!" He gritted his teeth and pulled.

And much to his surprise the generator kicked in first time. He let go of the handle and the cable pulled itself back into place. He stood back and just marvelled at it. All this technology and money and the whole place ran on an old petrol generator.

The lights flickered back on, and he could hear the TV back in the living area and the wonderful hum as the air filtration system kicked in again.

Kyle jogged back over to the door and pushed it with two hands, it easily closed with a soft hiss and a 'clunk' as it locked. He paused, the keypad on the wall was still registering zero battery, but the icon was now pulsing with an arrow running through it to indicate it was charging. And the numbers were illuminated once more.

Change the code.

He glanced back at the monitors. Whoever had been driving hadn't made their way onto the estate. He was still alone, but for how long?

He let out a strangled laugh and lent back against the cool metal of the door. The next job he decided was hunting through the storeroom of any sign of booze. Because by Christ all this peril had made him desperate for a drink.

"Where are you, Maze?" He breathed.

Hearing her name out loud set off a nagging spark that he had forgotten something else. Should he try calling her again?

He came away from the door and looked at his phone. Maybe later after a drink. He just prayed she got here before Adams and anyone else. She would know what to do when they did. Like she said, the bunker can't hold them all.

"Change the code!" He shouted out loud as it hit him. "Fuck wit!"

Kyle scrolled through the PDF until he found the 'change PIN' page. And he just hoped it was an easy procedure. He didn't know what would be worse, Adams turning up and simply popping in the code, or Masie getting here and realising he didn't know how to follow simple instructions on an idiot proof PDF.

He dismissed that as his insecurities messing with his head. He just needed to read the damn instructions, which after all had been specifically written for those who had no knowledge of how the place worked.

"Right, come on," he told himself and began reading.

‘Press star,’ he pressed star on the keypad. He was greeted with a short menu on the keypad’s small screen each option had a corresponding number. Change door code was four.

He pressed four and the hashtag to confirm as instructed. The display flashed four horizontal lines. What should he choose?

Movement from one of the monitors caught his eye as he was glancing around for inspiration. Did he just see the back end of a car disappear from one of the screens?

Next to the keypad there was an intercom which had three buttons on it. Talk, listen and a large green door release button. He wasn’t going anywhere near that one, he thought.

He pressed the listen button and was rewarded with the sound of birdsong and wind blowing through the speaker. He listened intently. Yes! He definitely heard an engine gunning in the distance.

“Shit!”

Still nothing on the monitors, he had time if someone was coming his way.

What code should he use? He wracked his brain, it needed to be something he wouldn’t forget without writing it down. So, four random digits were out of the question. He noticed each of the numbers on the keypad had three small letters underneath, just like a phone. He thought for a second, K.Y.L.E would be too obvious. Then a thin childish smile crossed his perfect features.

He typed; 3(F) 8(U) 2(C) 5(K)

The numbers on the display flashed and a prompt came up to press star to save the changes. He pressed star and was rewarded with a ‘Door code change successful’ message.

Kyle rested his head against the door and exhaled deeply in relief. He could feel tears close but bit them back and prayed for Masie to get here. There was something about the finality of such a simple task that scared him. He was alone now, safe, but alone.

And that terrified him.

Buoyed somewhat by his small victory with the door code, Kyle had determined that while he waited for Masie to finally get here (Two hours now!) he was going to master as much of the bunkers rudimentary systems as he could.

He had started off small with things like checking the manual water pump worked okay, which it did, and he even fitted a new filter. Then toasted his success with an odd tasting glass of water.

Then he had turned his attention to the CCTV system. That as something he knew he would need a rudimentary understanding of.

It had taken him the best part of an hour, but he had eventually managed to work out how to switch cameras on the CCTV monitors, even move the cameras outside using the joystick. Whisper it, but the PDF they had devised was indeed idiot proof. And almost more importantly, the whole endeavour had distracted him from worrying about events outside, events he had no control of. But instead concentrate on things he could control, and it had left him with a certain sense of reassurance.

He had been playing with controlling one of the cameras when a flash of movement through the trees caught his attention on the camera covering the car park and his poor abandoned Audi. A yellow KIA estate car was just visible through the thick foliage coming closer as it slowly negotiated its way along the now churned up dirt track. He could see the windscreen wipes on the vehicle going ten to the dozen as it slipped and slid its way through the mud.

Gradually it became more and more bogged down and out of control until finally it slid sideways and clipped the front of his Audi, but he barely registered the outrage as it struggled on like some dying beast and came to a halt. He could just make out smoke coming from under the bonnet.

The car just sat there smoking. It didn't take a genius to know whoever was inside not only knew about the bunker but thanks to his Audi, knew someone had beaten them to it.

The passenger door opened and a middle-aged woman in a heavy coat, Kyle didn't recognise, got out. She looked at the bottom of the vehicle which was now stuck up to its axle in the mud. She was flailing her arms around in a panic and shouting to the driver inside.

The driver got out to view the situation for himself. It was Professor Adams, Masie's second on the project. He was talking to the woman then gestured to the Audi.

That's right, Kyle found himself thinking, too late Professor. Tough shit. It's mine.

Then he caught himself. Christ, what the hell was that? It was as if the few hours he had spent in the bunker had already given him a siege mentality. He looked around his sanctuary, and yes, he had to admit, with a sense of ownership.

It wasn't a good look on him, he knew, but it was there, nevertheless. Only he knew the door code, only he could grant access to this life saving haven. Yes, dumb old Kyle, the pretty boy arm candy you all looked down upon. How are your half-dozen degrees going to help you now Professor?

The pair outside huddled together, talking, then after a moment Adams went around to the back of the car and opened the hatchback, and took out a large rucksack. He joined the woman, who Kyle assumed was his wife, and they set off through the mud.

Kyle switched to the cameras overlooking the clearing in front of the bunker and waited. Sure enough, five minutes later, the two figures came into view at the very edge of the treeline. They paused, just as Kyle had done and watched the entrance.

He felt a sudden stab of remorse as he watched them, two forlorn but hopeful figures on a TV screen. And not for the first-time cursed Masie for not being here. She should be the one charge, the one capable of making clinical life and death decisions. After all she was the soldier and what was he? A fucking male model!

He watched with a growing sickening feeling as Adams left his wife and came tentatively across the clearing and towards the bunker's entrance door, like a man crossing a mine field. Where he eventually appeared on the camera overlooking the door. Kyle tensed as Adams looked straight into the camera above him.

Then he keyed in the entrance code. Kyle could hear the beeps through the interior unit, then the harsh rejection tone. Adams seemed to jump as if he'd gotten an electric shock and then tried again with the same results.

"Christ," Kyle hissed through his teeth. "Damn you Maze."

Adams looked back up at the camera and Kyle could clearly see growing panic on the man's face and he had to look away.

"Hello?" A metallic voice said, and it was Kyle's turn to jump.

He spun on his chair towards the door half expecting to see the man standing right there.

“Hello? Who’s in there?” The intercom made his voice sound monotone and robotic. “This is Professor Adam. What’s wrong with the door?”

Kyle could see Adams had his face pressed close to the intercom waiting for a response.

“Fuck,” Kyle whispered as if the man could hear him.

“Major Kamen?” Adams tinny voice asked. “Is that you?”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Adams then turned and waved his wife over. She seemed reluctant at first, but after some coaxing she came over and stood by his side. As Kyle watched they exchanged some heated words after which, obviously at his wife’s behest Adams tried and failed to open the door again.

Kyle turned away from the monitor unable to watch anymore. He just wished they would give up and leave. He couldn’t imagine what would happen when Masie finally arrived. A hell of a scene no doubt. Then he had a sobering thought. What is she brought a gun with her?

He tasted bile at the back of his throat again as he pictured the altercation which would end with both Adams’ shot to death.

Kyle got to his feet and went into the living area, he slumped down on the sofa. There was a glass of half-drunk bourbon on the coffee table next to it. He leaned over and downed it in one and lay on his side as it began to chip away at his anxiety a little.

The intercom buzzed and he grabbed two cushions and put them over his ears as Adam’s metallic voice came through the speaker. He brought his knees up and hugged them staring at the TV. He began to weep as the oblivious woman on the TV was pointing at a weather map and told him something he already knew. It was raining.

It seemed impossible, but when Kyle next opened his eyes, he saw that the clock in the corner of the news channel screen had leapt an hour since he had managed to stop crying and closed his eyes for a moment’s peace. Nervous exhaustion no doubt, but still it was a shock.

He stiffly threw his legs over the edge of the sofa and got to his feet. He picked up his phone from the coffee table. Still no messages. He felt that old familiar pang of fear and anger in his gut again.

“Shit!!”

He went over to the monitors. The entrance was empty, he sat down in the chair and went through each camera one by one. But Adams and his wife were nowhere to be seen. Their car was still where it had been abandoned. The CCTV system was impressive, but he imagined it had to have a few blind spots, especially in the woods. He just hoped they had given up and headed back to the university on foot.

Or what that just wishful thinking? He had the nagging doubt that Adams had helped build this place. What if he knew of any weak spots? He went through every camera position again in rapid succession, looking for even the faintest sign of Adams skulking about, trying to get in. Every part of the bunker’s exterior was well covered, he saw nothing.

Every part except the roof. Kyle started in shock and looked to the ceiling. Was there a crawl space above? The wiring for the lights and air conditioning needed to go somewhere. Was there a junction box on the very roof itself?

“Oh, Jesus!” He exclaimed.

What if, even now he was up there trying to block the air filter? Trying to suffocate him or damage the filtration system so whatever agent was in the air out there could get in and kill him.

Was he having trouble breathing already? He did feel a little lightheaded. His hand instinctively went to his throat which felt a little tighter than normal. He took a long deep breath to be sure and his lungs seemed okay. No coughing fits or burning, no taste of blood in his mouth. He was just panicking he told himself. Relax, breath normally, everything is under control.

“Fuck wit,” he admonished himself. But still couldn’t quite seem to catch his breath.

He picked up his phone and opened the PDF. He scrolled through until he came to the bunker’s details schematics section. But he couldn’t make head nor tail of it.

“You bastards!” he shouted to the roof, as if they could hear him through the thick steel.

Then another thought, what if the bunker wasn’t actually airtight? What if the air filter was just for show, or just not set up right? You heard all the time how the military fucked up construction contracts and the like. He could, he thought even now be breathing in the toxins from outside.

Suddenly lightheaded he had to brace himself against the computer table. Despite himself he could feel his anxieties getting the better of him. If he wasn't careful he would go into full blown hyperventilation.

"Calm, calm," he told himself and he just concentrated on regulating his breathing.

It seemed to take forever, but gradually his breaths deepened and his head began to clear. He was being paranoid, he told himself. Trust Masie, she was smart, she knew what she was going.

Then another thought came to the surface, and one although it was an insult to his intelligence, he was quite happy to embrace at this uncertain time.

What if the whole thing was a drill? The 'attack' even Adams and his wife, if she was even his real wife and not some actress.

Kyle rushed back into the living area and picked up the remote control. He flicked rapidly through the various 24-hour news channels. They were all still up, no screaming headlines of Armageddon. No hint of an attack.

He turned off the TV. Yes, it all made sense. Hadn't Masie told him they had done tests like this before? Sure, not blind ones using an unsuspecting subject. But wasn't that the next logical step?

Kyle's all-consuming vanity railed against the thought a little. Would Masie actually do that to him? She must know humiliating him like this would end their relationship. And after all she would never find anyone in Kyle's league again. Were as he could have his pick of anyone.

Still that gnawing thought at the back of his mind wouldn't budge. That he was nothing more than a glorified lab rat. Christ, hadn't he himself prayed that the PDF had been... Idiot proof?

He looked around the bunker. Could she be watching him, even now from a lab somewhere, observing the simple-minded pretty boy? All of them laughing at him, joking that if even a simpleton like Kyle Easterbrook could survive in the bunker, anyone could.

Fear gave way to rage, fuelled by years of his insecurities.

"Fuck you!!" he screamed.

He ran back over to the monitors and picked up the chair. He moved to throw it at the screens but another voice in his addled brain piped up.

What of it isn't a drill?

“God, damn it!”

He threw the chair across the room in impudent rage. His heart was pounding hit to burst through his chest. His head was throbbing painfully, and he felt for all the world like someone was whacking him on the back of the head with a two by four, in time with each heartbeat. He'd felt this before, on the set of his first big photoshoot. He was on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

His doctor had prescription sedatives, which had worked wonders. Maybe they had something similar in the bunker, he thought, for situations just like this one amongst the volunteers? It wasn't the worst idea he ever had.

He staggered through the bunker and over to the kitchen area. Hadn't he seen a first aid kit in their somewhere when he had been searching for a glass for his bourbon?

He tore through the draws and cupboards like a junky in search of a fix, until he found a large red military issue first aid kit, the size of a large flight case at the bottom of the kitchen cupboard under the sink. He dragged it out onto the kitchen floor and sat down next to it. It had clasps like a suitcase but when he tried to pop the lid it was locked.

“Who the fuck locks a first-aid kit!?” He screamed at it.

He scooted across to the cutlery draw by the cooker and grabbed a hand full of knives and folks. He selected the thickest knife and began to try pry open the lid. It snapped as he put some weight behind it.

“Shit!”

There was also a metal toolbox in the cabinet under the sink, so he pulled up out and onto the floor in front of him. He rummaged inside and took out the largest hammer it had and began to pummel at the clasps on the medical kit until finally it sprung open.

“Jesus!”

He had thought it would contain plasters and bandages and hopefully a bottle of pills, but this was a military first-aid kit. Inside along with the usual first-aid materials he had expected, there was a shelf underneath with had several small bottles and syringe packs. A pack of three EpiPens and a leather roll which contained half a dozen scalpels. And a package of field dressings.

Kyle took out one of the bottles which was labelled ‘Lorazepam’ and in brackets ‘Ativan.’ He tossed them back in the kit and lugged it back over to the monitor table. He gave the exterior a quick look over but there was still no sign of life.

He picked up his phone and typed Lorazepam into google. It was a strong sedative used to treat amongst other things anxiety and yes, panic attacks. Perfect for prolonged isolation and claustrophobia, Kyles none medically trained mind told him.

He closed the lid of the kit but left out one bottle and a syringe, just in case. It was a paradox, but he realised despite his desperate search, he was actually feeling a little better just from the simple the act of retrieving the kit.

He gave a short laugh, more at himself than anything. Chalk one up for the 'thick' kid. And he almost wished his was all a test. Because he would pass it with flying colours, just you wait and see.

He saw a flash of movement on one of the screens. And he caught a brief glimpse of a ghostly figure in white darting through the trees, close to the clearing in front of the bunker, then it was gone before he could fully register what he had seen.

"C'mon."

He sat down and flicked through the various cameras panning and scanning where he could, but it had disappeared from sight.

More movement now on one of the cameras covering the dirt track and car park. Another vehicle was negotiating the mud and drove passed his Audi. This vehicle however he did recognise.

"Masie!" He could have burst into tears with relief.

It took him a second to realise that there was another vehicle he hadn't noticed pull up already there. A Land Rover that had made it past his Audi and had parked just ahead of where Adams had abandoned his car in such a way to block the whole track.

The figure in white?

Kyle jumped as his phone rang, he picked it up and Masie's name flashed up on the caller ID.

"Mas..."

"It's like a fucking car park out here!" She said cutting him off.

"That yellow one's Adams'. I didn't see the Landy arrive."

"Right, okay," she sounded calmer.

He could hear shuffling on the other end of the phone then the sound of the car door opening. When she got out, Kyle could see on the monitor that she was in full combat fatigues and even from this distance he could clearly see a black holster on her hip.

She jogged forwards, passed Adams' car and stopped by the Land Rover. She peered in through the windows.

"There's an NBC suit inside!" She exclaimed.

"A what?"

"Chemical protection suit," she clarified.

The white figure!

"I saw him, Maze, just now, he's running around the woods somewhere."

Any thoughts Kyle had that this was some sort of exercise were diminishing by the second.

Maise suddenly looked back down the track to something beyond the camera's view.

"Shit, there's more coming!" She yelled and set off running up the track towards the car park and the track leading to the bunker.

"Masie! Masie?"

The line went dead, and Kyle switched monitors to follow her as she ran up the track. She put her phone away and pulled out her pistol before ducking into the thick undergrowth and out of sight.

"Jesus, Christ."

Back on the first monitor two cars came speeding into view. The lead car swerved violently to avoid Masie's car and ended up on its side in the deep ditch that ran along the side of the road, some twenty yards from Kyle's stricken Audi.

The other, which was driving even faster despite the conditions and the mud splattered all over its window screen from following the first, swerved quite impressively around Masie's car but clearly didn't expect to see Adams' vehicle coming at it through the thrashing windscreen wipers.

It ploughed full speed into the back of the car. The monitor screen bleached white on impact and took an age to finally adjust itself to the changing light source and the picture became visible once more.

Both cars were engulfed in flames, Adams' was on its roof the other completely on fire. Kyle started in shock at the other car, and he saw several dark figures flailing inside the inferno in a vain attempt to escape.

He pushed himself away from the desk and staggered over to the entrance door, and half leant half fell against the wall by the intercom. He looked back at the monitor

covering the clearing and doorway. And waited for Masie to hopefully come running from the tree line and towards the bunker.

He waited, but still she didn't appear, he cursed her under his breath and pressed the listen button on the console. At first there was nothing but the natural sounds of the surrounding woods. Then a volley of gunshots cut through the serenity, followed by several more. It was impossible to tell through the tinny speaker if they were close or way off in the woods.

"C'mon, Masie, c'mon," he hissed through gritted teeth and checked the monitors again.

A flash of white, moving deep within the trees beyond the clearing. Not close enough for him to make out much but the general outline.

"Bollocks!"

Kyle abandoned the intercom and raced back over to the monitors. He selected the camera with the best view and zoomed in as far as he could. It was badly pixilated, and juddery as he panned with it, but the figure was indeed dressed in a white chemical protection suit. Like the ones he had seen a hundred times in the movies.

They had what looked like a rifle slung over their back, and it took him a little longer to realise they were carrying something bulky in their arms. Not something, someone.

"Oh, God."

More movement, from one of the other cameras as the figure in white trudged on with its burden. And Kyle almost shouted in relief as Masie came into shot, carefully picking her way through the tangled undergrowth. Pistol drawn, scanning her surroundings like an action movie heroine.

It was impossible for him to get his bearings as to where anyone was in relation to the bunker or each other. The pair could have been at opposite sides of the woods or right on top of each other for all he could tell. He thought about calling Masie to give her the heads up but feared her ring tone might give away her position.

Another figure came into view, coming out of the bushes just behind the soldier in white. It clearly wasn't Masie as this one was gesticulating wildly without any thought of stealth.

No, it was Professor Adams, he caught up with the soldier who just kept going and they seemed to be arguing as they walked.

“Adams what are you doing?” Kyle said to the screen. The idiot was going to get his considerable brains blown out.

As they moved closer, and the picture became clearer, Kyle could finally see the cause of Adams’ reckless behaviour. The soldier was carrying Mrs. Adams. One arm dangling, her head lolling lifelessly back and forth as they walked. There was a dark patch of something on her mouth and chin which was spreading across her cheek and dripping onto the soldier’s suit.

“Shite.”

Adams grabbed his wife’s limp arm and was speaking to her, which seemed to annoy the soldier who pulled her away from him and strode off. Adams followed a few laboured paces behind, clearly in extreme distress.

It was like watching a movie but one where the protagonists might soon show up on your doorstep. Kyle forced himself to switch to the monitor showing the burning cars, and instantly regretted it.

A man was standing by the burning car holding a shotgun. He pointed it into the car and fired at the unfortunate shadows inside. They surely must have already been dead, but who knew what anyone would do in that situation, Kyle thought grimly. Maybe they had been friends, or God forbid family.

The gunman turned back to the car in the ditch as a woman struggled to push herself out of a back window. He ran down and rested the shotgun against the car and helped pull her all the way out. Then together they leaned into the car’s window and pulled out what Kyle thought at first was a large ruck sack or bundle of something. But the bundle wrapped its arms around the woman’s neck.

It was a child of perhaps eight or nine.

“Oh, Jesus,” Kyle uttered in growing despair.

Just how many people knew about this place anyway? His phone rang. He picked it up seeing Masie’s name.

“Masie, where are you? These a fucking family out there now!”

For a moment there was nothing on the other end but laboured breathing.

“Masie?”

“Kyle...” Her voice was weak. She let out a horrific wet cough which chilled Kyle to the bone.

“Masie?” He asked cautiously. “You okay?”

“Yeah, course,” she replied weakly. “I’m close, should be there in a sec’.”

He heard the phone clatter to the ground, then Masie fumbling to pick it up before it went dead. She was wheezing like an asthmatic after a marathon. And for the first time since she had called him and set this whole sorry mess into motion. *‘It’s started.’* His thought process was crystal clear.

She was too late. The thought was cold, calculating and its finality was oddly comforting, as it laser focused his mind. There was enough food and water here to last two people three maybe four months. But if rationed it could last one person maybe six.

Was he really thinking what he was thinking?

In a distant dream world somewhere, he heard the door buzzer go off. There was a long pause, then it went off again. Kyle slowly spun in the chair and looked across at the reassuringly solid metal door. The buzzer went off a third time followed by four beeps and the familiar rejection tone.

Well in fairness he thought absently, it had been her idea to change the code.

She tried again, maybe the same numbers, maybe she was trying to guess the new code. He felt that familiar pang of anxiety once more. Maise was smart, he had no doubt that she *thought* he knew him, knew his ‘limited’ intellect.

Condescending bitch! But despite this he couldn’t shift the overwhelming feeling that once she had tried the inevitable K.Y.L.E maybe even M.A.Z.E she would eventually work out his undeniable immaturity and try F.U.C.K.

“Bollocks!” he snapped. Why hadn’t he thought of something more original and less... Him.

He wracked his brain for another code, something more off the cuff that he best write down. But that clarity of thought he had briefly enjoyed was slipping away with each passing BEEP, BEEP, BEEP, BEEP as she tried one code after the other.

After her latest attempt he braced himself convinced that this time she had figured him out. But there was no sickening metallic ‘clunk!’ and she didn’t burst in, bringing God only knew what poison with her. Oh yeah, and she had a gun.

The intercom crackled into life.

“Kyle? Kyle it’s me,” her disembodied voice sounded sharp and cold through the speaker.

He glanced back at the monitor covering the door, she was looking up at the camera with a weak smile. And he almost ran to the door and let her in, seeing her face, one he had longed to see at that very door all through this nightmare.

What was he doing? Half of him wanted to punch that door release button, the other screamed at him to stay strong, stay safe.

Kyle roared in frustration at the ceiling. The bottle of Lorazepam shifted slightly on the desk as he pounded his fist on it. It was tempting, but he hadn't read the side effects, what if it knocked him out and she finally figured out the code.

Think! Stay focused!

Kyle concentrated on the monitor and did his best to examine the grainy image of Masie's face on the screen. She seemed okay for all he could tell. She certainly wasn't bleeding or staggering about like Adams and his wife. Stressed for sure, but who wouldn't be? But then again, what did he know about the effects of this *thing* running amok out there?

"Kyle, it's okay. Let me in," her face was benign, understanding even.

He looked into her pixilated eyes and there was no hint of deception there.

"What's the new code, baby?" She asked.

"I can't let you in," Kyle said redundantly to the door.

He was filled with a heavy sense of guilt, at finally saying it out loud. But not having the courage to tell her himself. Christ how could he? He wrapped his arms around himself as tears came. Was it getting colder in here? Or was he going into shock?

He moved his attention to one of the other screens, more to avoid Masie's plight than anything. The soldier in the NBC suit was gently placing Mrs. Adams on the ground in a small barren area somewhere within the thick woods. She began thrashing violently, Professor Adams knelt next to her and seemed to be making a vain attempt at calming his wife.

"Jesus, God," Kyle whispered and hung his head, unable to watch any more.

He was seriously debating turning all the monitors off and just sit here in this steel womb until it was all over outside. Yes, that sounded good, maybe dose himself up with Lorazepam, bury his head under a ton of pillows in the bunk room and sleep away the apocalypse.

"Kyle!" Masie's voice distorted through the speaker, pulling him back to reality.

“Masie, I can’t...”

He got up and went over to the door. He desperately wanted to say something to her, something she could actually hear but he just couldn’t bring himself to hit the talk button.

Kyle let out a soft sob and pressed his forehead against the cold metal of the door. Trying to force some kind of connection between them, without actually touching her.

“Oh, Maze,” he felt tears stinging the back of his eyes.

But he couldn’t have said, even with a gun to his head, if the impending waterworks were for Masie stranded out there, or for poor Kyle Easterbrook, caught in the grip of indecision.

“Kyle, at least talk to me,” Maise pleaded.

Back at the monitors, Kyle saw the family from the dirt track trudging into view, they looked bedraggled and tired. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he vaguely knew the man. Probably one of Masie’s worker bees from the university, he reasoned. Although God knows where he got a shotgun from.

“It’s not my fault,” he told them.

His heart sank, the mother, who had been giving the boy a piggyback, let him slip back down to the ground, his legs gave way instantly and he fell on his backside in the mud. But unlike any kid Kyle had ever known, the boy just sat there. He didn’t cry, didn’t hold out his hands to be picked up. Just sat there.

The mother staggered a little and rested herself against the trunk of a tree. Kyle could see a black stain down the front of her bright pink coat.

Back with Adams. It was a growing catalogue of horrors all playing out on the monitors like an interactive snuff film. The soldier was nowhere to be seen, he had left Adams and his wife sat up against a tree stump. The professor put his arm around his wife, whose face was now absolutely covered in what he could only imagine was blood. She doubled over and spewed up a massive amount all over her legs and began convulsing again.

Kyle pressed the intercom talk button before he had realised he had done so.

“Maze... Why didn’t you wear an NBC suit?” It was an accusation as much as a question.

“Kyle!!? Oh, thank Christ, I thought you were... Open the door, please, baby,” the relief was palpable even through the small speaker.

Tell her you can't Kyle, tell her the truth.

"Masie... The suit," he repeated.

"What? Oh, I'm a tech soldier, I couldn't get one in time. Don't worry, it's still okay. Let me in."

She was desperately scanning the edge of the clearing now, pistol at the ready with her free hand.

"Kyle, for Christ's sake, let me in."

Kyle thought of the Adams', the blood, jet black on the monitor. The family too, gradually succumbing to the poisoned air. He closed his eyes and listened to the life-giving hum of the air filtration unit.

"You said it had started," he said as if in some way of explanation for his cowardice.

"Kyle, I told you I'm okay. It hasn't gotten this far yet. There's still time. Let me in!!" Her normal rational calm had fled.

"I see everything in here," he told her coldly. "I see people dying out there already."

"Kyle!"

"Look up into the camera again. Let me get a good look at your face." He turned to the monitor covering the door.

She shouted something he couldn't hear because she didn't press the intercom. He didn't need to read her lips. She was pissed off, but more than that. She was scared.

He did his best to shake off any lingering indecision that was gnawing at the back of his mind. He had to be strong, after all he was the one being reasonable. He was the one being a good soldier.

"Show me your face," he instructed firmly, eyes fixed on the monitor.

He saw her mouth 'fuck you' but then she seemed to check herself. Yes see!? Kyle thought. You know I'm right. Be a good girl, Masie, show me you're really okay.

"Masie," he drew the word out like a sarcastic child. It was perverse but he found he was actually enjoying being the one in control for a change in this relationship. She had the brain smarts, for sure. But he had the door code.

She finally turned and looked up into the camera, her face like thunder. She held out her arms defiantly. 'Well?'

The arrogance and self-righteousness drained right out of him in a heartbeat, replaced by an ice-cold nausea. And he let out a soft moan.

“Masie... Your nose is bleeding.”

A look of shock flashed across her grainy face, and she touched her nose with the back of her hand, and it came away speered with black.

She elbowed the talk button.

“Kyle, it’s not what you think, I got into a fight, back at the gate with the security guard,” she was clearly rambling. “He wouldn’t let me pass, said I wasn’t on the daily log.”

“Oh, Masie,” he said softly to himself.

The guard had let him straight in and he didn’t even work here. He even knew she was on her way, but of course Masie would have known that if she were thinking straight.

Kyle turned and slid down the door until he was sitting on the cold concrete floor. He tucked his knees up under his chin. She’s already dead, he thought soberly, and there was no getting away from that fact now. Tears came and he began to sob. They were all dead out there, Masie, the Adams’ and that poor family with the kid. Christ, maybe the whole country.

Conversely, he didn’t feel at all safe, despite the sealed walls and air filtration. What was there to say they were any use against this thing poisoning the world anyway? And hadn’t he himself been outside *after* it had all started? Who was to say he had made it here in time?

And then of course he remembered with growing horror. There were all those precious minutes when the door had opened and he had fumbled around in the dark to start the generator.

Who was to say this wasn’t all just some cosmic joke with him, already dead despite this wonder of modern technology all around him as the punch line?

As the enormity of events finally hit him, Kyle was suddenly finding it hard to breath. He choked out the last sob of self-pity but still couldn’t quite catch his breath. His heart was hammering hit to burst right out of his chest. He tried to swallow, could he taste blood? He cried out in shock and dragged himself unsteadily to his feet.

He staggered back against the door to stop himself from collapsing all together. His lungs felt oddly heavy, like they were filling with liquid. He looked across to the monitors, Adams’ wife was laid in the Professor’s lap, convulsing violently, and then a fountain of black blood spurted out of her mouth covering them both in gore.

Kyle gagged at the sight, he checked his nose, his eyes. There was plenty of tears and snot, but nothing ominous as yet. But he still had to fight to force the air into his aching lungs. Could this be Psychosomatic? He spat on the floor, just regular spit, no blood despite the coppery taste in his mouth.

“Thank Christ,” he managed to choke out.

Panic attack, he told himself. The bunker was spinning now so he screwed his eyes shut. You’re having a panic attack, just breathe. But no matter how much he tried he couldn’t regulate his shallow, staccato breaths.

“Kyle!” Masie voice, metallic, a million miles away. “Kyle, open the door!!”

Kyle opened his eyes and did his best to concentrate on the monitor table across the other side of the bunker. He staggered forwards on legs that weren’t his own, arms outstretched like a drunkard desperate for one last drink at the bar. His thighs hit the edge of the table as he crashed into it and a stab of pain ran up his legs.

The bottle of Lorazepam toppled over, and he just managed to grab it before it rolled off the table. He turned and half sat half rested his backside on the edge of the table. He tried to read the small label through tears of panic.

The words seemed to dance and ripple before his eyes. He closed one and tried to read, and old drunken trick. Dose - Two millilitres, no two milligrams? How many grams in a litre? Fuck, no, concentrate. It’s two *milligrams*! Wasn’t it? If he wasn’t careful, he was going to overdose.

“Fuck!”

But try as he might, he couldn’t make head nor tail of the instructions. He picked up the packet of syringes, ripped it open and took out a syringe. He stuck the needle into the silver foil top of the bottle, his hands were shaking so much it took him several attempts. But if he thought it was hard trying to read the label, the numbers on the thin syringe were impossible to make out.

“Christ!!” he cried out in frustration and growing hysteria. Again, that taste of blood in his mouth, had he bitten his lip in his mania, or was this the beginning of the end?

The intercom buzzer went off again, pulling him from the brink just a little. Masie. Masie was smart, she would know how much to take.

He pitched forwards and barrelled over to the door. He slammed hard into it with his shoulder and the pain help clear his head somewhat. He looked back at the monitors

which seemed to be at the end of a very long dark tunnel. Maise was leant against the door sobbing. Kyle managed to hit the talk button and saw her jerk in shock.

“Masie, I...” He needed to clear this mind, he was mentally tripping over the countless thoughts ricocheting around his head, and it was like English was suddenly a second language.

“Maise, I’m losing it, I need you,” he blurted out unsure if it was even intelligible.

Yes, yes it was as Maise turned to the intercom and listened.

“I need a shot of that drug, the sedative from the medical kit.”

“Lorazepam?”

Masie was smart.

“Yes, yes that’s it! But I can’t make sense of the label! Masie, please, what’s the dose?”

She shook her head wearily in disbelief.

“Panic attacks don’t usually kick in until the second week,” she said. And even through the speaker the sarcasm was clear.

Masie was too smart.

“Tell me the dose and I’ll let you in,” he replied in desperation.

He felt like he had run a marathon in a heat wave. He was soaked in sweat and his head was swimming as he fought for a half decent breath.

“Let me in and I’ll give you the shot myself.”

He was shocked to see his hand drift over the door release button, and he pulled it away.

“No,” he replied, trying to concentrate. “After you tell me.”

“Kyle!?”

“That’s the deal.”

“Deal!!?” She caught herself and ran her hands through her short, cropped hair the way she always did when she was trying to calm down.

“Zero point zero two, millilitres,” she said after an age.

Kyle looked at the shaking bottle and syringe, and willed his hands to steady, even a little. He was just going to have to stick the thing in his leg and hope for the best.

“And you don’t have to inject it,” Masie said as if anticipating his predicament. “Just squirt it under your tongue. That will work fine too, just take a little longer to kick in.”

“Thank you,” he said and slid down the door and onto his back side.

He pulled his legs up and wedged the bottle between his knees and pressed them hard together. This steadied the bottle and the syringe sticking out of the top just enough for him to delicately pull up the syringe plunger, he concentrated on the numbers and stopped as the black rubber at the end reached the zero point zero two marker. It might have been a little over, but he would gladly risk it. He pulled out the syringe and squirted it under his tongue.

He closed his eyes and waited for the drug to take effect.

And waited and waited. It might have been ten seconds or ten minutes but, although he did feel a little less anxious, probably due to just successfully taking the drug, his heart was still hammering fit to bust his ribs and his breathing was only a little deeper.

Kyle struggled to his feet. Had she told him the right dose? Maybe she was wrong about not injecting?

“Maise, it’s not working,” he said into the intercom.

“Christ Kyle, it’ll take a while. Just try and relax.”

“Relax!? Relax? That’s why I took the fucking thing in the first place!!” He ranted.

He suddenly felt faint at the outburst and had to lean against the door to stop himself from toppling over.

“Fuck...”

“You took the right dose, yeah?” Maise said.

Kyle felt a flash of anger.

“Of course! I’m not a fucking idiot.”

“Kyle! You’re gonna have a heart attack if you don’t calm, down! Let me in, I can help.”

Kyle thought back to the others outside and the way Mrs. Adams had convulsed, throwing up that horrific mess.

“Kyle, I did what you asked.”

“You are already dead,” he whispered to himself.

He gradually became aware that he wasn’t shaking quite so much, his thoughts were not quite so jumbled. He looked back over at the monitors, but not with dread this time, but a sense of detachment. Professor Adams had begun staggering around, he double over in a coughing fit. His wife was laid motionless on the ground close by. There was no sign of the white suited soldier or the family. The plague family he thought dispassionately.

And for the first time since all this had started, Kyle felt a sense of tranquillity wash over him. He took in the bunker, his home for the foreseeable future and it didn't seem such a terrifying proposal now. He was safe, Maise had designed it, watched over it as it was built. Masie was smart, he needn't have worried about its integrity.

He drifted away from the door and slumped down contently in the chair in front of the monitors. Masie was on one, shouting something he could not hear. The Adam's on another in what he imagined was their death throws.

And finally, the family trio, they had appeared through the woods and looked very much the worse for wear. But it didn't touch him in the slightest. He was feeling too contented, like he was wrapped in cottonwool and had just drunk a large glass of warming whiskey. It was like watching a tv show while drifting off to sleep. Even the child, who was vomiting black goo onto the ground was just some actor and special effects.

"Not so bad," he sighed with a smile.

He could feel his heart slowing with each beat and he took a deep cleansing breath and couldn't quite remember what had gotten him so riled up in the first place.

"Not, so, bad..."

The reassuring warmth of the drug was now all enveloping. He left the desk and glided over to the living area and turned on the TV. Maybe there was a better show on it than the one outside.

All the channels were off, some had 'please stand by,' cards. Others just spat static, but Kyle didn't care. He went through into the bunk room and collapsed on the first one he came to. Perhaps, he wondered as he slipped off to sleep. Everything would be back to normal when he awoke. Oh yes, he liked the thought of that.

Kyle woke from the middle of a drugged, blissful half remembered dream, into a waking nightmare. The polar opposite to that feeling of serenity and hope he had drifted off to.

When he opened his eyes, the lights were off, and he could hear shuffling coming from the living area beyond the still open bunk room door.

Hollow voices now, whispering, laughing. He swung his legs over the edge of the bunk and got to his feet. He swooned at the effort, no doubt the lingering effects of the drug,

which was slowing his thought process. Then it hit him, if the lights were off that meant the generator and battery backup had stopped working. No air filter... No door lock!

They were inside, they were all inside! Kyle desperately scrambled around in the dark for anything he could use as a weapon. Then he was hit by a massive wave of nausea, and before he could react, his stomach cramped violently, and he threw up a torrent of black blood.

“Oh, Jesus God!” He gasped.

“Glad you could join us, Kyle,” a familiar voice said from the doorway behind him.

He turned to see Maise standing in the near darkness, her deathly white face suspended in the gloom. A grinning death’s head, all teeth and soulless eyes. Her breathing, such as it was, nothing more than a desiccated wheezing death rattle.

“Masie...” Was all he managed before another wave hit him.

His stomach felt like it was on fire, he doubled over and collapsed in a growing pool of black acrid smelling blood. Bright flecks of light danced around his head and he could hear Masie’s hollow laugh as it filled the room, bouncing off the walls around him.

“There, there,” she said with a ghoulish glee. “It only hurts for like, forever. FYI, that’s your innards liquifying, quite the sensation, isn’t it?”

Kyle began wailing and thrashing around on the floor clutching at his stomach. Her cruel, mocking laughter louder and harsher with each of his accompanying sobs.

The short sharp buzzing of the intercom someway off cut through the laughter. Then again as the laughter began to fade.

Kyle jolted away with a shrill scream. The bright overhead lights blinded him, and it seemed to take him a full minute of disorientation to realise he was slumped over the monitor desk.

It had been a dream a damn nightmare, but still he couldn’t shake the utter terror it had induced in him. A quick glance behind him confirmed the door was still very much locked, the hum of the air filtration system a welcome background noise.

His thought process was laborious at best and not just from being wrenched from a deep sleep. It felt a lot like he was hung over, not the pain, just the feeling each thought he tried to formulate had to drag itself through a lake of thick treacle. The ongoing effect of the drug no doubt.

The buzzer sounded again which should have set his nerves on edge, but his reaction to it was so delayed and muted, by the time it had registered it had lost all power to startle. That he thought ponderously, he could live with.

“Kyle?” Masie’s voice tinny and distant through the speaker. “Are you dead yet?”

That did sour his serene mood just a little.

He took in the monitors, one at a time. It was dark outside, but he could just make out what looked like a dozen or so ghost-like figures shuffling through the woods. Their faces as white as Masie’s had been in the nightmare.

That soured his mood a little more.

Maise was by the door, she was clinging to the frame as she rested her head against the intercom. But he could still see she was deathly white, except for the black blood around her mouth and chin, which was dripping onto her jacket.

With great effort, Kyle tried to stand, but his legs refused to let him. He planted his hands on the desk and tried to push himself up, but he was as weak as a child.

“What the hell...” The rest of the sentence stuck in his throat at the sound of his own voice. He was slurring like a paralytic student on freshers’ night.

“God, God!” Even those two syllables were an effort.

He figured the drug might make him a little spaced out, but this was so much worse.

“Kyle, speak to me, lover, if you can,” Maise taunted from outside.

Movement on the edge of the clearing set off the proximity lights on the top of the bunker and Kyle saw eight of the figures from the wood were now at the very edge of the clearing, shuffling forwards. Just like Masie, they were all deathly white, where they weren’t covered in black blood.

It was now he noticed five, no six figures laid motionless on the ground. One was the white suited soldier, his rifle was discarded in the dirt by his body. Kyle could make out several ragged bullet holes in the suit.

“Jesus.”

Then the overhead lights seemed to flicker. Was it a trick of his drug addled brain? He shielded his over sensitive eyes and looked up at the strip just above his head. And yes, there was no doubt, it dimmed ever so slightly then flickered again, before stabilising once more.

Some of the figures in the woods were moving through the trees and into the clearing. As the proximity lights hit them Kyle saw it was the family of three as came into view. The boy was walking haltingly next to his mother like a toddler who had just learnt to walk, but Kyle could now see he was probably ten years old at the least. His young face all but covered in dripping black.

Five others in similar states of distress followed but Kyle didn't know who they were. But just like the rest they had come to this place in hope of salvation. But just like the rest, they were too late.

He checked his phone which was down to its last bar of power. The network symbol had a line through it, which meant all the mobile towers were offline now.

He was about to throw the phone across the room when he noticed the date.

"Holy, Christ!"

All this had started on Tuesday morning, hadn't it? He thought so, yes Tuesday. It was now 7.30 on Thursday evening. He had lost nearly two days since taking the Lorazepam! The light flickered briefly again, as did the monitors and the lights outside.

He could see Masie looking up at the flickering lights. A grin crossed her ghoulish features. She wasn't too far gone to know what that meant. Beyond the tree line, Kyle could make out yet more ghostly figures in the woods. Some were just wandering around, clearly in distress or thrashing around as the poison in the air took its toll on them. Yet more still seemed to me making their way towards the clearing, and the light there, moths to the flame.

"Say," Masie's voice came through the intercom. "That generator has been on for an awfully long time."

The shock of realization gave Kyle just enough energy to push himself to his feet. Using anything he could to lean on he made his way into the living area. He could see plates on the coffee table with half eaten food on them. Over in the kitchen area there were pots and pans and the detritus of abandoned food preparation strewn everywhere.

But he had no memory of any of it. He must have been conscious to some extent during his black out. Christ! Hours and hours of stumbling around the place, with all the lights, monitors and God only knew what else on sapping the power.

He came haltingly through the living area, using the furniture to brace himself, then he slid along the back wall and over to the half open door of the storage room. He eased the

door further open and came inside. Tins and ration packs were everywhere, and it looked like the room had been attacked by a pack of wild dogs.

“God damn it!” Try as he might, he couldn’t remember any of this.

Using the racks on the right, Kyle slowly picked his way through the debris and down to the generator room at the very end. He could hear the thing chugging away as he approached and when he opened the door he was hit with a blast of fumes and heat.

He unscrewed the petrol cap and peered inside. He couldn’t see any fuel at all, again, that stab of fear, but the drug soon smothered it, just not as effectively as before. He did his best to ignore the residual low hum of panic in the pit of his stomach and nudged the generator, so it rocked slightly.

The overhead light glinted off the very bottom of the tank which had a thin layer of petrol sloshing around. It was almost down to fumes.

He kicked the petrol can by the generator already knowing it was empty and it clattered against the wall.

The generator gave a shudder and spluttered, the lights flickered again, and Kyle held his breath, willing the thing to keep going. He gritted his teeth as it seemed about to give up the ghost, then it rallied again, and the lights brightened. But for how much longer?

His future suddenly came to him with ice cold clarity. If the generator goes down, the battery back-up kicks in. But that has a very limited life. And once the battery packed up, the power would go out...

And Kyle Easterbrook knew only too well what that meant.

He pitched forward as the realization hit him. He reached out and caught a hold of a wooden shelf on the wall over the generator to stop himself from cracking his head. His fingers touched something metallic. He picked it up, it was a key with a label attached. He turned the label over and read.

‘Fuel shed key.’

It took him a while, but once Kyle had made his way clumsily back to the monitors, he panned, zoomed and scanned one of the cameras covering the clearing. He was having real trouble focusing his eyes but after a third go around he finally saw it.

Tucked off to one side, at the very edge of the clearing and just visible in the midst of a bunch of overgrown bushes was the outline of a small metal shed. It had a sign on the door, but he didn't need to read it.

The lights flickered again.

"Bet the air filtration isn't working so well," Masie taunted through the intercom.

Was that why he was feeling so shitty? Kyle wondered with unease. Had the virus or whatever it was killing everyone outside somehow made its way in after all?

The lights and the monitor screens flickered, died for a moment, came back on for a second, then he was plunged into total darkness.

Kyle screamed as the constant hum of the air filtration unit slowly ground to a halt and he was left with nothing but his panic breathing. The Lorazepam was good, but even that couldn't soothe the fear of impending death.

Kyle got up and barrelled headfirst in the direction of the entrance door, he hit the wall and fumbled blindly until he found the handle and pressed his weight against the door for either the battery to kick in, or the ominous death rattle of the door lock failing.

Then the sweet sound of; Beep, beep, beep. And the lights, monitors, and thank Christ the air filtration came back on as the battery backup kicked in.

Kyle rested his hands on his thighs and sucked in air. He couldn't tell if it was the drug or just the sheer panic, but he felt ready to throw up again.

Either way he had a little more time.

Over on the monitors the proximity lights had taken a little longer to come back on. The picture strobed for a second and he could make out Masie pushing against the door with her shoulder. She took a step back in dismay when the lights finally kicked in.

"Nice try," Kyle breathed in relief.

Suddenly the young boy broke into a sprint and ran screaming into the door. He hit it hard, and Kyle winced on the kid's behalf, the lad staggered back, his shoulder at an odd angle, then he rallied a little and ran at it again, headfirst. Blood hit the shiny metal of the door.

Again, the kid staggered two paces back. He stood staring at the entrance with a look of pure feral hatred on his young face, but this time didn't attack again.

"Fucking hell," Kyle watched the manic display, mesmerised by the sheer ferocity of the onslaught.

He could only imagine what the growing hoard would do if they actually got inside.

He looked at the keypad and the battery indicator and he knew it wouldn't last that long. He needed to preserve as much power as possible until he figured out how the hell to get to the fuel shed and back without contaminating himself.

He dragged himself over to the monitor desk and turned off every screen except the one with the cameras covering the clearing and entrance door. Then he slowly made his way through the entire bunker, turning off every light and appliance he could find. Leaving only the air filtration unit and the one monitor, which he would use as his only light source for now.

Kyle finally collapsed in the chair in front of the monitors, gasping for air and completely exhausted from the extreme effort it had taken him to perform just those simple tasks.

He was definitely feeling ill, there was no getting away from it. The old thoughts of paranoia started to bubble to the surface once more, gaining dominance over the drug which must be diluting now as it coursed through his system. Had the virus gotten in when the filtration went briefly down?

Or, which was a more terrifying thought, what if the place wasn't truly air tight all along? It was a prototype he reminded himself and not for the first time since entering.

"Stop it!" He admonished himself.

The last thing he needed was to give in to despair and morbid speculation. He needed to think straight. He needed...

Lorazepam. The bottle and syringe were on the desk to his left, although he had no recollection of doing so, he had put them back during his blackout. He reached down the desk and picked up the bottle and syringe. He looked at the label, despite his growing distress, his hands were thankfully steadier than before. He squinted at the tiny lettering and waited for his eyes to focus.

What was the dose? The numbers seemed to ripple before his eyes so he couldn't make them out. He wracked his brain trying to remember the dose Masie had told him and to his surprise it popped straight into his head.

'Zero point zero two millilitres.' Strange he could remember, but he supposed it had saved his life before.

He moved to stick the syringe into the top of the bottle again when the numbers and lettering finally came into focus.

‘Recommended dose: Zero point zero *zero* two millilitres no more than three times a day.’

Kyle paused, that couldn’t be right. She had definitely told him to take zero point zero two millilitres. It was wedged in his brain.

Kyles blood chilled. Had he misheard? He didn’t know shit about maths or medical doses, but that must have been a massive overdose. He dropped the bottle, his hands shaking violently once more.

Then he remembered Maise’s taunt at the door when he had first come around. ‘Are you dead yet?’ Why would she have said that? What else? Yes, something about ‘talk to me, *if you can.*’

“Fucking bitch!” He slurred.

No wonder he had blacked out for so long. Christ, she had deliberately caused him to overdose! She had tried to kill him! No wonder he felt like death warmed up, then out of nowhere he laughed. It was strange, but despite his outrage, it was tempered with the realisation that all this disorientation, blackouts and nausea had nothing to do with the virus outside.

He was the fucking experiencing the aftereffects of a drug overdose and although he felt shocking, he was alive, it hadn’t killed him.

Then another thing hit him. He hadn’t used the intercom since he had come around. So, for all Masie knew, he was indeed dead. Not so clever after all, are you sweetheart? He thought mischievously.

Right, he told himself. Calm the fuck down, you’re alive, and this bunker is the only thing that’s going to keep you that way. So, you need to pull yourself together and figure out how the hell you are going to get to that fuel shed. It felt good to have a focus and it helped clear his mind somewhat.

He tried to remember anything Masie might have told him about the bunker during her tour. But if he was honest, he had switched off for most of it, eager as he was to get her to the bunks and out of her uniform.

The bunks! There were lockers next to every bunk for weapons and uniform storage, wasn't there? He doubted he would find guns but there might be something in them he could use. He thought back to the soldier in the NBC suit. He had died by shooting and not the shit in the air.

And just like that he had a plan. If he could get an NBC suit or something similar, then he could get outside. They were all fucked up out there and he had the element of surprise, plus his very ex-girlfriend thought he was probably already dead.

He'd grab a couple of cans of fuel and make it back here hopefully before they had any clue what was going on. He even then remembered, it would be a good idea to stay in the suit for a while once he was back, to give the air filter time to purify the air once more.

Christ, it might just work, he thought with great pride. All those years of being insecure about his intelligence and he had come up with this all on his own. And what was more, all the brainiacs with their fancy degrees and condescending looks were out there, dead or dying and he was in here, safe, and with a kick ass plan.

Hope, that great motivator. A sudden rush of purpose filled adrenaline ran through Kyle's body and out of nowhere he burst into tears of relief.

Although it had taken up most of Kyle's remaining energy and a good ten minutes of searching, he had found an NBC suit in an airtight suit carrier type garment bag in one of the lockers which lined the back wall of the bunk house.

Next to this was a metal, thankfully unlocked cabinet in which he had found a row of gas masks, each individually sealed in polythene type bags. Everything a growing boy would need to survive the apocalypse, apart from a gun unfortunately. But, despite his growing self-confidence, Kyle was still self-aware enough to know that was a good thing as he would probably end up blowing his own foot off.

He put the suit half on and then tied the arms around his waist for comfort while he sat back down at the monitors to survey his opposition. The suit had been easy enough to put on as much to his relief it wasn't some space aged contraction with valves and tubes, but in truth was little more than glorified zip up onesie, made from thin white plastic like material, complete with booties and black plastic gloves already attached.

The zip at the front also had a Velcro like strip next to it which once it was zipped up could seal you in completely, which was extra reassuring. The black gasmask had a ridge

all the way around the face part which he deduced the suits hood would feed into. He had also found a roll of gaffer tape which he would use to seal everything even more.

All he needed now was the right moment to exit then he would suit up proper. During his time watching the clearing and the woods beyond, he had seen the dozen or so shambling figures thin out, either as they wandered off into the woods or just keeled over dead. It would have been easier to think of them as zombies out of a movie, but he had observed all too human traits in the half hour or so to believe that.

He had seen them fight amongst themselves, cry, gather around the entrance, mutely threatening or begging for help. He had seen some scream at the night sky, perhaps to an uncaring God. Before most shuffled away into the woods. He could still see them amongst the trees some way off as they wandered in the dark. Those he didn't need to worry about.

Now Kyle counted maybe eleven bodies in the clearing, and a twelfth laid just by the treeline. That was the dead, Kyle scanned and panned one of the cameras. There was only Masie, and two others still milling around that he could see. All three clearly feeling the devastating effects of whatever was killing everyone.

Maise looked shocking, there hadn't been any taunts or threats since the generator had shut down, she didn't seem to know or care what that meant when the battery failed.

"Oh, Masie," any anger he had felt at the overdose had long since dissipated.

As he watched she stumbled off towards the trees like a drunkard. Ever the soldier, she was still clutching the pistol in her hand. And Kyle wondered grimly if she was going to find somewhere private to shoot herself rather than suffer any longer.

He waited until she had disappeared into the dark wood. That just left the other two, both men Kyle didn't know. And just like Maise they looked to be on their last legs.

The battery indicator on the keypad had told him there was just two bars left the last time he had checked. As if he needed reminding time was of the essence.

Kyle had made sure he had turned off everything but the essentials to preserve the battery but the one thing he couldn't control was the proximity light, which would maddingly come on every time someone moved outside, helping drain the already dwindling power supply. He had even consulted the hated PDF but could find nothing to disable it.

He angled the camera to take in the woods, there were still plenty of shapes shuffling around, just visible at the very edge of the light's reach, but he knew he couldn't sit here forever waiting for the right moment. He had to make a decision.

One of the men in the clearing collapsed and the other knelt next to him and seemed to be trying to help.

"Poor bastards," Kyle uttered.

Grim as it was, that was the que he had been waiting for. It was now, or never. He stood and zipped up the suit and awkwardly struggled to put the mask on. It took him a frustrating amount of time to manoeuvre it into what felt like the right place so that it felt tight against his skull. Then he had to thread the hood into the groove around the facemask.

There was a mirror on the wall in the living area, Kyle went through and examined himself. He looked the real deal, then he jumped up and down and it all seemed to stay intact.

Back at the monitor desk, he took the tape and ripped off several strips and covered the Velcro zip cover and taped the edge of the gasmask where it fitted to the hood as best he could.

Kyle was acutely aware he may have put the whole thing on wrong anyway and would be committing suicide the moment he stepped outside. But he also knew he had no choice but to at least try. Afterall he would be dead soon enough if he stayed put.

He put the fuel shed key in a Velcro breast pouch and moved over to the door, the suit was light, and he was surprised just how easily he could walk. The battery indicator was now down to one bar.

"Fucking proximity lights!" he cursed and his voice sounded weird in the mask.

Over on the monitor, the man was trying to pull his fallen friend up and onto his knees, all the time shouting what must have been encouragements to keep going.

Kyle took a couple of deep breaths and raised his hand to the door release button. He felt lightheaded, but any fatigue he had been feeling was burnt away by the adrenaline overdose coursing through his veins.

"Three, eight, two, five, three, eight, two, five." He would need to be quick punching the entrance code in once he had the cans.

Three, eight, two, five.

Fuck indeed.

He punched the door release button and a moment later came the metallic ‘clunk’ as the lock released. The door opened slightly, and he pulled it open a little further so he could slip outside.

The two men were holding on to each other like Saturday night town drunks.

“Come on, George, come on mate, gotta keep going,” the helper coaxed.

The other man wailed something incomprehensible that chilled Kyle with its sheer desperation.

He turned and pulled the door, and it closed with a satisfying ‘click’ as it locked once more. He turned back and was about to set off when he saw the helper, who had abandoned his friend and was now standing bolt upright staring straight at him in wild eyed disbelief.

Now that he could see the man’s face properly, Kyle had to fight the urge to turn and flee back inside. Even accentuated by the harsh proximity lights, where the pallid skin was visible, the man’s partially black blood splattered face was so impossibly white it almost glowed.

But what made the death-like mask of his features even worse, were his blood red eyes and the burning hate behind them as he looked upon the author of all his pain. Then the man’s eyes flashed with something close to recognition.

“Kyle fucking Easterbrook?” His voice sounded like he had been gargling with broken glass.

Kyle winced at the unexpected sound of his own name coming from such a monstrous face. Did he recognise the man after all? Parsons, yes, something Parsons, from Maise’s team.

“Parsons?”

As if triggered by this, Parsons let out a shriek of pure murderous hate and ran full pelt at Kyle. Luckily for him, it was blind rage, so all Kyle had to do was side-step at the last minute and Parsons hit the door head first and hard.

He bounced back a foot or so then crumpled to the ground where he started to convulse violently and spewing jets of black blood.

Kyle moved away and caught sight of the soldier laid dead close by. He saw the rifle in the dirt by his side. He scooped it up and swung it in Parson's direction, but the impact had all but killed the man.

"Christ!"

Kyle turned to the other man, George, but he was just sitting on the ground watching him in mute confusion as if he was looking at some sort of alien. No threat.

He made his way across the clearing and over to the shed, all the time scanning the woods for any sign of the many infected roaming around out there.

"Fuck," he could see several moving shadows, closer than before, probably attracted by Parson's shrieking.

He propped himself against the shed and lamely aimed the rifle at one of the shuffling figures, then another. But he could barely see out of the mask as it was, let alone aim a weapon. Hopefully, they were moving slow enough to give him enough time to get the fuel and get back to the bunker before they were a threat. Hopefully.

Kyle leant the rifle against the side of the shed, and began fumbling with the Velcro pouch, which he now found had been much easier to close than to open with his fucking Micky Mouse gloves on. After an agonising struggle he finally managed to rip open the top and fish out the key.

Another glance to the trees, yes, they were getting closer, their moon-like faces bobbing in the dark as they approached. At least eight now, that he could quickly count. He tore himself away and concentrated on the door. Somehow, he managed to get the key in the padlock first time, which won an involuntary yelp of relief, and he turned the key.

He pulled off the padlock and let it fall to the ground, and then pulled the door open. The proximity light at his back cast a paltry amount of brightness into the shed at this distance, couple with him standing in the doorway. But there was enough light for Kyle to see a row of six twenty litre green army fuel cans.

"Yes!" he exclaimed in relief.

He would only be able to carry two back to the bunker but judging by the size of them they would fill the generator several times over and if he rationed the power, it would last him a week or so. Then he would always have the option to come back out for more later. When surely, he mused grimly, everyone would be dead.

He stepped into the shed and grabbed the handles of the first two cans and bracing himself against their weight he lifted them and stepped back.

They were empty.

“The fuck?”

He staggered back comically in shock and let them clatter to the ground. He looked down at the cans almost accusingly, then moved back into the shed and grabbed the next two.

Empty.

A mixture of panic and rage welled up inside him. He tossed the empty cans aside and kicked at the remaining two. They toppled over, filled with nothing but air.

He tried to speak but the utter shock of it had robbed him of his voice. He staggered out of the shed and glanced back across the clearing to the bunker in despair. The building had once been his saviour, but soon if he went back inside. It would be his tomb.

Now he knew how those poor souls out here had felt. So close, yet so far. He let out a strangled sob.

“It’s not fair,” he said finally finding his voice.

“Someone’s gonna get fired for that,” a familiar if horribly mangled voice said from behind him. “If I told them once, I told them a hundred times to get those refilled.”

Masie.

Kyle’s heart seemed to stop as the shock hit him. He glanced down at there the rifle was propped against the shed. He slowly turned on his heel to face her.

It was Maise, but only just. She had the look of a wild animal about her and was grinning wider than he thought was humanly possible, her exposed teeth flecked with black blood. Like Parsons her eyes fair glowed a deep red, all natural colour gone they were so blood shot. Her matted hair, usually so meticulously kempt, stuck up in all directions.

Kyle didn’t really know what a banshee was, some witch like creature he vaguely thought. But whatever one was, he was sure he was looking at one right now. Black blood and spittle were oozing through her clenched teeth, as she hissed with each ragged breath.

Her chest rising and falling in rapid faltering motions as if she had been sprinting to get her.

Kyle couldn't move, and he was so transfixed by the monster in front of him, he barely registered the fact she was raising the pistol in her blood-soaked hand. Behind her a group of perhaps nine or ten were emerging from the woods close by. Fleeting glimpses of more off to one side, all descending on the clearing now. Perhaps to enjoy the show.

"It was too late for you," Kyle managed to say in mitigation of his crimes against them.

His fear and drug addled brain set of a rant in his head at the injustice here. After all, what could they possibly gain from the bunker now? They were all as good as dead and it wasn't as if the bunker could magically cure them. Only he had a chance, he had the suit, and with it the possibility of escape. Why couldn't they give him that? It wasn't his fault, he didn't start any of this. He would have let them in if it would have saved them.

Kyle focus on the thing that had once been Maise again, you most of all. He had loved her, in his way and he would have liked nothing more than for them to be together again, safe, just like it was supposed to have been.

"You loved me?" Maise said with a tilt of the head. The contempt was all too clear even through her garbled voice.

Kyle looked at her dumbly, then came the dawning realisation that he had been saying all that out loud and not in his head. Ranting like a lunatic.

Maise's face twisted in a horrendous sneer.

"You never loved anything in your vacuous, self-obsessed life. Except yourself."

It was surreal hearing such articulation from such a grotesque creature.

Maise pointed the pistol at his forehead.

"At least it will be quick for you," she said with an unexpected hint of compassion.

The thought of imminent death snapped Kyle out of his fugue. His clouded mind cleared to crystal clarify.

Yes, she was a solider and he was just a male model. But she was all but dead and he was still very much alive, and very much wanted to stay that way. He was fast, she was slow.

Kyle lunged forwards and knocked the pistol to one side with his left arm, just as she fired. He was glad for the protection the heavy rubber mask as the gun went off an inch from his ear.

Then he shoulder charged her in the chest, black blood splashed the front of his white suit as she had the wind knocked out of her and she went staggering backwards with a grunt and fell over.

He set off running towards the safety, albeit fleeting, of the bunker. He heard a muffled shot and a bullet sparked off the bunker's steel façade to his right.

"Jesus!"

He just kept running, then as he reached the door he looked back. Maise was laid on her side aiming in his direction. He braced himself as she fired again, but the bullet went high and missed the bunker and thankfully him completely. She fired again and dirt kicked up close to his feet. Even in her dishevelled state, she was getting her eye in.

"Fuck!"

As he turned to the keypad, he caught a glimpse of several figures coming out of the woods. At least two of them were half staggering, half running.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" he had to ignore them and concentrate on punching in the door code.

Three... Eight...

Even through the mask he could hear shrieking behind him, and getting closer.

Another bullet sparked off the door directly over his right shoulder and he heard shrapnel pepper the mask. A foot to the left and that would have been that. But it wasn't! Just keep fucking going! He urged himself.

Two... Five.

The door mechanism seemed to take forever to kick in, until he was finally rewarded with that familiar, 'clunk,' as the lock released, and the door drifted open.

Kyle chanced a look back over his shoulder, the two runners were just one now and he was close. Kyle knew in an instant he wouldn't get inside and get the door shut before the maniac was upon him. So, he turned to face his assailant with fists raised.

"Come on!" he screamed in muffled defiance.

The man was flagging badly as he approached and was threatening to topple over. But despite this Kyle could see to his horror, he was a massive unit. It was like bracing yourself for a hit from a rabid wrestler. He was going to dodge but realised that would send the man careering through the door and into the bunker. He would have to somehow knock him away.

A muzzle flash lit up way over the other side of the clearing as Maise, now on her feet, fired again.

The front of the charging man's head exploded covering Kyle in gore and he pitched forwards landing in a crumbled heap at his feet.

Kyle froze in horror, stunned. Then Maise's scream of frustration followed by another shot which hit just to his left snapped him right out of it, and he toppled back into the bunker.

Silly cow just saved my life! Kyle thought maniacally. His relief was short lived as she aimed again and a group of others came barrelling out of the woods, stronger and faster than the previous two.

"Bollocks!"

Kyle shoved the door closed and it locked. He stood there panting in the meagre light coming off the monitor and waited. His head pounding along with his rapid heartbeats, and his head was once again filling with cotton wool. If they got in somehow, he wouldn't have strength enough to scream when they were ripping him apart.

The battery indicator was still showing one bar, but he knew with those damn proximity lights constantly burning through it. It wouldn't last long.

"I'm fucked," he stated plainly. And hit the floor before he realised he was falling.

Kyle felt a shooting pain at the back of his skull, it was as if someone was stabbing him there to the rhythm of his heart.

He opened his eyes and there was nothing but black. He cried out and blindly flailed his arms defensively. But this just brought more pain and nausea.

He could feel blood sloshing around at the back of the hood as he moved, and the smell of it filled his nostrils. He grunted in effort and rolled onto his side. As he did so he was rewarded with the sight of the bunker's grey concrete floor. The mask must have

shifted when he fell blocking his vision, he felt it slip into place once more, giving him a slightly better view through the eye pieces.

He gave a fatalistic laugh, he was still alone, the hoard outside weren't in here bashing his brains in just yet.

As his thought process cleared a little, he figured he must have passed out and hit his head hard, and he was bleeding. Blood poured across his face as he moved. It wasn't too much, but it made him gag as some went into his mouth, and with that came panic.

Somehow, he managed to push himself up into a sitting position and now the blood tricked down his neck and into the suit itself. The stench of blood made him gag again and he was finding it harder and harder to breath within the confines of the mask. He had a flash of fear as he imagined the whole airtight suit filling up with blood and him drowning in it.

"God..."

His head lolled forwards and the bunker took on a blurry red tint as the blood washed over the eye pieces. He instinctively tried to wipe the Perspex lenses. Panic set in afresh as he blindly thrashed around, he began clawing at the mask in a desperate attempt to clear his vision.

Hyperventilating now in the claustrophobic constrains of the mask, he swallowed a mouthful of blood which flooded his lungs. His stomach cramped and before he could react, he vomited. All thought of contamination disappeared as he gasped for air, which just made things ten times worse.

He tried pulling at the mask as he choked, but those fucking Micky Mouse gloves made it impossible to get a decent hold. He fell onto his back again as he struggled and hit his already damaged skull hard on the concrete floor.

He saw stars and for a moment lost all sight and feeling. He was teetering on the edge of consciousness, when strangely in the midst of all this hysteria he hit a pocket of absolute calm. He flashed back to a memory from his old, charmed life several years before.

He had been at a party to celebrate his first six figure modelling contract with Dior. He had gotten so drunk, that he and a friend had passed out in his agent's pool house. When he had come around the next morning, Kyle had been covered in puke. He had thrown up in his sleep and could have quite easily choked on it.

Full of the immortality and arrogance of youth, they had joked that it would have been the classic rock star death. Oh, how they had laughed as he had been contemplating a recording career at the time.

It didn't seem so funny now.

Kyle came back around and somehow managed to grip the seal, he pulled at the mask, but it was alarmingly well attached, he pulled again. It held firm and he cursed his, up until then, unknown talent for air tightening NBC suits.

He screamed in terror as his stomach threatened again. What a way for him to go! Not choking, but drowning in his own blood and vomit, and in the very device that was supposed to keep him safe. He would have laughed at the irony of it all, if he wasn't crying.

The mask gave a little and spurred on by his impending death, Kyle pulled harder and managed to get his rubber fingers between the suit and mask. He tore at it, and it came away with an audible sucking sound. He threw it across the bunker and curled up in a ball, sobbing and gasping for air.

As he laid there, he became vaguely aware that a truck was backing up somewhere close by.

Beep, beep, beep.

Strange that.

Jesus! Was it the army coming to save the day? Backing up to the door so as not to contaminate the bunker when he opened it?

Beep, beep, beep.

It was an insane thought, but one he could fully get behind.

Beep, beep, bee...

The bunker plunged into absolute darkness, and Kyle held his breath. But there was no dramatic military entrance, just the sound of the air filtration unit faltering, then grinding to a halt.

Oh, well, Kyle thought as all reason fled like a coward. At least I have my health.

He began to laugh. It was a good joke, and it actually lifted his spirits somewhat. But still, despite this, there was a nagging doubt at the back of his mind. All this meant something was terribly wrong, but for the life of him he couldn't think what. Maybe it was just his pounding head and mild concussion, he mused. That's enough to sour anybody's mood.

Thinking about it though. Weren't there three things that happened when the power went out? Kyle tried his best to remember.

Lights... Air filtration...

'Clunk.'

The vague outlines of furniture within the bunker began to slowly take shape as his eyes adjusted to the merest hint of a new light source coming from somewhere.

A table, a chair, the bank of now sightless monitors. All gradually coming into hazy detail around him.

Then he was hit by a rotting, sickly sweet odour, so bad it even cut through the smell of his own blood and vomit. It was coming from somewhere close by on a cool foul-smelling breeze.

The smell was awful, but the breeze was nice.

Kyle shifted his aching body around so the breeze could caress his face.

"Oh."

The open doorway to the bunker was filled with a seething mass of steaming silhouettes, back lit by the bright moonlight outside. One of them stepped forwards, it was an outline he knew all too well.

"Hello lover."

Kyle Easterbrook was handsome as hell, beautiful really. He had been dealt a full house in the genetic card game.

Or at least he had been until his girlfriend and her newfound allies tore him to shreds.

DEEP BLUE

Some said the tale was an apocryphal one. The small Caribbean island's very own urban legend. A tale of woe and sea spirits to be told around the campfire in hushed tones on the very sand and soil it had said to have taken place decades before.

And it was true that the story had spawned its very own cottage industry the islanders were more than happy to profit from. It was something of a selling point to the many tourists that came to their home.

'Come for the sun, sea and seclusion. Stay for the spine-tingling myth of unexplained death and disappearance!'

There was a book detailing the whole sorry affair, which revelled in the more sensational aspects. There was even one for the kids compete with pictures, but one that sanitised the more salacious and downright gory aspects of the case.

Then there was the ever-popular replica reed doll, that featured so prominently in the story, which you could buy in any number of gift shops dotted around the island.

However, this particular souvenir caused no end of controversy within the community itself. As many of the older islanders truly believed in the power such totems can possess.

Indeed, some still had their own variations of the creation, hand made by great grandfathers or grandmothers years ago, and handed down from generation to generation. And they thanked God that they, unlike the poor unfortunate in the story, had never needed to unleash its mythic power.

Depending on who you asked, it had been eighty to one hundred years since it had happened. The story at been passed down from one generation to the next, where it would inevitably take on subtle changes with each storyteller or the listener.

One diligent researcher from main island of Jamacia, had actually obtained a copy of the original police report, such that it was. But even his account of what he read had become just as mythic and maligned as the more fanciful renditions of what had happened. And the reason for this was a simple one. Because, even taken word for word as written, the police report at the time couldn't bear up to even the briefest of amateur, let alone professional scrutiny.

This just fuelled the legend.

However, everyone could though agree on the protagonists to a greater or lesser extent.

A former American gangster, who had fled to the island from police and vengeful mobsters alike. With his trusted bodyguard and assorted goons.

And of course, there was the gangster's unfortunate much younger English wife and her lover, an island local, who had only been guilty of one thing. Falling in love.

The truth, not that anyone really cared. Was sadder and stranger than most could imagine.

The old fisherman stood on the high cliff and stared out over the glacial Caribbean Sea.

The sun, blood red and fading was already half obscured by the horizon as the day gradually gave way to the night.

Despite the on-coming chill off the ocean, the old man refused to go back to his small house. On any other day he would have retreated back to the fire there to warm his bones. A task that was harder and harder these days.

But this wasn't simply any other day.

Once a year on this same date he would climb the steep meandering path which led from the beach and up to this secluded spot on the cliff's edge, so he could be alone with his thoughts.

Like warming his bones, the trip up here was getting harder each year. His legs weren't quite as strong as they used to be, and he had to use a stick these days. But as long as he drew breath, the old man would make his yearly pilgrimage. Same time, same place. Because he knew, one year he would see his son again and he would give his beloved boy back the old reed doll he had left behind decades before.

The one the old man had made with his own hands, sitting in front of the fire, his son watching him weave every strand. Then once it was completed, they had bound the spell together in its very fibres using blood, spit and old magic. Just as his father had done with him when he was a child. And his father before him.

Like many, the old man had thankfully never needed to use the power of his own doll, few did. Never needed to call upon its ancient enchantments in a time of extremis. And oh, how he would have given anything for that to have been true of his son.

He turned his son's doll, over and over in his calloused aging hands. It's spark of magic long gone. Used on that rainy summer night, fifty years ago to the day.

In the years that passed, many had asked him what had happened that night. It was a tale of woe? Yes. Of magic? For sure.

But mostly it was the tale of a son, lost to the sea, for nothing more than following his heart.

The rowboat made its way through dark, choppy waters. Inside, three men out in a storm, each of them knew only two would return.

The youngest of the three, Jacob was on his knees, battered and bruised from the beating dealt out by his would-be executioners. His hands, tied with rough rope, lay in his lap.

Jacob was born and bred on the island so the storm lashing the boat was like a mother's lullaby to him and as such, it soothed him as they went.

This was in stark contrast to his two companions, Issacs and Peterson. Foreigners from America and the architects of Jacob's current condition. They cursed the weather and their boss for making them take this perilous journey. There were many easier ways to dispose of an irritant like the kid. That didn't involve the threat of drowning in some God forsaken sea, so far from home.

This was no night to be out in such a flimsy craft, but they had work to do. And they both knew, even in the dark, Crawford would be watching.

And so he was. Milo Crawford stood on the balcony of his palatial colonial beachfront house and watched through his binoculars as the little boat moved further out to sea. Even above the driving rain he himself paid little attention to, he could hear his wife sobbing through the open French windows at his back.

He knew her heart was broken, but that meant nothing to him. Crawford was a cold man, dead inside some would say. And he had long forgotten the meaning of love, if he had even known such a thing in the first place.

The whole incident, discovering Rebecca's infidelity and the swift retribution that now followed. Was simply a matter of pride. She was his and that was an end to it. Love, jealousy, those things meant nothing. Empty emotions he had never felt.

On they rowed in silence, pulling the boat out into deeper waters.

Neither Issacs nor Peterson had any idea what the need for all the theatrics was.

Better just to shoot the kid in the back of the head and dump the body somewhere in the hills. It was a small island, but they were skilled body stashers. A skill you needed working for someone like Crawford.

Jacob felt the boat drifting to a stop and one of the men struggling with the oars. He knew his fate, but he was not afraid. Even now, in the middle of nowhere he could feel her close. He closed his eyes and pictured her perfect face. Those dark brown eyes and flawless features. He knew those stolen moments they had shared together would comfort him.

Issacs got unsteadily to his feet, with a curse, and then once the damn boat had stopped rocking too much, he dragged the kid to his feet, eager to be done with this and back on dry land. He held onto him tightly, more for his own equilibrium than security, after all where could the poor bastard go? But still, years of doing this kind of dirty work had taught him that folks about to die could do some pretty crazy things.

He watched as Peterson tied the anchor to the kid's leg and not for the first time since arriving on the island, he wondered just how the hell he had gone from New York to the ass end of the Caribbean. It never failed to amaze him just how quickly life in this supposed tropical paradise had worn thin and he had wished for the cold, trash filled streets of Brooklyn.

Finally, Peterson gave the rope a good tug and nodded in satisfaction. It was going to take both of them to heave the anchor over the side, after that, gravity would do the rest.

Yet still the kid just stood there, his face turned up to the sky, letting the rain wash away the blood. He couldn't be certain, but watching him, Issacs thought the kid was actually smiling.

Peterson stood up and with great effort, both men picked up the anchor and set it to rest on the edge of the boat. They exchanged a glance, the kid must have been concussed or something because as they stood there, waiting for the end. He was definitely smiling now.

Jacob reached inside his torn shirt with his bound hands and felt the reed doll he always carried there. It was warm and running his fingers over the textured belly of the effigy made the storm and the pain melt away. He ran his finger over the smooth surface

of its simple face, like he had done a hundred times before, then grasped it tightly in his hands.

Jacob didn't hear the anchor as it hit the water, but he felt the tug as its weight sent him over the side and dragged him down beneath the surface.

Issacs lent over the side and watched as the poor bastard disappeared into the black. Something about the whole episode had unnerved him and he was glad it was done. Both men took an oar each and began the long row back to dry land, each rowing a little faster than they had before.

It's done.

Crawford got the call from his right-hand man, Meeks just a little after eleven as he was settling down in a chair nursing his third whiskey of the night.

Meeks had co-ordinated the whole thing with his customary efficiency. Just like he had done back in the old days. As far as Crawford knew, Meeks had never actually killed anyone in his life, he was always too smart to do the deed himself.

After all, these days that's what Peterson and Issacs were for. Crawford had wanted to leave the two of them back in New York when he had fled the city. But Meeks had persuaded him otherwise.

'You never know,' he'd said and of course he had been right. Besides they were as much pariahs by association as he was back home. And he had to admit they reminded him of more exciting, dangerous times.

'Retirement' didn't suit Milo Crawford at all.

The news made Rebecca sob all the more. She had pleaded with him to spare the kid, swore blind to be an obedient wife once more. She had even offered her life for his.

All that just proved to Crawford that she didn't know him at all. And in truth how could she? Although they had been married three years now, he had never let her into his world. Their marriage, like so much in his life was a contractual transaction. She needed a green card, he a trophy wife.

Their worlds could not have been more different, let alone the age gap. He was pushing sixty and she was still in her twenties. She had, in the beginning, been attracted

by his money and the rumours of past cruelties. In the early days, he had to admit he enjoyed regaling her with tales of his rise to infamy and those he had crushed on the way.

Before things had turned sour and the ghosts of past crimes had come back to haunt him. It was all such a long way from this dull, dull life on the island. Despite the palm trees and sunshine, it often felt like a prison by any other name.

Crawford looked across the bedroom to where Rebecca sobbed into her expensive silk pillow, her normally immaculate auburn hair a tangled mess obscuring her face. In time she would once again accept her place in things. Forget this folly and any thoughts of escape with a clandestine lover.

He left her to her misery and went downstairs for a bite to eat. Murder always made him peckish.

As the anchor pulled him down, Jacob could feel his young life slipping away.

As he fell, he remembered what had seemed like an endless summer's day that had been his childhood. He could see, in his mind's eye his beloved father, sitting by the fire of their small but welcoming house working on the doll that he held as he drifted downwards into the dark depths below.

His father had spent seemingly unending nights crafting the doll after he returned from work. Binding one reed after the other into its evolving form, watching as it began to take shape in his expert hands. Jacob had lost count of the number he had used, but he vividly remembered the hours spent as a young boy hunting the island of suitable reeds for his father to use.

Only the most robust reeds would do, his father had told him. The doll must be strong, like you. Like the bond between father and son. Even now, in his last moment, Jacob remembered the pride he had felt if his father used only one or two of the scores he had collected on any given day. The doll was a symbol of his life, and of his father's love.

And of the sea which had been the source of his family's livelihood for generations. The sea would watch over him when his father could not. Long after his father was gone if needs be, the sea would protect. And if it could not protect, if his life were to slip from its grasp as it did now. Then the sea would avenge.

Jacob let the doll slip from his grasp, and it drifted away. This was the first time since its creation that they had been so far apart. And so, with this final gesture, Jacob gave himself up to the sea. Content that it would do, what it would do.

As he died, Jacob thought of her, of his beloved Rebecca. Of those perfect stolen moments they had spent together, wrapped in each other's arms, oblivious to the world and the risk they were taking. Blind to everything but each other. There being together had been inevitable ever since their first meeting, neither had any control over what would follow. All they could do was surrender to fate and let it do with them as it would.

He could feel her close, even now in his final moments, in spirit if not in body. And he knew, as darkness took him, they would be together again.

Lost in a fitful sleep, Rebecca heard someone close whisper her name. And with it came a sense of absolute serenity.

She awoke, half expecting Jacob to be laid beside her. But although she knew that he was gone, and she was physically alone in the bed. The realisation did not sour her mood, her grief had now given way to purpose.

She rose and drifted over to the French windows in a trance like state. She opened them and the wind and rain came flooding into the bedroom. Although the storm lashed all around her, tugging at her nightdress making her long hair thrash around her ashen face, she was oblivious to its attentions. A moment later she was out on the balcony in its very midst. She climbed up onto the stone balustrade and balanced there in bare feet and let the rain soak her through.

Johnathan Meeks stood in the doorway to Crawford's vast study. His employer was sitting on a couch with his back to him, silhouetted by the bright beam of the whirring film projector as it cut through the dusty air.

He was watching the clandestine film footage Meeks himself had taken of Rebecca and the local young gardener engaged in energetic love making in Crawford's own bedroom. The old man had watched it many times over the last few days, but never Meeks had noted, out of lust, or even masochistic jealousy. A detached curiosity perhaps.

Meeks had set up three such cameras behind two-way mirrors in the house at Crawford's request when he had first become suspicious, and it hadn't taken long to catch the lovers in the act.

Meeks had suggested giving the kid a beating and calling it quits. After all Crawford didn't love his young wife. She was for show, and it wasn't like the affair would make Crawford look like a cuckold fool with the locals the way it would have done back home. If this had happened in New York, they would both have been clipped.

So, it was a shock when Crawford had ordered him to kill the kid. Meeks had tried to talk him out of it, this was a small island, and a local disappearing would raise eyebrows and cause them unwanted heat.

Meeks was one of the few people prepared to stand up to the boss, and he knew Crawford had a begrudging respect for that given his years of loyal service and getting him out of many a scrape and of course spiriting him away here when things got dicey in New York.

But still all that counted for nothing when he recognised the murderous look from the old days in Crawford's pale eyes. So much for retirement, Meek mused grimly.

The whole scenario had trouble written all over it, they had lived here for a year without any problems, just growing older and browner in the Caribbean sun. But this was different, this was reckless.

Maybe that was why Meeks had purchased a one way open dated air ticket from the Jamaican mainland to Cuba. Better safe than sorry he always said. This life of mischief had taught him that if nothing else.

Meeks left the old man to obsess over the footage. Due to all of the homicidal activity tonight, he had yet to do his normal end of day security checks, now that things had died down, he decided to run through the procedure, more for need of distraction than any security concerns.

Issacs and Peterson were drying off in the boat house, where they would undoubtedly spend the night. The place was decked out like a summer house so they would have all the comforts they needed. Plus, he had made sure they were well stocked with liquor as a thanks for their nightly nautical jaunt.

The main house itself, which dated back to British colonial times, had eight bedrooms and numerous studies and rooms. The kitchen was large enough to feed a small army and

would normally have been the hub for the three full time servants Crawford insisted on employing, but they were all back at home in the village and not due to return until six in the morning.

With the downstairs sweep complete, Meeks made his way up the impressive staircase to the first floor. He stopped outside Crawford and Rebecca's bedroom. The door was vibrating on its hinges, buffeted by wind coming from inside. He held up his hand, palm out and could feel the wind blowing through the gap between the door and the frame.

He cursed to himself. The woman had probably passed out from the Valium she had taken earlier to calm her hysterics and left the French windows open.

He opened the door and peered inside the dimly lit room. And sure enough, the windows were open at the far end of the room. He took a step inside and something white against the angry night sky on the balcony beyond, caught his eye and he offered up a curse.

Rebecca was standing on the balcony balustrade, arms stretched out from her sides, Christ like with her face turned up to the driving rain.

Meeks moved quickly but cautiously into the room and over to the windows, not wanting to startle the woman. He knew once he reached her, he would need to act fast, pull her back inside before she knew he was there, drag her by the hair if needs be, anything to stop her jumping.

The gusting wind filled the room, perfect cover as he approached her. Then, when he was only five strides away, she tilted her head, listening. Meeks froze, racked with indecision. Then she turned slightly and looked over her shoulder at him.

Their eyes locked for the briefest of moments, but where Meeks expected to find desolation he saw only utter peace. Then she smiled, actually smiled contentedly, and was gone, over the edge in one graceful motion.

Meeks stood there for what seemed like an age, staring at the empty space she had occupied a heartbeat before. That look in her eyes, that smile, had chilled him to his very core, and he would have stood there for longer, dumbstruck had the wind not suddenly picked up and rain splashed his face, dragging him out of his stupor.

He moved out onto the balcony and peered over the edge to the courtyard below. He had half expected to see her flying majestically off into the night sky, borne on the wind.

But there she was, sprawled face down on the hard stone courtyard dark blood flowing from her head in rivulets mixing with the rain.

Deep out to sea, and working against every natural instinct, every screaming nerve ending of its being. The leviathan swam away from the thrashing, wounded fish it had been tracking.

Although it could taste its prey's blood in the water, the sheer primeval power it felt flooding its keen senses pulled the great fish away from the kill.

With one sweep of its massive tail, it glided effortlessly away, off into the gloom and down to towards the seabed. It was soon upon the supernatural source that drew it here. A tiny speck drifting in the current, but with a power a thousand times its physical form.

Moving swiftly the shark took Jacob's doll in his mouth and held it there with a lightness of touch that belied its massive bulk. The spark of magic bound in its fibres seeped through into the shark's body like a powerful poison and as it coursed through its intricate nervous system it awoke an ancient purpose within it.

The shark swam on, guided by the growing magic that rippled through its great body. Its already preternatural senses keener now than ever before. After a short time, a shape melted out of the darkness ahead and it slowed to a near stop. And with one final thrash of its tail, it glided effortlessly forwards until it came to a stop, inches from the face of the dead human who was floating above an anchor embedded in the sandy bed, tethered by a length of rope tied to his ankle.

The dark water around them began to shimmer with flecks of bright blue light. Softly at first but growing in strength with each passing second. The energy flowed through the shark and out into the surrounding sea itself, enveloping Jacob's lifeless body. The water becoming agitated almost alive with a kind of electricity, emanating from the doll in the vast creature's mouth. Its power binding together human and shark spirits alike.

Now it worked its enchantments on their flesh. Stripping meat from muscle and muscle from bone and cartilage reconstructing their separate bodies, merging them into one being amidst the maelstrom of power around them.

The shark's great body was finally undone, and its remaining bulk faded into the darkness of the sea beyond the luminescent throbbing power. But its life essence remained, bound in human form by the now dying embers of the doll's ancient magic.

Until finally, that spark, held so tenaciously with its very fibres passed to the body of its creation. And the doll, now just a hollow shell, began to float away into the void. The transformation was complete. At first glance a man, a perfect facsimile of the son of its creator. But with a predator's soul.

This new being, working on pure instinct, blindly stretched out a hand and with lightning speed caught the drifting effigy before the current could take it away. Its power was gone, its significance was not.

A moment later its once vibrant fibres merged with this new creation its now spent power had fuelled. As much a part of this new wonder as the man and beast it had once been.

Jacob took his first deep watery breaths and opened his eyes.

His vision cut through the gloom of the ocean as if it were a shallow clear pool and his senses tingled, he could feel every ripple in the water, could see in his mind's eye the electrical currents from fish swimming miles away. Could taste the blood from a wounded yellow fin tuna as it thrashed through the water in a desperate attempt to flee a closing hammerhead shark.

His first thought after this new life, this aquatic resurrection was to swim away. Off into the depths, to be free of his earthly memories and what they inevitably meant he had to do.

It was hard, that dream of being human. And almost every part of this magnificent creature he had become, wanted so desperately to explore the limitless freedom the sea had to offer. The thought of having to walk on hard unforgiving land again, breathing polluted stale air instead of the pure water that tasted so sweet to him now, sickened him.

He reluctantly let himself begin to drift upwards towards the dreaded surface. As he drifted the image of Rebecca came to him, but it was indistinct, like a blurred photograph he had once briefly glimpsed years before.

Once though he seemed to remember, he had only to close his eyes to effortlessly picture her every pore, every freckle and slight blemish on her otherwise perfect face. Hadn't he?

He glided to a halt with the slightest movement of his body and let the sensations of the ocean wash over him. And with it he was calm again, all thought of the surface fading

with each new aquatic wonderment. And with it he began to wonder if that life on land, with all its pain and strife. Perhaps it had all been just a bad dream of the horror of humanity.

Soon as he drifted, he could not remember for the life of him why he had wanted to go back there in the first place.

Although his wife was dead. Crawford hadn't reacted at all when Meek had broken the news to him.

In truth Meek hadn't known what to expect, certainly not histrionics that was for sure. But the old man hadn't even blinked an eyelid. There was nothing, no trace of emotion at all.

Crawford had simply asked Meeks to carry her body back up into their bedroom and lay her on the bed. Which he had done, then Crawford had asked him to leave them alone.

Once his duties were done Meeks had the need to get the hell out of the house. It had nothing really to do with the body now laying in state upstairs or the fact that he had witnessed a suicide.

If anything, he wished that it were. But no, he had been driven to stay away from the house for the night by that look in Rebecca's eyes just before she had jumped.

It haunted him, even as he lay in his modest room at the island's only hotel, half a bottle of local rum later. He could still see that look of bliss. Bliss! It seemed obscene to him and the only thing that gave him any comfort was that he reasoned she must have been drugged up to the eyeballs. He tried anyway to believe that, but the crystal clarity in her eyes made a lie of the theory, and he knew it.

Crawford gently brushed aside the blood matted hair from the face of his dead wife.

Even with the trauma inflicted by the fall, she was still stunning, even in death. And it was now that he only truly realised just how beautiful she had been. Her porcelain skin was battered and bruised of course, but the rain had washed away most of the blood and she looked to him like she could almost be sleeping.

She looked at peace, almost serene and he couldn't quite remember when he had seen her look so contented. Then it came to him, this was how she had looked on Meeks' film, sleeping in the arms of her lover. And with that revelation, he knew deep down, it was that

look, that look of total happiness she had found with another, was the real reason he had wanted the kid dead and gone.

The realisation perplexed Crawford but it was still true, nevertheless. He had thought he felt nothing of her infidelity. But now? Had he loved her after all?

The shark who had once dreamt it was a man, tried yet again to swim away from the place of his re-birth.

But the sheer magnetic pull of the location dragged him back for what must have been a fifth time. Pulled it back to the true purpose of its existence.

As it drew closer, it was the anchor, half buried in the sandy seabed and the length of rope swaying in the current above that called so relentlessly. It drifted closer until it could smell the rust in the water. A strangely familiar odour that somehow reminded it of a time, above the waves. Of gliding on the surface in a boat propelled by two others, others with murder on their minds and blood on their hands.

It could smell that blood now and with it came images of a forgotten life, of a life out of its beloved ocean. The memory frightened the creature for a moment. The surface. The surface and what lay above the waves, a slow agonising, gasping death.

Didn't it?

If that were so, then why did it suddenly yearn to see the night sky? Why did it feel the surface's irresistible draw? Just as it had to return to this very spot.

A spark of memory, now as if to ignite its renewed purpose. A face, looking up, eyes locked in passion, a smile that could melt your heart. It knew, although it could mean its end that the surface and what lay beyond held something dear to it.

The creature kicked its legs and made for the surface. It wanted the blood of those murderous puppets who had sent its human form to the depths, mindless of its pain and suffering. But mostly it wanted the blood of the puppeteer who pulled the strings.

It was close to the surface now and could see the moon through the water. Clear and full. It was a sight it remembered sharing with another, that face looking up at him in bliss. Vivid and alive now in its mind's eye. And with it came the name of a Goddess.
Rebecca.

Jacob broke the surface and took in a huge lungful of air. He half expected to choke on it, but it wasn't as toxic as he anticipated. An unwelcome substitute to be sure, but acceptable in its way. He didn't like the way it felt in his lungs, it was harsher somehow, the water flowed so effortlessly through him, but he knew he could survive in it.

It was a small discomfort he was willing to endure until he would be able to return to his beloved ocean. He could tolerate its bitterness because he knew it would lead to sweet bloody vengeance, and her.

It hadn't taken Issacs and Peterson long to drink most of the crate of beer Meeks had left then as a thank you for a job well done.

That coupled with the bottle of local rum had made Peterson go out like a light and he was now sprawled asleep snoring loudly on one of the plush couches the boat house had to offer.

Issacs watched him as he slept and not for the first time, marvelled at just how opulent the furniture in here was. It was an afterthought to the estate, tucked away here at the water's edge but it was still worth more than Issacs could ever hope to earn.

Maybe that was why he enjoyed nights like these when he was allowed to sleep here instead of his sparce little room at the back of the main house. At least out here he could dream he had made something of his life.

He had spent most of the night in a fitful sleep, despite the alcohol, Isaacs had been unable to wash away the half-remembered dreams of the look on the kid's face as they had sent him to his death.

Issacs dozed in his chair having been awoken by the sound of waves crashing against the side of the boat house. The storm was still in full force and the walls rattled intermittently with each gust of wind.

He examined his bruised knuckles, in the past he had always enjoyed the rush brought on by violence. And initially when he and Peterson had jumped the kid on his way back home after his latest tryst with Crawford's wife, he had felt that familiar buzz.

It was more the anticipation of the fight. Both he and Peterson where in their forties and had seen better days, and the kid was twenty at most and in very good shape. They expected one hell of a fight but, just like when they had sent him over the edge of the boat.

He hadn't put up the least bit of resistance. Now that he thought about it, the kid hadn't even thrown a punch.

Lost in thought, Issacs didn't notice the dim strangely coloured light outside or that the storm had faded away. Then the light flashed bright blue, like lightening but did not fade away, nor was it followed by thunder. It grew in intensity shimmering like sunlight off water and came streaming through the window.

Drunk and groggy, Issacs first took it as sunlight, he assumed he had been up all night, but he glanced back to the other side of the boathouse which faced the sea. There was a large window in front of the speed boat they kept covered up inside which was bobbing gently in the water. It was pitch black outside. He could see that the rain was still battering the glass, but it made no sound at all.

Spooked, Issacs lent across to the wicker table by his chair and pick up his pistol. Peterson suddenly sat bolt upright as the dancing light hit his face. He glanced around, disorientated and shielded his eyes. He saw that Issacs had his gun so fumbled around on the floor by the couch and grabbed his own revolver.

Both men were on their feet now, they aimed at the ever-brightening light coming from outside. It flooded through the gaps in the door frame and wood panelling of the walls in harsh pulsating shafts, filling the boathouse with dancing shadows.

Then, as if hit by a massive wave, the whole side of the boathouse shook violently, the impact was so fierce it splintered and cracked the door and surrounding wooden wall panels.

Gripped by blind panic, Issacs fired his automatic into the door. Round after round slammed into the wood leaving smoking holes where the light shone through in shimmering blue beams.

An instant later the light died like at the flick of a switch, and they were plunged into total black. Issacs continued pulling the trigger in the darkness long after his gun was empty.

It took him ten full seconds to register his gun was no longer firing. He ducked back towards his jacket which was hung on the back of a chair and cursing fumbled in the inside pocket for his spare mag.

Issacs didn't see the door ripped off its hinges and tossed away like a child's plaything. But he heard the scream from Peterson followed by gunshots.

All hell broke loose as he was thrown headlong into a cyclone of nightmarish violence. The light filled storm came flooding into the boat house from every side. Issacs dropped to his knees and steadied himself as best he could against the onslaught. He just managed to retrieve his spare mag when the coat was wrenched out of his grasp by the wind and away.

He gritted his teeth, all the while being battered on all sides by stinging ice cold wind and rain, and more out of luck and muscle memory finally replaced the empty mag.

The air was filled with tumbling debris and blinding blue light as the furniture was reduced to kindling in the blink of an eye. Something spun out of the tempest lightning fast and clipped him on the side of the head, stunning him for a moment.

An instant later, he was on his hands and knees with blood in his mouth. He spat and just about managed to drag himself to his feet, he gripped the pistol tightly and aimed as best he could through slitted eyes. He shouted to Peterson who was little more than a shadow in the maelstrom, but he couldn't even hear his own voice above the din.

Issacs screamed blue murder at Peterson, who was still standing, bracing himself with remarkable strength against the storm as he aimed through the open doorway to whatever was causing this assault. But something was wrong, there was something about the way he stood. The ice-cold rain lashing Issacs' face was suddenly warm for a moment and he tasted blood, but he instinctively knew it wasn't his own.

It all came into horrific focus in a split-second lull in the storm as a bright blue flash illuminated his partner. Peterson had been decapitated but still he stood there aiming stiffly even in death.

Issacs screamed as the storm resumed in with increased ferocity. He caught a blur of movement to his left as a misshapen shadow, moving incredibly fast darted through the boathouse. One moment it was there the next it was gone.

Issacs aimed left and right, another flash of something blurring by and then the shadow slammed into Peterson's body, and it was catapulted up in the air, it spun wildly sending up a fountain of blood and flesh, some of which hit Issacs in the face and he spat out a mouthful before collapsing in a heap retching.

He looked up through tears and blinding rain to see the shape was leant over Peterson's body at the far end of the boathouse, its head buried in his chest thrashing from side to side as it tore off chunks of flesh.

It was at once human but something much, much worse, his fear addled brain could not make out its twisted unnatural features, which he subconsciously took as a blessing, he was tiptoeing on the edge of madness as it was.

More by instinct than anything, Issacs raised his pistol and took aim at the nightmare devouring Peterson. But before he could will his trigger finger into action, the thing whipped around and sprang at him. It seemed to almost swim through the air, which was rippling as if they were underwater. He could do little but marvel at the graceful way it glided towards him.

Then there was a blur of bright ragged teeth and white-hot pain as he felt a sharp tug at his arm and then it was gone, ripped off at the elbow in a cloud of red mist. Issacs watch it slowly drift away still holding the pistol as shock took a hold of what was left of his senses.

The shape darked off and around the boathouse, then it came at him again, faster, sleeker than ever. And this time for the kill.

After the blissful slaughter of the boathouse, Jacob hadn't taken the relatively short path up to Crawford's mansion straight away.

Although the pull he felt towards it was almost physical. Something deep within him had taken him on a different journey. He walked through a familiar wood, it was not far, but it awoke a dizzying array of memories with each step, and it wasn't until he came to the very edge that his destination became clear.

His father's small house came into view through the trees and the sight clear broke his heart. It was in darkness, his father would be asleep and would not rise until dawn. When he did wake, Jacob could picture him pottering around the house preparing for the day ahead. 'You have to get up early,' he had always told Jacob when he complained about the hour as a child. 'Fish don't wait for lazy bones to roll on out of bed.'

He had to fight the urge to go closer, this was not why he was back. He knew there would be no goodbyes, tearful or otherwise.

This had always been about Rebecca and the wrongs done to them both. Since his transformation and the clarity that brought, he had thought of nothing else but the two of them being together once more. Somehow, he knew she was already dead, that was inevitable. It was just all part of the tapestry they were all woven into.

But what of his father? Jacob had accepted his fate the moment he had been attacked, almost embraced it as a part of his and Rebecca's narrative. The classic star-crossed lovers, or some such tragedy, but he had done so without a thought for him. A parent should never have to outlive their child. What in the world could be worse?

The man who had raised him after his mother's death in childbirth, the man who had given him the very power that now coursed through his veins. Would be left all alone by a selfish son who thought of nothing but his heart's desire.

Jacob bite back a sob and again he had to stop himself from crossing the clearing and slipping into the house through the back porch. Like he had done a hundred times in life. He so desperately wanted to see his father one last time, but what could he say? He could only imagine what he looked like, naked and drenched as he was in murderer's blood, let alone the physical changes wrought by the doll's magic.

He looked down at himself. This was only a memory of his former body, a chimera of the spirit of shark and human made flesh. Normal enough to a certain extent but in constant flux between the two. He ran his tongue across the layers of razor-sharp teeth in his mouth. No wonder his killers had screamed.

Jacob hopped over the back garden fence and moved over to the back door. It would be so easy to go inside, to watch his father sleep for a short while, but he knew that was a torture he did not need.

So, without knowing such a thing were possible, he reached into the flesh and bone of his chest, which split open painlessly like a fresh wound, and pulled out the doll from within his body and placed it on the doorstep. This would be the first thing his father saw when he left for work. Then he would know his son's fate. Then he would be able to start to mourn.

Jacob hoped it wouldn't be too painful.

He pulled himself away and back into the wood. Better his father remembered him as he was and hopefully one day be content in the knowledge that his son was at peace, and with the only other person in this world and the next that he truly loved.

In time Jacob knew the guilt would fade. Even now, as his open chest knitted seamlessly together again, he could feel the remorse for his former life dissipate as the beast within tipped the balance of power, calling him on once more to carnage.

Crawford awoke to the sound of the ocean, although the house was a thousand yards from the sea, he could have sworn the waves were crashing against his bedroom door.

He dismissed it as the residue of some forgotten dream. He turned on his side to Rebecca who was a dark lifeless shape on the bed next to him. She could almost have been alive, laid there in the darkness, her arms by her side. He hadn't meant to fall asleep in the bed next to her, but it seemed apt somehow, being this was the last night they would ever spent together before he would have Meeks 'disappear' her body in the morning.

He moved to touch her cold cheek when the sound came again. This time downstairs, though just as loud and accompanied by splintering wood.

Crawford got out of bed and crept over to his desk and took out his old revolver from one of the draws. He checked the barrel to make sure it was still loaded and moved over to the door. He opened it a notch and peered through the gap. From where he was, he could see the spacious landing and the top of the opulent stone staircase which led down to the vast entrance hall directly below him.

He came out onto the landing, his first thought was that the ground floor had been flooded somehow, shimmering blue light cast dancing shadows on the walls and was slowly creeping up the staircase to the first floor.

And could hear water lapping against the stone steps. He moved closer to the balustrade at the end of the landing where it met the banister and looked down to the entrance hall below.

It took Crawford a moment to realise what he was seeing, although it didn't make any sense despite the evidence of his own eyes. It was as if the entrance hall was rapidly filling with water, but water he could not see, only the effect of it on the debris swirling in its midst.

Objects kept downstairs, furniture, ornaments, the coat stand he kept by the door, which was shedding flailing coats and jackets like drowning men. Even the priceless paintings from the entrance hall walls were tumbling, rippling and floating upwards as if under water.

A dark ominous shape appeared in the gloom at the very bottom of the long staircase and began to drift menacingly upwards. Its features masked by the detritus in the air and the increasingly agitated flecks of bright blue light swarming around it. Its outline was oddly human but off somehow.

Crawford didn't wait for it to get any closer and ran back to his room, he slammed the door shut and locked it. He backed away as the phantom water began lapping at the bottom of the door which rattled in protest at the growing pressure behind it.

Crawford braced himself, half expecting the door to burst inwards, but for now it held, the strange blue rippling light teasing under the door frame, but nothing more.

He aimed at the door and waited for that shadow on the stairs to come knocking. At first there was nothing, just that odd lapping sound like waves against the wood outside.

Then as the seconds ticked on Crawford began to feel the blood throbbing in his temples. His head was pounding, and he could sense the air pressure in the room, changing, his ears popped like dull gunshots.

It was as if he were in an air pocket deep under water and getting deeper as the pressure built. His breathing became laboured as it weighed heavy on his chest, and he had to physically fight for even the shallowest of breaths.

Then the door exploded inwards, and Crawford was flung backwards against the French windows by what felt like a tidal wave of freezing cold water. He hit his head hard on the glass, which cracked, but it did not break.

He slid down onto his backside in a daze. He spluttered and gasped for breath tasting sea water in his mouth. He looked down at himself, expecting to be drenched but his clothes were dry.

The shape that had ascended the staircase was standing in the open doorway now, silhouetted against the shimmering bright blue light at its back. Crawford saw his revolver had fallen close by and he scooped it up and aimed at the monstrosity with both shaking hands.

He moved to cock the hammer and fire, but the moment he did the shimmering blue light flooded into the room, half blinding him. He tried to scream but shock had taken his voice. He threw his hands up to his face covering his eyes as best he could. He could see fleeting glimpses of the thing before him in flashes of hideous detail as the lights danced around it.

It was Rebecca's lover of course, but now a nightmarish perversion of the human form. His once dark ebony skin now a mottled grey. His eyes large, black and lifeless. He tilted its misshapen head, clearly enjoying Crawford's distress.

Then it smiled and Crawford screamed. A cruel grin cracked its face and spread literally from ear to ear, threatening to split its head in two. The harsh blue light flashed against row upon row of deformed jagged teeth.

The scream caught in Crawford's throat as he began to gasp for breath, he could inexplicably feel water rising up past his legs, but still he was bone dry. Then, like the staircase everything in the room began to float and bob, but again they were floating on the light flooding the room.

He could feel the icy phantom water moving up his knees and lapping against his chest as he sat there. In a panic he braced himself against the cracked window and pulled himself unsteadily to his feet.

Crawford's pyjamas were moving as if in water and he could feel it ebbing and flowing against his body as if filled the room. He instinctively pushed outwards with his palms in an attempt to push the water away. But despite everything he could see and hear. There was no water!

On the bed, Rebecca's body slowly began to rise, her long auburn hair and night dress moving as if submerged. Her monstrous lover held out a hand and gently touched her shoulder. His touch made the light around her ripple, which in turn ran through her body.

The undulating light and its accompanying aquatic illusions were up to Crawford's neck now. His limbs felt heavy as his entire body was being buffeted and crushed by the imaginary currents swirling around the room.

He desperately craned his head back trying to somehow keep it above the rising light. But it washed over his face making him gag, he could taste and smell the harsh salt water as it lapped over him. He began choking on it as his body floated helplessly up towards the ceiling.

Jacob watched Crawford gasping and flailing in the air as he slowly drown. The old man clawed at his throat, drawing blood as if trying to stop the inevitable filling of his lungs. But to no avail.

Logic was a nonsense here, he was dying, choking on sea water that was at once suffocating him and not there at all.

Jacob could have struck, torn the man limb from limb as he had the others in the boathouse. But that would be too quick. A man like Crawford who had caused so much

pain and suffering in life, should die in terror. Feel his life slowly slipping away, just as Jacob had done.

It was strange, he had expected to feel elation when Crawford finally died. But in truth as he watched his lifeless body floating there, he felt nothing. He was already forgetting the injustices of this mortal life on land and was once again filled with a longing to be back in the ocean. He could see it through the French windows, just visible beyond the grounds of the estate.

Even the thought of leaving one of his tormentors alive held no meaning anymore. Let him live out his miserable life in fear of what he would find here in the morning.

He decided he would leave Crawford's body there, on the balcony, facing the sea where he and Rebecca would be forever together beneath the waves. Free to wander the depths without a thought for the surface world and all its woes. Yes, there was a certain poetry in that.

Jacob took Rebecca in his arms and carried her back towards the beach. The storm, the one not of his making, had blown itself out and the sky was beginning to redden with the approaching sun. He knew instinctively as they reached the water's edge that there was enough power left in him for the both of them.

One kiss would start her metamorphosis. Then when she was perfection in her new state, he would show her the vastness of their new home. The size of which would only be dwarfed by the future they had together.

The first thing Meeks noticed when he arrived back at the estate the following morning was that the door to the boathouse was missing. He had decided to drop in on Issacs and Peterson first before checking in with Crawford. His boss had asked him to get here before the servants arrived at six so that he and the other two could dispose of Rebecca's body.

He checked his watch as he went down the path leading to the boathouse. It was five twenty, plenty of time to rouse the pair and set about losing the body before anyone arrived.

As he got closer, Meek noticed that in addition to the door, the wooden walls were bowed and cracked and the windows facing him were all shattered. Had the storm really been that bad last night?

He didn't know why, but as he approached, he felt the need to draw his pistol. Maybe it was the New Yorker in him, or maybe it was the odd smell drifting on the air towards him.

By the time he reached the doorway and stepped inside, the smell was unbearable, and he was hit with a wave of nausea. He cursed to himself and took out his handkerchief to cover his nose and mouth before stepping inside to the sound of buzzing flies.

He reeled in shock as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. The place was a slaughterhouse, it was as if a bomb had gone off. What was left of the furniture and the speedboat which was half sunk had been reduced to kindling. Worst still, what remained of the two men was splattered all over the decimated interior.

He could only manage a cursory glance around at the festering carnage strewn around the place before he was driven back outside into the fresh air. An instant later he was on his knees vomiting up his breakfast all over his new shirt.

One thought came to mind after he had gradually pulled himself together somewhat. The house.

Meeks ran, pistol at the ready up to the main house, like the boathouse the heavy front door was missing. Bracing himself for more horrors, he went inside.

The house place had been turned upside down, the entrance hall was littered with debris and smelt oddly like low tide. He had to pick his way through the shattered furniture and smashed ornaments and once he reached the staircase, he was able to move faster. He ran upstairs taking them two at a time and quickly made his way to the old man's room.

He paused in the open doorway and could see the room was in the same decimated state as the rest of the house. He levelled his gun and stepped inside expecting to see the same horrors he had witnessed at the boathouse.

The bed was on its side and there was no immediate sign of Rebecca's body, but it could have quite easily been buried in the clutter and destroyed furniture he had to navigate.

The billowing lace curtains leading to the French windows caught his eye. The windows were half open, and he could see Crawford sitting on a chair with his back to him on the balcony looking off into the garden and the coastline beyond.

He called Crawford's name, but the man didn't move. But even as he reached the old man, Meeks knew that he was dead. But still as he eased through the gap in the windows he wasn't prepared for the look of absolute terror on his face.

Meeks knelt in front of him and studied the body which was sat bolt upright in the chair. Apart from some vicious looking scratch marks on the old man's neck there didn't seem to be a mark on him. But Meeks had no doubt from the look on his face that Crawford had died horribly.

He checked his watch again. The staff would be arriving soon, then all hell would break loose. Three dead, two of them eviscerated. It was no place for a known crook like Meeks to get caught in.

He packed what little possessions he had into two suitcase and took them to one of the cars parked in the garage to the side of the house. He knew Crawford had a couple of grand in cash stashed in a shoe box in the desk in his study, so he reluctantly went back into the house and after a panicked five minutes of searching the trashed room, he found the box and took it with him back out to the car.

He gunned the engine as he waited for the automatic garage doors to open, then sped away in a cloud of burning rubber.

He would be off the island on the first ferry to Jamacia long before the cops had stopped looking for him in amongst the decimation of the house not to mention the abattoir that was the boathouse.

Then he would be on the first plane he could get to Cuba. And then? As far away from the Caribbean as was possible and away from this nightmare once and for all.

As he drove, he knew he should have felt relief, he had survived whatever had attacked the estate. But he couldn't shift that look on Crawford's face, a face that had witnessed horrors beyond his simple imagination and wondered if he ever would.

And with that came the realisation that although he was in one piece, something deep within Meeks told him his would be a life lived in fear and that the events of this small nondescript island would haunt him forever.

And so, the legend began. Crawford's body was taken to the mainland for an autopsy.

As there was very little damage the initial thought was that the old man had died of a heart attack. Brought on by the strange assault on his estate. But it wasn't until he was opened up that the true nature of his death revealed itself to the coroner.

His lungs were filled with sea water, so it was officially reported as a drowning. The coroner's report failed to mention however that not a trace of sea water residue was found on his clothes, body or even in his mouth. Apparently, he had drowned on dry land and a thousand yards from the sea.

And the others? Of Crawford's three known foreign employees, one had disappeared completely. Along it was suggested with Mrs. Crawford who was also missing. There had been rumours in the village of an affair between Rebecca Crawford and an employee, so in that particular instance the authorities were happy one and one did indeed make two.

Then there was the case of the other two unfortunates. Details of their demise was sketchy at best and in the end the authorities had agreed that both men had been the victims of a vicious shark attack, which in truth matched their considerable wounds and missing parts.

This was the first recorded incident of this nature in fifty years. The head of the case and the Jamaican chief medical examiner thought it wise to leave the investigation at that. No need, it was privately agreed, to probe too deeply into just how two men had been torn to shreds by a shark, in a boathouse next to, but definitely not in the water.

Over the months and now years that had followed that night, the legend of the 'Crawford killings' had grown.

Everyone laid claim to a theory. From mob hit to witchcraft. It was only the older folk who knew of course. Jacob's father had not been the only one to have fashioned a doll using the old ways. But as time went on fewer and fewer of the younger islanders truly believed in its power and like most traditions, this hidden craft would fade in time.

Even if its idol of reeds lived on, albeit without much meaning in the many gift shops which stocked its likeness throughout the island.

As daybreak came, the old fisherman reluctantly abandoned his vigil for another year.

He would be back, health allowing, same time, same place next year, hoping for a glimpse of his lost son. Although deep down he knew his son, Jacob was out there in the

vast ocean lost to the sea with no memory of being a man and what it was like to once walk on the land.

It was a price his son had gladly paid all those decades ago, to be reunited with his beloved. And that thought had always comforted the old man and tempered his yearly disappointment. After all, any parent only wants for their child to be happy, and deep down he knew his son was.

Perhaps next year Jacob would remember that forgotten life, perhaps in a dream of what once was. And would wish to visit it again. If only for a short while and meet with the old man who sits on the cliff's edge year after year.

The old man he used to call father.

Showdown At Little Rock

The town of Little Rock was dying long before the shadows came out of the dust that night.

Its ever-dwindling population (now a mere one hundred and two,) were testament to that. Even if those hardy, or foolhardy folks who so stubbornly remained there would never admit it, at least out loud. The town was fading away, slowly but surely returning to the barren desert from which it had risen no more than forty years before.

If anyone would have cared enough to ask the dwindling residents, why Little Rock ailed so, they would have, to a soul blamed the railway. Or more precisely the lack of it.

Little Rock was situated on the very edge of the blistering Mojave Desert and was so remote many map makers had failed to notice it. And so, there it sat as history and the new burgeoning United States of America passed it by.

Untouched by the war between the blues and the greys, now ten years past. Its remoteness had then seemed like a blessing, but soon after became a curse. When the long-promised railway station had, like the war and history in general passed them by. Fifty miles away to be precise.

Little Rock was now the type of place that if you'd had the misfortune to be born there, you moved away as soon as age or circumstance allowed. Then once you were away you could quite happily lie about where you came from in the first place.

Those left behind, whether it be by reason of poverty or down right apathy, were mostly a bitter and twisted bunch. So little was there to recommend the town to outsiders that the stagecoach company had reduced their once twice weekly run to and from the town to just two a month. Hoping perhaps that this would hasten the place's demise and then they wouldn't have to bother at all.

Little Rock was the very definition of 'out of sight, out of mind.' Although without doubt a haven of misery, not all of its ill-fated population were strangers to bliss.

Ever since he had made the journey to the new world from his home country of the Netherlands as a wide eyed nineteen-year-old, Skylar Haaland had a recurring dream of flying over a cool blue ocean.

Drifting effortlessly to a never reached horizon, close enough to the water to dip his hand in as he flew. His only companion on this much travelled dream jaunt was a soothing sense of wellbeing.

Lately thought, the dream had changed, he was still flying, but over sand now which burnt and scratched his hand when he touched it. And that once familiar feeling of serenity replaced by an oppressive yet unseen presence close by.

Even in sleep, Haaland was a bright man. He knew the oppressive feeling was Little Rock, always threatening to smother its inhabitant's futile hopes. The sand was the merciless Mojave Desert it so desperately tried to keep at bay.

The metaphor was as clear as a stampede. That journey of hope and expectation he had taken over the sea to America had, over the eight years he had been here, been smothered under an ocean of sand and the harsh realities of misanthropic places like Little Rock and its citizens.

But tonight, it was the cool blue water again and the faintest feeling of hope. As he dozed, he could hear the soft breathing of his lover next to him. He could feel her heart beating against his chest as she held him as she slept.

So, this was bliss Haaland thought with a faint smile. Entwined in May's embrace as they lay in bed, safely tucked away from the harsh realities of the town. Not in love, no it

was too early for that, and he had no illusions about how fickle May was when it came to affairs of the heart.

It was lust certainly, fuelled no doubt by the illicitness of their relationship. But also, in a kind of belonging, they were two kindred souls who had found each other quite out of the blue amongst all this despair.

He couldn't remember the last time he felt so safe as he did in that moment, not since before the death of his parents, the event that had driven him from his homeland to the promised land of America.

Soon he had promised, he would take May away from all this and they would start a new life together. Somewhere where he could dream of the ocean every night until it washed away the sand forever.

Something made May shift beside him, and her breath quickened.

A nightmare perhaps and he held her a little closer, not wanting to break the spell of contentment, to keep Little fucking Rock at bay for a little while longer.

But despite himself, this brought him to the edge of sleep, and then he heard it. A harsh sound invading this warm cocoon. Wood creaking, rusting door hinges complaining at their use. A definite footfall now, close by, followed by hushed voices.

Haaland opened his eyes, and the world came flooding back, he sat bolt upright, disorientated from being ripped from sleep so abruptly. It took him a precious few seconds to realize where he was, still groggy, he through he saw three out of place shadows in the gloom of the room.

May's scream next to him dragged him back to reality in all its ugly glory.

"Jess'!!" May shrieked in panic close to his ear, and one of the shadows stepped forwards where a shaft of sunlight coming through the window shutter hit his sneering face.

Jesse, May's sometime boyfriend was standing over him, his face like murderous thunder. Over at the door behind him, Haaland caught sight of his two ever present cronies. Cutter and that skinny kid, Billy.

"Yer fucker!" Jesse sneered.

Shock and the need for self-preservation slapped Haaland wide awake. He lunged across to the bedside table to his right and grabbed his holster. To his horror it was empty.

“Lookin’ for this?” Jesse snapped in triumph and spun Halaand’s own pistol on his finger.

“Jess, wait...” Was all Haaland could get out before the big man pistol whipped him hard across the face.

Sharp pain and blinding light overloaded his senses. He thought he heard May scream again, then silenced from what might have been a slap. Then before he knew it, he was being dragged out of bed by his hair and onto the wooden floor. The first kick caught him on his forearm as he tried to protect his head. But the second caught him square in the face and then there was nothing.

His hearing came back first, shouts and laughter from his attackers filled his ringing ears.

Then the sensation of being dragged and kicked. Finally, his vision came next just in time to see himself being thrown head first through the Hotel’s front door. He rolled off the decking, down the three steps and into the dusty street.

He rolled as best he could and managed to get to his knees. He felt the stock of a rifle in his chest and looked up to see Cutter’s ugly face looming over him.

“Not so fast, lover boy,” the man spat out. And pushed him down onto his hands and knees.

Jesse was a blur of motion out of the corner of his eye and before Haaland could react, Jesse kicked him hard in the ribs, and he felt something snap, and the wind was knocked right out of him. He crumbled into a heap and tried sucking in air but got a lung full of dust for his efforts.

He rolled onto his side, coughing and spluttering which sent stabbing pains through him, and he knew that kick had broken his ribs. This earned a chorus of mocking laughter from Cutter and Billy who were holding him by the arms between them.

“Leave him alone, Jesse,” she pleaded and tried to wrench her arms free but the held her tight.

“Shut up,” Jesse snapped back, never taking his eyes off Haaland laid in the dirt.

He pulled him by the front of his night shirt and punched him once, twice in the face. Followed by a flurry of kicks and punches as he fell onto his back, trying in vain to protect himself.

“Jess’, you’re killing him!” May cried out through tears. “Please, leave him alone.”

Breathing and sweating hard from the exertion of the beating, Jesse ignored her and leant over Haaland, who was now in the foetal position clutching at his damaged ribs.

“You can’t say I didn’t warn you, yer fucker,” Jesse spat and dragged Haaland to his feet and turned away.

For one fleeting moment as he tottered on the edge of collapse, his senses dulled by the assault. Haaland actually thought that maybe that was it. Lesson learnt, beating over. But Jesse wheeled back around and punched him again, hard in the stomach. The next moment he was face down in the dirt again, staring at his own splattered blood on the ground in front of him.

“Cutter,” he vaguely heard Jesse say through the bells ringing in his head. “Gimmie the pistol, yer Fucker.”

Haaland cursed to himself and somehow managed to haul himself up to a sitting position. He looked through a mist of pain and tears as Jesse reached out a hand to his idiot lacky.

The imbecile pulled out Haaland’s pistol from out of his belt and spun it on his finger with a whoop of delight, mimicking his boss’ display from earlier. However, Jesse was good with a gun, Cutter was not. The pistol spun up and over his shoulder, barely missing his left ear and clattered onto the hotel’s porch behind him.

“Jess’, come on...” Haaland said through blooded teeth. But if his assailant heard, he did not turn around.

“Christ Cutter!” Jesse exclaimed and sneered at the man. “Next time I hope you shoot your fucking balls off. Yer fucker.”

‘*Yer fucker.*’ That was how Jesse addressed everyone, man, woman or child, regardless of if he were mad at them or not. Haaland had often wondered if he spoke to his momma like that at dinner. ‘Pass the potatoes, ma. Yer fucker.’

The thought must have inadvertently brought a smile to his battered face because it earned him a stinging back hander from Jesse, who then turned back to Cutter. He stared at the man expectantly but got nothing but a vacant look in response.

“Well, pick it up then you stupid bastard!” He ordered.

Cutter scurried over to the weapon and picked it up. He threw it to Jesse who caught it then tossed it into the dirt in front of Haaland.

Although he was dazed from the beating, Haaland knew this was a new twist on Jesse's normal bullying routine. Before there had always been kicks and punches, when he was in a rage with someone, and he had even seen Jesse use a bull whip on one unfortunate once.

But the pistol in front of him spoke of a new game. Jesse finally seemed to think he was more than just a one-horse town bully boy. Jesse was now ready to see just how grown up he really was. Perhaps he had read one too many of those dime novels the general store stocked every now and then. The ones with the gunslingers and outlaws.

Perhaps he fancied himself on the cover of one.

"Shit," Haaland said, and the word came out with a chaser of blood.

He was aware of hushed voices around him now. He looked up to see grey, black shapes gathering close by. The commotion had attracted a sizable crowd. Drawn out of their collective lethargy to bear witness to yet another beating dished out by the thug Jesse and his hangers on. It was a scene as familiar to them as it was to the victim.

Most had not been surprised to see it was the Dutchman, his affair with May had been an open secret to all but Jesse himself. This was a beating Haaland had coming.

But all Haaland saw with a growing sense of relief were witnesses. Not even a lunatic like Jesse would gun a man down in the street in front of everyone. All he had to do was go nowhere near that pistol.

A glint of metal caught his eye, the tin star worn by Jameson the town's one and only law man.

"Oh, thank Christ," Haaland breathed.

"Thank who?" Jesse asked incredulously. "Ain't no Christ here, Dutch. Just us sinners."

He tapped Haaland on the side of his head with the toe of his boot.

"Ain't that right, sheriff?"

Jameson visibly tensed at this and shifted his gaze, suddenly aware that he was now the centre of Jesse's attention. Several of the onlookers watched him with a kind of ghoulish delight. Thankful Jesse had not singled them out.

Jameson glanced around at his unwanted audience as they hung on his response. He knew, as did everyone there, that he wouldn't get shit in the way of support from any of them. He then looked down at the prone Dutchman but winced as the man gazed up at him in anticipation of salvation.

"I, er," Jameson mumbled, then cleared his throat but his voice was weak. So, he shut up.

Afterall, he reasoned to himself. Who was he kidding? He was fifty-eight years old, a lousy shot at the best of times, which was a moot point anyway since he had left his gun back at the saloon where he had been propping up the bar all morning.

"I, I er, think the Dutchman has had enough, Jesse," he managed to croak out. "Whadda ya say?"

The only response from Jesse was a well-practiced, very effective dead-eyed stare. That and letting his right hand gently brush past his gun holster. It was subtle, especially for him, but it was effective. The sheriff dropped his head and studied his boots.

"That's what I thought," Jesse said with distain.

He turned to take in his audience which had doubled in size, drawn to the scene thanks to the appearance of the gun still laid in front of Haaland and the prospect of real bloodshed.

Jesse made an expansive gesture with his arms and addressed the crowd.

"Now everyone here knows that I am a reasonable man." He paused for any dissenting voices but was met with silence. "And Christ knows," he continued. "I have given this Dutch piece of shit enough fuckin' warnings to stay away from my May."

He leant over the prone Haaland who was still looking at the sheriff in disbelief. He shifted his gaze to his attacker as Jesse's considerable shadow fell over his face.

"Jess..." It was barely more than a grunt.

"But you just couldn't help yourself. Could you lover boy?"

"Jesse, please..." His voice was paper thin, and he tried to suck in more air, but his broken ribs had a stranglehold on his lungs.

The only other sound was May who had started sobbing.

"Jess'," she pleaded through the tears. "Jess', please he's had enough, can't you see he's hurt bad? He's sorry... I'm sorry. C'mon, he's no match for you, he never was."

In all honesty Haaland had to admit he wasn't sure just how May would react to all this. She could, if the situation called on it, flip from one side to the next depending on her needs. She'd done it before, hell she'd done it to him in the past.

But he couldn't deny she was trying to help, at least for now. Appealing to Jesse's ego was a good ploy, making him out to be the tougher guy. He would love that. And Haaland

was more than happy to double down on that if it put an end to the pain. Humiliation was a small price to pay for self-preservation.

“We are sorry, Jesse,” he said softly. “You’re right to be angry.”

“Well shit,” Jesse snorted. “She’s sorry, you’re sorry. Trouble is, I ain’t! You’ve had this coming for years, Dutchman.”

Jesse stood up straight and puffed out his chest. From Haaland’s vantage point he looked double his six feet as he towered over him. Then he took several deliberate paces away and the crowd backed off to give him space. He stopped, turned and faced Haaland once more.

“Get up and draw,” he said coldly, and moved his hand to his holster.

This won an audible gasp from the crowd, and they fanned out to give both men plenty of room. Sheriff Jameson winced visibly but back off as well all the same.

Although he had never actually seen Jesse kill a man. Haaland was in no doubt he could. Again, he looked at the Sheriff for any sign of help, but the useless old bastard wouldn’t even meet his gaze. Then he looked imploringly to the crowd around him. He didn’t care how pathetic he appeared, shit he would lick Jesse’s boots in front of the whole God forsaken town if it saved his life.

Some looked away as his eyes met theirs, others, clearly glad it was him and not them, were openly grinning.

This fucking town, Haaland thought bitterly.

“Shoot him, Jess!” Someone at the back of the crowd shouted.

Haaland thought it was that runt Billy, but he couldn’t be sure. Whoever it was, it won nods and murmurs of approval from several folks around him.

“Get-Up-And-Draw,” Jesse said emphasizing every word.

“I, I can’t,” Haaland tried to give his voice some weight, but the words came out as a hoarse whisper.

“You broke my ribs,” he continued. “I can’t fuckin’ breathe... Jess’, please stop this.”

He was suddenly scared, hearing the way his voice cracked, he sounded like a frightened child, felt like it too. Despite the beating, which he would gladly take. He finally realised this had gone way beyond that. Jesse was going to flat out kill him here, in the street like a half-dead dog. The tears snuck up on him and before he knew it, he was sobbing.

This caused Cutter and Billy great amusement.

“Christ, look at him!” Billy cried. “He’s fuckin’ bawling like a babe in arms.”

He jumped up and down on the spot, looking ten years younger than his mere eighteen.

Jesse’s face was a stone.

“I said, get up and draw.”

“No!” Haaland sobbed, tears mixed with snot, blood and sweat on his face. He felt pathetic but he couldn’t control himself.

“Jess’, stop this,” he pleaded. The words blurted out without any thought of self-respect.

He had never felt so pitiful. He looked around and caught May’s eyes, her expression was now one of disgust and embarrassment. But still, he couldn’t stop himself.

“I was always faster than you, Haaland,” Jesse taunted. “Always was, always will be. Now get up and draw or I’ll shoot you where you lay.”

His voice was thick with contempt. He pushed aside his coat away from his pistol.

Cutter was suddenly in May’s face.

“You chose *that* over a man like Jesse?” He mocked.

“It ain’t like that,” she said and pulled away

“Both of you, shut up,” Jesse ordered. “Haaland, get up, or die like a dog.”

It was more due to the look of contempt now on May’s face as she watched him grovelling in the dirt, than Jesse’s demands, that stung Haaland into movement.

Slowly, painfully, with his ribs shooting needles into his lungs, Haaland dragged himself to his feet. He swayed as unconsciousness beckoned, but just about managed to stay upright long enough to see the sea of eager faces all around him.

“Please, someone, stop this.”

But to man, woman and child they all turned away. Many he recognised who yesterday would have called him friend, but those bonds had been well and truly severed by Jesse’s malevolence. He caught the Sheriff’s eye, but he too looked away. At least the man had the decency to look ashamed, Haaland saw. That was something at least.

“Nobody’s listening,” Jesse told him with a grin. “Now pick up your gun.”

Haaland looked down at the pistol at his feet, he did his best to wipe his face with his sleeve. Thankfully he had stopped blubbering, but the tears refused to stop completely.

He had a choice to make. Not that in the end it was any choice at all he knew.

"I can't beat you, Jesse," he finally said to the ground.

"Why?" Jesse asked.

The pistol seemed a mile away at his feet, and it may as well have been for all the good it could do him. Why? He knew why, it was his last humiliation. And it was true, always had been. But at least voicing it, may win him a reprieve.

"I said, Why?"

"I can't beat you," he barely heard the words himself.

Neither it seemed could Jesse.

"Louder. Why can't you beat me? Is it yer busted ribs?"

The shake of the head was slight, but it made Haaland's head swim all the same. He staggered a little like a drunkard. Someone laughed.

"Come on Jess'," Cutter called out. "Put the poor bastard out of his misery."

"Why Dutchman?" Jesse asked again, this time his voice was low, a whisper almost.

"Because..." Haaland's voice cracked again, he cleared his throat as if he was about to make a speech.

And in a way, he supposed he was, and his last one to the folks of Little Rock. Win or lose here today he knew he was done with the town and oddly that rallied him a touch. He just needed to get through the next few minutes and be left breathing at the end.

"Because I can't beat you, Jesse, you're faster, you're stronger than me. You always have been." He finally said.

May pushed past Billy and Cutter and came to Jesse's side.

"You can't shoot him, Jesse..."

He pushed her away and shot her a look of such venom it was hashier than any bullet.

"I'll deal with you later," he said.

"Jess' you can't kill him, not in cold blood," she continued.

The fear was clear in her voice, but she had a resolve Haaland hadn't thought possible in the young woman. And it shamed him probably more than this public humiliation.

"That would be murder," she said addressing those around her now. Then she leant into Jesse. "They will hang you for sure. Just let him go, you can see he's beat. He's got no more fight in him."

“To hell with her,” Cutter said to Jesse. “Shoot him! The bastard’s been asking for it. You forget what he did? She don’t want you to hurt him, just so he can bang her some more.”

Billy exploded in a fit of childish giggles at this, followed by some of the crowd.

Haaland and May’s eyes met, she was frowning, seeing the utter defeat in his. And he knew in that moment any half-formed fantasy he had that maybe she would leave town with him was lost forever.

Not because Jesse had won her back, no it was as clear in her face as if she had screamed it into his. She thought he was a coward and that crushing disappointment in her eyes hit him harder than any punch.

Out of nowhere came an unexpected spark of rage deep down in his guts. It must have registered on his face because he actually saw Jesse frown a little. Haaland’s head was screaming at him ‘NO!’ But the fire in his belly pulsed up inside him, making his fingers itch. Itch to hold the familiar cold metal of his pistol.

It was in his legs, heart, balls, willing him on to be a man. Not for May, certainly not for those sons of bitches watching on. But for himself.

All he had to do was drop to one knee, pick up the pistol and put a bullet in Jesse’s smug face.

Alas, if only Haaland had been a better poker player, he might have actually gotten the drop on Jesse. But the big man saw it in his face a full two seconds before the command to move left Haaland’s brain. And that was more than enough time.

One moment, Jesse’s hand was a blur of motion, the next his pistol leapt into his hand. He drew back the hammer and all Haaland had time to do was close his eyes and wait for death.

Fear made a nonsense of time, Haaland heard the audible ‘click’ of the hammer coming down as Jesse pulled the trigger and an instant later, May’s scream.

The crowd gasped as one, but it seemed like an age for the shot to come. In that infinite moment between life and death, Haaland felt as if he could somehow dodge the bullet when it came, swat it away like a bothersome fly. All these sounds and thoughts washed over him in the space between two rapid heartbeats, and still no shot rang out.

And then they came, three shots in rapid succession, impossibly loud. Two hit close to his bare feet, he felt them slam into the dirt an inch from his toes. The third was closer still. He screamed as it blew off the big toe of his right foot. He finally opened his eyes to see his ruined foot. Before he knew it, he was hopping comically around like some demented court jester. The initial gasps of shock from the crowd gave way to nervous then riotous laughter.

“Dance yer fucker!” Jesse goaded and emptied the three remaining bullets at Haaland’s feet.

“Cutter,” he ordered. “Gimme the Winchester.”

He holstered his pistol and held out his hand and Cutter threw the weapon which he caught deftly and at once began shooting at Haaland’s feet. Forcing him to do a desperate jig to avoid further injury.

Pain shot up Haaland’s leg every time his wounded foot hit the ground. Then another bullet clipped the heel of his left foot sending him sprawling flat on his face as his legs gave way.

“Jesus! Jesus!” Haaland cried.

He clutched at his wounded feet and screamed in pain. The crowd seemed to be all around him now, closing in to get a better look at the spectacle.

His pain addled brain started to go into shock, and they seemed to be spinning and darting around him like phantoms, their laughter deafening, pounding into his head like a physical assault. He could feel himself drifting towards unconsciousness again.

Now he was on his back, looking up at the mocking faces above him, it was like they were somehow weighing down upon his chest so he could hardly breathe. Like they were sucking the very air from his lungs. He tried to make a desperate plea to their rapidly vanishing humanity, but he couldn’t force out a single coherent word.

Their faces were barely recognisable now, just swirling images blurred out of all recognition. Their mouths huge black gaping maws, spinning faster and faster until they were just a whirlpool of growing darkness.

Finally, a disembodied face seemed to form out of the mass bearing down on him. It was Jesse’s face floating closer still, his features a grotesque parody of the one he had loathed all these years. His mouth opened so wide it seemed to dislocate his jaw and he was speaking, but it took an age for the words to reach Haaland’s ringing ears.

Then they did the hideous face had already melted back into the approaching darkness overhead.

“Haw, haw, haw...” They were unnaturally deep and slow, almost cavernous. “Don’t worry,” they boomed. “I ain’t gonna kill ya... I’ll let the desert do that.”

And darkness followed.

Death, when it came, felt like a warm embrace to Haaland.

Almost cosy, like being wrapped in a soft blanket on a winter’s night. Death was not cold or harsh as he had always imagined it would be. After the trauma and humiliation of the end to his life, this felt like heaven. He was wrapped in a blanket of darkness, being rocked gently back and forth like a babe in its mother’s arms. A warm safe place.

It carried on like this for what seemed like hours but could just have easily been decades for all dead Haaland knew. But as time passed the once soothing motion changed. The soothing rhythm was now disjointed, harsher somehow. He felt almost like he was on a boat, borne up on choppy waves of nothingness on his final journey.

An image came to his mind’s eye, a picture he had seen in a book, years ago. A solitary sailboat under a stormy black and blood red sky. A skeletal figure piloting a body wrapped in a shroud across the river Styx. Yes, that made sense to him now. This was his finally journey to the afterlife, whatever form that took.

If so, it was a journey he willingly took. He was leaving behind the torment and hopelessness of his life in Little Rock and to hell with the lot of them. Even May, more so perhaps as he could still see that look of contempt in her eyes. That had been worse than any beating Jesse or life itself could meet out. Her normally beautiful, warm, emerald eyes turned to twin pools of ice.

Haaland shuddered at the memory, but the boat soon rocked away the feeling and he was content once more. Little Rock was long gone, along with all it stood for. Drown beneath the dark waters on which he now sailed.

His thoughts drifted back to his journey to the new world and all its false promises of paradise. That had been a harsh and hazardous crossing, but like this final one he had taken it willingly. So, it was fitting to him that a journey that had started on a boat, would end that way. Death was taking him home, and it couldn’t come soon enough.

The boat suddenly lurched to one side, then the other and for one heart stopping moment Haaland thought he was going to be pitched over the side and into the river itself.

The warm comforting embrace which had surrounded him thus far, was now stifling. And Haaland felt a stab of panic as the boat dropped from under him, making his guts churn. Surely the dead don't puke.

He was aware of more sensations building throughout his body. A dull ache in both feet, the feeling he was somehow suffocating rose up and with it came the dawning realisation that he was in pain, and unbearably hot. His head was throbbing in time with his heartbeat as it pounded in his skull, threatening to burst it wide open.

The panic grew as his whole body seemed to burst into flames, the heat was washing over him like an ocean of fire. Haaland tasted blood in his mouth which fuelled his distress all the more. Then his whole body shifted violently to one side.

If he had been walking, which surely he wasn't, he would have sworn he had just stumbled. He instinctively tried to hold out his arms to balance himself but to his horror they were dead, paralysed beyond use.

He let out a low rasping moan which scratched the back of his cracked, dry throat. Close by, of all things a horse snorted, and he could make out the soft clump, clump of horse's hooves. And he gradually became aware that the sounds all around him were no longer in his head. The pitch black he had been floating in began to give way to a murky grey.

I'm on a horse! It was the first coherent thought he'd had since death had claimed him. And close on the heels of that revelation came the fact that the dead don't ride horses.

Haaland took as deep a breath as he could, the dead don't do that either, pal, he told himself. But he could only manage the shallowest of breaths. It wasn't his busted ribs though, they hardly hurt at all. He shifted in the saddle that he could definitely feel underneath him now. The rhythm of the rocking boat was the lolloping gait of a horse trudging through sand.

"Shit," he wasn't sure if he had said it out loud, but with it came a growing sense of where he was.

His eyesight was beginning to clear, the grey smudge now white but still featureless as his eyes tried to adjust to not being blind or indeed, dead. But why couldn't he move? Haaland struggled to move his arms, but they still refused the instruction.

The darkness was all but gone now, burnt away by what could only be the sun. He screwed his eyes tight shut then opened them again.

He winced, he was staring right into the mid-day sun, he cried out and closed them again. Fireworks went off under his eye lids which took an age to fade. When he opened them again, he narrowed his eyes to slits and slowly opened them more and more until his eyes fully adjusted to the assault of bright light.

He was looking out over a sea of never-ending sand stretching out in front of him, to the horizon and no doubt beyond.

The horse below him snorted and stumbled again. Haaland cursed and gripped on tightly to its sweating flanks with his knees.

So, he wasn't dead after all. He squinted down to his labouring mount. They had tied him to a flea-bitten mule, which by the looks of things had been at death's door long before it had been sent out into the desert. Haaland's arms had been tightly bound with a length of coarse rope.

Jesse's final words to him echoed in his addled brain.

'Don't worry, I ain't gonna kill you... I'll let the desert do that.'

Haaland threw back his head and let out a howl of anguish, which was instantly swallowed up by the high dunes around him.

The mule was spooked by the outburst but had no energy left to do anything but wheeze in protest.

The bastards had dressed him in a long heavy overcoat, and to top it off they had put a winter hat on his head. Then sent him off into the endless desert on this poor beast.

He tried to look around to see if he could get his bearings, but the motion almost made him fall. He steadied himself and took in his surroundings, but he didn't recognise anything. Little Rock was nowhere in sight. North, east, south or west of him.

The mid-day sun beat down mercilessly on him. As the mule, now more dead than alive, trudged blindly on.

Its legs growing ever weaker with each agonising step, weight down by the poor soul on its back. Both slowly cooking and at any moment one or both of them would fall and be claimed by the sea of sand they were wading through.

Oh, how Haaland wished he had drawn on the son of a bitch. There was no doubt in Haaland's mind that Jesse would have beaten him cold, but at least the end would have been quick. Not like this slow miserable death.

The mule faltered and its legs finally buckled underneath it. It fell and rolled onto its side, dead before it hit the sand. Haaland went with it, and he rolled helplessly down the steep banking of a dried-up riverbed where he came to a stop halfway down as the sand clogged around him.

He cursed the animal for its demise but a moment later the creature came rolling after him. He managed a strangled cry of alarm, which caught in his parched throat, as its massive bulk bore down on him. He tried to gain purchase enough to stand as the sand shifted under his knees, but this coupled with his arms still being bound by the blanket he could not regain his balance even to get to his knees.

He braced himself as best he could as the animal hit him, it rolled straight over his body causing his body to twist alarmingly and his breath was knocked right out of his lungs. The mule carried on rolling down to the bottom of the banking and Haaland slid down the rest of the way behind it where he landed awkwardly face down on the hardened sand of the riverbed.

As he lay face down unable to move, Haaland wondered just what he had done to offend death so. He had been beaten, shot twice! The sent wandering out into the unforgiving desert on an already half dead mule. A mule which had then died and rolled right over him for good measure. That alone should have surely broken every bone in his body.

But still death did not want him. 'What has a fella got to do to expire around here?' The thought made him smile despite himself. And as he laid there slowly cooking in the unrelenting sun a strange sense of calm came over him. Which must have meant, he reasoned, that death was in fact close now. He wasn't in pain anymore and he had to admit even the sun wasn't that bad down here at the bottom of the long since dried up riverbed.

And so, Skylar Haaland gave himself over to the fates. He would wait here (After all what else could he do?) Until the grim reaper had forgiven him for whatever offence he had caused it and come and claim him.

In the end it didn't take long, or so it seemed.

Haaland couldn't move much more than raise his chin out of the dirt and stare off along the riverbed which snaked off into infinity. As he did so, what looked like a black wisp of smoke dissolved out of the blistering heat haze ahead of him, some half mile off.

The smoke gradually began to take on a vague solid form to reveal it was in fact a shimmering black shape drifting slowly down the riverbed towards him. About fucking time, Haaland thought.

As it drew closer, Haaland managed to roll onto his side and using his shoulder and butt to push against the hard floor and managed to somehow push himself up until he was kneeling. Arms still pinned uselessly to his sides, he watched the approaching phantom. At first it seemed to be gliding above the sand, but as it got closer it took on a more solid, and unexpected form.

On any other day, Haaland would have dismissed his eyes as liars and shook his head until they agreed to tell him the banal truth of things. But he knew this was as far from any normal day as it were possible to get.

A small boy, of all things, riding a rickety old tricycle, rode along the shimmering riverbed towards him. A tatty black umbrella was attached to the handlebars by a long cream ivory shaft, so it hovered above his head, shielding him from the harsh sun.

Haaland couldn't help but laugh at the approaching illusion, for that was surely what his was. What did they call it? A mirage. The sun had finally cooked his brains. He had heard death came as a rider on a pale horse. But a child on a tricycle?

The boy stopped peddling some way off and let the gentle slope of the riverbed take him the rest of the way. Haaland could now get a better look at him now that he coasted to a stop no more than five paces away.

He was perhaps eight at most and impossibly gaunt, with thin strands of hair plastered to his otherwise bald head. His features were plain to the point of blankness, and he doubted if he would recognise him again even given their surreal meeting. The boy was wearing grubby long johns, no shoes and the biggest grin Haaland had ever seen.

The lad didn't seem at all surprised to see a trussed up, half dead cowboy on his knees in front of him in the middle of nowhere. He rested his bony elbows on the tricycle's handlebars and studied Haaland from under the shade of his umbrella which was fluttering in a breeze the Dutchman could not feel.

Although he was still grinning with glee at the sight before him, tears suddenly came to the boy's deep-set eyes.

"Papa said you would come," he said softly in an accent Haaland could not place.

The boy turned in his seat and looked back the way he had come. Haaland shifted on his knees and followed the boy's gaze off down the riverbed. He squinted against the glare bouncing off the hard impacted sand. And although there wasn't a cloud in the sky around him, he could see some kind of dark angry storm brewing on the blistering horizon.

Haaland blinked sweat out of his eyes and in that brief instant the storm was suddenly miles closer. The boy's umbrella fluttered wildly now as it approached but still Haaland couldn't feel so much as a breath of air in the sheering heat around him.

The boy glanced back at Haaland, and he could see he now had an almost maniacal glee in his hollow eyes. He turned back and began to drum impatiently on his stick like thighs and was whispering to himself excitedly. But try as he might, Haaland couldn't make out any words.

The storm was moving at an impossible rate towards them, and he only now realised that the path of the storm was inexplicably keeping to the meandering route of the riverbed, following the very route the boy had taken.

It was no more than a hundred yards from him, closing all the time. Haaland peered as best he could into the maelstrom, it was like no other storm he had ever seen before. He could make out fleeting glimpses of dark shapes twisting and turning deep within the heart of the thing. And now what looked for all the world like a large, covered wagon deep in the centre.

"What is that?" Haaland asked unable to tear his eyes from it.

"Home," the boy replied plainly.

The storm was almost upon them, and he was suddenly hit with a blast of ice-cold air which knocked him off his knees and onto his backside. The ropes binding his arms loosened as if they had been cut by an unseen knife and fell to the ground in front of him.

Haaland got stiffly to his feet. He could definitely make out people in the midst of it now, a dozen or more spectral figures walking alongside the wagon. He wondered absently, as it wheeled towards him, if some were behind pushing the heavy contraption as there were no horses in front.

Then he was hit with the full force of the tempest that came with it. The noise was deafening, almost as violent an assault as the freezing wind and scouring sand it whipped up. And Haaland was in no doubt it would tear him to shreds. And for what must have been the third time that day, Haaland prepared to die.

Suddenly he thought of the boy, he would be caught up in the murderous onslaught as well. He tried to shout a warning, even though he knew it was too late for both of them. But he could hear the boy laughing close by. He could just see him, little more than a shadow against the assault. He had his arms out wide, welcoming the thing with an ecstatic holler of delight.

“Weeee!!” The boy squealed as the wave of swirling darkness and sand washed over him.

Then to Haaland’s utter disbelief, the boy crumbled before his very eyes becoming a part of the storm, but he could still hear him laughing.

“Jesus,” was all Haaland could muster, and the storm hit him in turn. Its impact knocked him back a few paces, but he remained on his feet. He looked down at his body half expecting it to disappear like the boy, but he was still solid enough and the storm oddly didn’t seem so harsh now that he was in it. And more over he could see despite it battering his eyes and face.

The ghostly figures were all around him now, no more than shadows really, but not in the storm, but somehow a part of it, just like the boy had become. He no sooner managed to make out a vague human shape, when it was gone, spinning off into the blur of darkness.

He could hear their voices, some whispering, some screaming so loudly they were almost indistinguishable from the deafening roar of the sand whistling past his ears. But these weren’t screams of pain or anguish, they were, at least to Haaland’s dizzying consciousness, cries of ecstasy and exaltation.

Then through the darkness at the heart of it all, the wagon came into view. Haaland half expected it to disappear as it was caught up in the whirling nightmare just like the boy

and shifting shadows he had thus far encountered here. But it seemed to be the only true constant besides himself. Solid enough for it to cut wheel marks into the dirt of the riverbed, which he found somewhat comforting in its reality.

It stopped ten feet from where he was standing and the moment it did so, Haaland was plunged into an eerie silence as the wind and the voices faded away to nothing. The maelstrom was still all around him, but it no longer touched him as if called off by some unheard command.

So, this was the eye of the storm.

Now that he had chance to take in his surroundings unmolested. He could see that the wagon was the source of the darkness itself. It came oozing up through the top of the canvas roof like some black shaft of inverted light. He had to fight the urge to step up to the thing and rip aside the cover to see what could possibly causing such a phenomenon from within that was bleeding darkness like this.

He was about to take the first step towards it when two spectral figures melted out of the darkness close by. The moment they came into the meagre light they took on the seemingly solid forms of a man and a woman.

The man was in his late thirties whilst the young woman looked to Haaland to be perhaps twenty at most. They were both dressed plainly enough and Haaland could have easily mistaken them for simple farmers, were it not for their entrance.

The young woman smiled. A perfectly normal action perfectly well executed and were it not for the fact that he had seen her literally form out of the storm itself, he could have said she was quite attractive in a plain sort of a way. It was mostly in her eyes which seemed to alternate between green and an icy blue depending on the motion of her head.

"We knew someone would come," she said. Her voice was light with that hint of the unknown accent the boy had.

He was about to speak when a blur of movement to his right caught his eye and he turned to see the boy stepping out of the murk. He grinned that same grin.

"Don't be scared," he said. "No one will hurt you here."

"I'm not scared," Haaland lied.

"You are disorientated," the young woman told him. "This is only natural. You have had quite the day, my friend."

She took a step towards Haaland, and he caught the briefest flash of panic in her ever-changing eyes. She glanced back at the wagon as if scared of being away from it and the darkness it was spewing to the heavens.

She whispered something to herself, perhaps an encouragement as she then walked over to where Haaland was standing.

“What are you people?” He asked as she approached.

There was a sound of soft movement to his side like a breath of wind through autumn leaves and he saw the boy was gone returning to wherever he had come from. His impish giggle faded a moment later.

“You must forgive him,” the woman said. “Some of us doubted...”

She paused and her brow furrowed slightly as she seemed to search for the next words.

“Doubted?” Haaland prompted.

“You,” she replied.

She took another step, so she was within a yard of him, and still the illusion of flesh and bone was flawless so close up.

“What are you?” Haaland asked. “You, you look real enough. Then you disappear like your made of sand and whatever that is.”

He gestured to the mass of swirling darkness emitting from the wagon.

She slowly raised her hand to his face and gently touched his stubbly cheek. Her hand was warm, he didn’t know why, but that surprised him. She was inches from his face and Haaland studied her features, searching for any flaw in the façade, but there was none. Just like the boy she was real enough, even if every fibre of his being screamed that it was impossible.

“You need a shave,” she said with a hint of mischief in her voice.

“That’s the least of my troubles, lady.”

She laughed and the impromptu sound had such music in it that Haaland felt tears sting his eyes. Another strange thing on such a strange day. He felt the urge to break down, just to let himself go. Maybe it was the look of compassion, love perhaps in her eyes and the purity of her voice, but he just knew she would comfort him, make everything go away, make everything better. He knew all this with an odd certainty even though he had only just met her. Whatever she was.

“Strange, strange day,” he said to no one in particular.

“You asked what we are,” it was the older man who had remained silently in the background up until now.

Haaland had to force himself to look away from the woman’s eyes and over to where he was standing by the wagon.

“Ghosts,” Haaland stated plainly. What else?

“No, not ghosts, as such,” he replied. “We are like you. We are the lost.”

“You’re made of sand and darkness.” It was a statement not a question.

The man made an expansive gesture with his arms.

“In a way, yes. This storm, this is just one of the many places we can hide.”

“Papa keeps us safe,” the woman said. “He created this haven, this storm as you call it, to protect us. But he is growing weak. Soon he will be too weak, and we will be lost forever.”

“Papa?”

The man beckoned Haaland over to the wagon.

“Papa,” he patted the side of the wagon. “He’s inside, please come, take a look. He told us we would find you here.”

Haaland moved tentatively over to the wagon, the voices in the storm all around rose and fell excitedly as he approached.

Now that he was close, he could see the wheels were made from metal, they looked somewhat like those from a railway carriage, only smaller.

Two figures appeared from out of the swirling mass next to the man and help him pull back the heavy canvas covering to one side.

Inside was what looked to Haaland like a highly polished metal lidless coffin, but the sides were cylindrical like someone had taken a locomotive engine and sliced off the top. At first it seemed smooth, but as he looked on, strange, caved shapes and symbols ebbed and flowed through the metal as if it were liquid, only to disappear again an instant later.

Haaland gently touched the side, but it was solid and cool to the touch. When he brought his hand away, it rippled again, giving a brief glimpse of the ornate fluctuating designs once more. Until, again, they were gone.

An ancient looking man was laid asleep inside, amongst piles of heavy blankets and cushions. He was impossibly thin, his arms no thicker than brittle sticks. He was flanked

on either side by two young children, both girls who could have been triplets with the boy on the tricycle. Their saucer like eyes wide with shock, seeing him standing there.

The old man was clearly the source of the of the storm, the column of black light that he had seen coming through the wagons roof and up into the swirling mass above, was emanating from his hollow bare chest like thick black smoke. It gave off a low hum which set Haaland's teeth on edge.

The two girls clutched at the old man's hands which despite their young age dwarfed his own.

"Papa?" One of them whispered in his ear, her lip trembling in fear.

"I ain't gonna hurt ya," Haaland said suddenly guilty at their reaction.

The old man's eyes opened at Haaland's voice. And the two girls helped him sit up slightly. They propped a pillow under his back for support. The moment his deep-set eyes fell upon him, Haaland felt a shudder of power run down his spine and could feel it begin to course through his veins like a sudden shot of strong alcohol making his whole body feel more alive than he could ever remember.

The old man pointed a bony finger at him.

"Sotiras," there was an unexpected strength to his voice that belied his frail appearance.

The fear seemed to drain from the two girls face at the word.

"Papa?" One asked.

The old man nodded in response, and they removed the pillow and gently set him back down again. He closed his eyes with a look of contentment on his pallid face.

The audience with 'papa' was it seemed over.

Haaland moved back and the canvas cover was pulled closed once more.

"What did he say?" Haaland asked.

He could feel the power pulsing through his body, stronger than ever, and it felt good.

"Sotiras," the young woman said as he came away from the wagon.

He looked at her, none the wiser. She could see his confusion. She frowned and screwed her eyes shut.

"Sotiras," she repeated and paused clearly looking for the right word.

Her face brightened and she looked at him once more.

"Saviour."

She smiled and before he could reply she was swept back up into the storm. Haaland frantically looked around, but he was alone with the wagon.

"We have travelled too long," A voice from the storm, one of seemingly hundreds, fighting to be heard in the swirling darkness around him, which was closing in.

"We need a sanctuary, somewhere away from the light," it was a dozen voices all at once each with a slightly different cadence.

Haaland spun around, disorientated, the storm was spiralling violently now and within it, dozens of figures were shifting and churning in its depths. Here and there faces appeared near the surface, shaping from the sand and darkness only to be swallowed again. Then moment later they were replaced by a dozen more until they too were gone.

Their voices were deafening and Haaland had to put his hands over his ears to try and stem the assault that was threatening to shatter his skull.

"What do you want!?" He screamed back at them.

"Help us," they replied in unison.

"How?"

The young woman's face appeared out of the darkness in front of him, suspended in the air.

"We need a home, we need somewhere safe," she said. "We have wandered so long, but papa has grown weak. Too weak to protect us."

"We need a home, Sotiras, saviour," the travellers said, their voices legion.

Sotiras, the word rung in Haaland's ears. Saviour. Surely, they were mistaken. Saviour, him? The coward of Little Rock. What could he do to help these phantoms? He was nothing.

"We need a home."

Home, that long forgotten place across the sea. He cursed himself silently for ever leaving that place, and for what? The hope of a better life in the new world.

That hope had turned to a nightmare soon enough and had left him, wandering alone in the desert, like these impossible things.

"We need a home, Sotiras," they repeated.

Don't we all? Haaland thought bitterly.

"Don't we all," he said it out loud now.

Somewhere as forgotten as his dreams of a new life. Somewhere people such as himself and his new companions could live without fear.

Somewhere like Little Rock. A place no one would miss, if they had heard of it at all.

“Little Rock,” he said softly.

His whipped the storm around him into even more of a frenzy.

Little fucking Rock. Hadn't he often thought that the whole Godforsaken town could get swallowed up by the desert and no one would ever know or care? He had never truly thought of the place of home, not really. It was a dumping place for the dregs of the west. Those too dumb or lazy to just get up and leave.

He thought of all their laughing, mocking faces as he had been humiliated in the street. Crushing his spirit just as Jesse had crushed his body under his boots.

“Why not?”

The voices rose in volume spurred on by this, but he became aware of just how frenzied the once benign creatures were becoming in their excitement. Many too loud and too close for comfort, like a mob on the verge of riot. He felt them brushing past him, through him almost, as they danced and cavorted.

“Hold on,” he warned as genuine fear gripped him. “Calm down.”

But if they heard him over their own howls they didn't care.

“Wait...”

A dark shape thudded into his chest and knocked him backwards. He teetered on the edge of falling but just about kept his footing.

“Stop this! Just hold calm down!” He urged to no avail.

They were buzzing around him like deranged hornets, a wild frenzy of movement and sound. He had to duck and weave as several of the more manic flew straight at him. Finally, he fell to his knees under the assault and covered his head with his arms as best he could.

The onslaught went on and on without pause, battering him from every side, without and within. The voices screamed over and over, one bleeding into the next. Mostly it was a garbled mess, but as he knelt there for what seemed like hours, recognisable words and phrases began to cut through the cacophony.

“Show us the way, Sotiras, Papa said you would come, *so sorry*, join with us, show us the way, help us, we will help you, so glad we found you, Sotiras, saviour, *so, so sorry*, we

know what they did, we know what you are, *so sorry*, papa's weak, we are strong, with you, sanctuary, a place we can all call home, *so sorry...*"

On and on it went with one cryptic phrase slowly dominating the rest. Until in the end all others faded away and he could hear nothing else.

"*So sorry*, it was the fall, help us, we will help you, *so sorry*, it was the fall from the horse, *so sorry you are dead*, the horse Sotiras, saviour, it was the fall from the horse, give us Little Rock, let go, *so sorry*, the horse, *you are dead*, it was the fall, *so sorry*, they can't hurt you anymore, *you are dead*. *So sorry you are dead*, *so sorry you are dead...* *So sorry you are dead*, *so sorry you are dead...*"

"Stop!!!" Haaland screamed.

He heard the sound of forming sand and looked up to see the young woman had appeared knelt on the ground just in front of him. As she did so the voices began to fade.

"Oh, thank Christ," Haaland uttered in relief.

"We are so sorry," she whispered with genuine emotion.

"No," Haaland snapped not wanting to hear. "I'm right here," he touched his chest. "I'm alive."

She reached out and touched his face and smiled forlornly.

"No, it was the fall, from the horse," she said with a slight shake of the head. The sadness crystal clear in her strange ever-changing eyes.

She gently closed his eyes using the palm of her hand like you might do for a dead man.

"Remember," she whispered.

And he did.

He was back in the harsh blank desert in an instant.

But this time he was standing on at the top of the banking which led down into the riverbed. He could see himself on the mule as it took its final shuffling steps, and its front legs gave out.

Haaland had been half dead already, he pitched forwards and having no way to break his fall he landed awkwardly onto the sand and slid down.

Then came the mule rolling after him. And from his unique vantage point Haaland could see as the mule rolled over him his head had snapped back with an audible ‘crack’ which turned his stomach.

The mule rolled on as did Haaland until his body slid to a stop on the riverbed with his head at an odd angle to his trussed-up body.

The scene played over and over again as he stood there watching, unable to look away as it hammered home his quite unspectacular demise.

So sorry you are dead.

“No,” Haaland’s vision failed and for a moment there was nothing but black.

Then he felt the young woman take her hand away from his eyes. And she came back into focus.

He was back in the eye of the storm. And the tears came in floods.

“No,” he sobbed.

“It was the fall, and the mule,” she said softly. “It broke your neck.

She took his face in her warm hands and Haaland felt a slight jolt of energy in his cheeks.

“We are so sorry, there was nothing we could do. It was papa, he did his best to keep death at bay. But you have to accept it now. Only then can we truly help you, and you us.”

The phrase ‘keep death at bay,’ stung him. And it was only now he realised he had no pain in his battered body. His ribs didn’t hurt anymore, neither did his feet. Was he even breathing at all he wondered?

He still felt, he knew that much, the woman’s touch, the sand as it hit his face. But there was no pain.

“No!” He dismissed the thought as madness and drew in a lungful of air. So what if his ribs didn’t scream at the act any longer?

“This is madness,” he told her and pulled away from her touch.

“Seems to be the day for it,” she replied. “Wouldn’t you say?”

The young woman was so real, he couldn’t deny the evidence of his own eyes. Her face a picture of sorrow before him. Yet he had seen that same face made and unmade before those same eyes.

She moved to touch him again, but Haaland struggled to his feet.

“This can’t be,” he sobbed. All thought of composure long gone.

Watching himself falling and being crushed by the mule played over again in his mind’s eye. Neck twisting, surely snapping as the heavy beast rolled over his body.

“No!” It was as if the word would somehow make this insanity disappear like the magic word from a child’s picture book.

The voices in the storm rose again, their mantra the same.

“So sorry you are dead, so sorry you are dead.”

“I’m not!” He screamed hoarsely, pulling at his hair in frustration. “I’m, not, dead!”

Tears and snot streamed down his grubby face. This had not been a day for dignity it seemed.

He rubbed the back of his supposedly broken neck and recoiled in horror as it felt jagged just below the base of his skull.

“Christ! Jesus Christ!” He screamed.

The young woman was crying now, still knelt at his feet. Real tears down real cheeks. A perfect illusion Haaland could almost believe in. She got to her feet and tried to hold out a hand to him, but he moved away, fearful of what that touch might bring.

The storm was closing in again, the voices indistinct but loud within it.

“Please,” the young woman pleaded. “You have to let go. Papa cannot keep this up much longer. But we...” She made an expansive gesture. “We can make it better, make it all go away. You just need to let it happen. I know it’s hard, but you must accept what has happened to you.”

There was a sudden unexpected note of empathy in her voice. Echoed, more of a feeling than words, but there nonetheless by those in the storm around him.

Had they, like him, been through this exact dilemma?

Madness!!

“Let go,” a voice from behind him said. He turned but the speaker was gone, returning to the seething mass around him.

“No!” The magical word was losing its power by the second.

“Join us,” the young woman urged. “Take us to Little Rock, give us a home. All of us.”

The boy suddenly appeared, still on his ever-present tricycle and began riding around and around him.

“Take us home, Sotiras!” He cried with glee. “We’ll show ‘em!”

“Yes,” the young woman said. “We will show them all, they will pay for what they did to you. But you must let go!”

“No!!” He screamed it in her face, and she lowered her gaze, despondent.

“I don’t know what else to do,” she sobbed. More to those around her than to Haaland himself.

Haaland felt an unexpected twinge of guilt at her distress.

“He won’t let go,” someone called out with resignation.

“I’m sorry I failed you,” the young woman said and let out a deep soulful sigh.

Haaland thought it was addressed to the storm, but it could have quite easily been to him.

“He cannot accept it,” it was some ten or so voices from within the flickering forms around him. All in perfect unison. Men, woman, and children. “It is no one’s fault. He needs to let go... He needs a grand gesture.”

The young woman seemed to brighten a little at this.

“Yes,” she said.

Haaland dragged his gaze away from her and around at the ever-changing faces and forms around him. He recognised the Boy’s as it flowed past for an instant then was gone, tricycle and all, lost in the throng once more.

He absently reached out a hand and touched the storm. It was cool to the touch and not at all abrasive. He made a fist and pulled his hand back out but all he got was a handful of seething darkness and hints of sand, which he let run through his fingers.

“Haaland?” It was the young woman now at his back.

But he didn’t turn around and just watched as the strange mixture in his hand drain away.

“Haaland, turn around!” Her voice was firm, like a mother talking to an errant child.

Haaland brushed the last of the substance from his hands and finally turned to face her. He wanted to tell her that he was ready to let go. But he just didn’t know how. Then he saw the ‘grand gesture’ they had spoken of.

She was pointing a pistol at his head.

“We love you, Haaland,” she said, and he knew she meant it.

He didn't hear the shot but felt the relief it brought.

Hank Jameson the duly elected sheriff of Little Rock, took another swig of whiskey and settled back in his chair on the porch outside the jailhouse. It complained under his bulk but held out just fine.

Although it had been a couple of days now, he still felt bad about what had happened to the Dutchman, but the whiskey was helping. He tipped back in his chair, so the back rested against the wall, and he looked out from the porch and into the approaching darkness. The sun had gone down a little early this evening and it felt like thunder was in the air.

Sure, he had to admit, Jesse and his mob were out of control. But what did this miserable place expect one man such as he to do? He took another hit of whisky straight from the bottle and let it warm away his guilt, at least until the morning.

Maybe, he thought as the alcohol took a hold, that he should go see the state Marshall about what happened but that would just bring up awkward questions. After all, he was the law here, so they would have wanted to know why he hadn't done anything to stop, what for all intents and purposes was a lynching. At least that's what they would call it up state.

No, he would just let it go. The lad had no family, no one to miss him. Even that fickle bitch May, who as far as Jameson was concerned was the cause of the whole ruckus, had gone crawling back to Jesse, now lover boy was gone. Well, at least she knew what side of her bread was buttered on, he had to admit.

In fact, the more he thought about it the easier it was to justify the whole thing. The Dutchman had gone sniffing around Jesse's woman, so he had got what he deserved. And the drunker he got, the more sheriff Jameson believe it.

A chilly wind blew across the desert surrounding Little Rock and through the town's main street.

Jameson looked up at the now pitch-black sky and shuddered. The oil lamp hanging from the porch roof was swinging wildly so he figured he had better take it down. The last thing he needed was a fire after the last few days he had endured. His joints complained as

he pushed himself out of the chair and walked across the creaking boards to retrieve the lamp.

The distant sound of spurs drifted out of the night on the ever-increasing wind. Jameson frowned. Who the hell was walking around at this time with a storm on the way?

He took down the lamp and walked out into the dirt road. The wind was worse out here as it travelled down the natural funnel of the houses on either side of the street. He could see the beginnings of what looked like a sandstorm on the outskirts of town and cursed to himself.

He had been meaning to get someone to fix the rickety shutters on the jailhouse windows for weeks. He'd just have to hope they stayed on one last time.

He held up the lamp, he could definitely hear the 'ching,' 'ching' of someone's spurs now and they were getting closer. But he couldn't see anyone in the street yet by the lamp's meagre light.

"Who's out there?" He called out into the wind.

Of all things he got a childish giggle in response.

"Hey, I'm not kiddin' around. Get out here or..."

Before he could finish a scrawny looking kid, Jameson didn't recognise, wearing a man's cowboy hat and riding, of all things a tricycle came peddling out of the darkness. The boy then stopped in the middle of the street and looked around, gawping.

"Hey kid," Jameson said. "You should get inside, there's a storm comin'."

The boy finally looked at the sheriff as if just noticing him.

"I'll say," he replied with an impish grin.

Then Skylar Haaland strode out of the night behind the boy with a blistering sandstorm right on his spurred heels. All Jameson could do was stare at the man in disbelief.

As Haaland passed the boy on the tricycle he took off the hat the kid was wearing and placed it on his own head.

"Sheriff," Haaland said with a polite tip of that hat and just walked on past like it was the most natural thing in the world and was swallowed up by the night.

The storm and its legion of occupants hit Jameson like a steam train, and he was ripped to shreds an instant later.

As he walked on Haaland couldn't help but smile as he heard Jameson's strangled cry followed by the boy's mischievous laughter.

Death came quickly to Sheriff Jameson, as it did for the majority of Little Rock's beleaguered population. Most were taken quickly and painlessly in their sleep. After all, although their present circumstances made them murderers.

The travellers in the storm, whatever they might be, were not cruel souls. Far from it, they took no pleasure in the slaughter, and would, in time each mourn the loss of life. But not tonight, tonight was all about survival and deliverance from the unforgiving sun.

But for all their show of mercy to those they had to despatch, as the killing came to a close. The four remaining survivors of the onslaught, all holed up in the town's saloon, would see none of it. They didn't know it then, but they had been shepherded there for one final showdown.

Cutter winced in horror as he was hit full in the face by a jet of Billy's blood. The man was being torn apart right in front of him and he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

"Help me!!!" Billy screamed, but the words were soon drowned as a torrent of blood gushed from his mouth.

Cutter staggered back as the demons from hell ripped and pulled at the teenagers beleaguered body. His right arm was pulled right out of its socket and was bourn up by the storm like a trophy and then disappeared in its midst.

And Cutter just had time to see Billy's head come away from his neck as it twisted off by a dozen half formed hands and what was left of his body was dragged out of the saloon's swing doors and into the swirling nightmare that had them trapped here.

Another scream, but this one of defiance as Jesse shouldered past Cutter and fired shot after shot from his Winchester at the darting shapes all around him.

"Yer fuckers!" Jesse hissed through blooded and broken teeth and dropped to one knee to reload.

"Whadda we do? Whadda we do?" Cutter babbled in terror.

Something clawed at his face, and he felt blood coming in streams like tears down his cheeks.

"How the hell should I know!?" Jesse replied. "Just keep fucking shooting!"

Even though they were only three feet apart, they had to shout above the unearthly din coming from the storm.

May tucked her knees under her chin as she hid behind the bar. For whatever reason she had remained untouched by the attack. Still, the sheer overwhelming horror of it all threatened to rob her of her already slipping sanity.

She heard Jesse scream out a curse to the monsters and fire.

She knew deep down it was useless, they were being punished, although May was not a religious woman the reason for all this was quite clear to her fear addled brain. This was the end of days.

“It’s the rapture!!” She screamed. “We have been judged! We are damned!”

“May!” Jesse shouted from what seemed like miles away. “Get out here and help!”

She was about to tell him all was lost and all that was left was prayer when a succession of screaming banshees crashed into the shelves at the back of the bar sending shattered glass and liquor raining down all around her.

She caught a glimpse of the most horrific face as the demons flew past and she hit with a blast of fetid air. The face, more screaming mouth than anything with deep set black eyes, stopped dead as the others disappeared into the storm raging all around.

Its soulless eyes caught hers.

“May,” it hissed, and the mouth turned into a hideous grin.

For the briefest of moments, the face became solid. The disembodied head of a young woman. Then it was none to merge once more with its fellow creatures.

Hearing her own name from such an abomination drove May screaming from behind the bar.

Jesse and Cutter were desperately trying to fend off the demons that swooped and spun around the saloon. There was no sign of Billy. But the sheer volume of blood splattered on the front of the bar and the floor gave testament to his fate. One they would all surely soon suffer.

“Jess’!”

She saw that a group of the things had gathered up on the balcony above them. As if massing for a more organised attack, it would only take a moment for them to come flooding down the stairs and overwhelm them.

Jesse turned to her, and she pointed up to the writhing forms.

“Up there!” She warned.

Jesse followed the gesture and his blooded face filled with horror.

“Cutter, up there!” He shouted and aimed.

Cutter followed his lead and both men fired into the squall of nightmares.

Jesse emptied his Winchester and tossed it aside. Then drew his revolver and emptied that in an instant. It took him several more pulls of the trigger to realise the weapon wasn’t kicking anymore.

“Fuck!” He backed away and began to pull shells from the loops in his gun belt and frantically reload.

Cutter holstered his own pistol and fired both barrels of his shotgun. And to his amazement the spectral figures retreated back through an upstairs doorway leading to the hotel upstairs.

“Jesse, it’s working,” he shouted triumphantly.

Jesse pushed in the final shell and aimed back up the stairs. Cutter was right, the things were all but gone.

Something burst through the swing doors to his right, and he spun to see two of the things edging inside, dark misshapen things within the storm.

He fired once and the storm and the demons within retreated back outside. He kept his aim on the door but no more came through.

“It worked,” he uttered in disbelief. Then bellowed. “It’s working!!”

Cutter gave a whoop of delight then remembered his shotgun was empty.

“Shit,” he cursed and fumbled to reload.

“It’s a miracle!” May said in awe as she came to Jesse’s side.

Although the storm was still raging all bloody hell outside, it was little more than a breeze of thin drifting sand inside the saloon.

“Thank Jesus,” May said and took Jesse’s arm for comfort.

“They’re going,” he assured her. “They’re going.”

“What the fuck were those things?” Cutter asked, clutching his loaded shotgun like a lover.

Jesse just shook his head. The three survivors had their eyes glued to the rattling saloon doors. Bracing themselves for a renewed attack. But a full minute past and the

storm gradually began to fade away. They could hear it in the distance as it retreated, then nothing but their own ragged breaths.

“Cutter,” Jesse whispered as if fearful of re-awakening the storm. “Take a look outside.”

Now Cutter had been afraid of Jesse ever since he had met the man, despite being five years older and a lot bigger. But he wasn’t that afraid enough to obey that lunatic order.

“Fuck that.”

Jesse turned and sneered at the man, but after everything his heart wasn’t in it, and he wondered if Cutter would ever listen to him again.

For his part Cutter held Jesse’s gaze as steadily as Jesse had ever seen him do before. And for the first time in ten years, he noticed the man had the greenest eyes he had ever seen.

The sound of approaching spurs snapped Jesse back to reality. He aimed back into the night just beyond the top of the swing doors and Cutter did the same with his shotgun.

“Who is that?” May whispered.

She was gripping his arm so tightly Jesse could feel her nails break the skin under his shirt. But he barely registered the pain. Just more cuts and bruises to add to the battering his body had taken tonight.

The storm outside suddenly surged up and the swing doors blew open where they stayed as if held by unseen hands. Then after what seemed like an age a shadowy figure emerged from the darkness and stepped into the saloon.

A beat later the storm came with him and spread throughout the saloon, encircling Jesse, Cutter and May but at a distance, where it hovered teeming with shadows within.

But none of the three noticed. Their attention was on the figure in the doorway.

It was May who spoke first.

“Haaland?”

The Sotiras took a moment to let his entrance sink in. He could feel the fear emanating from the three and let it wash over him like a warm mid-day breeze.

He looked up at the trio from under the brim of his hat, the one Jesse himself had placed upon his head not so long ago. But he did not speak. Those within the storm grew agitated as it hung back. Desperate to be the instrument of their saviours’ tormentors deaths. But Haaland, the Sotiras had other ideas.

There was a long pause as no one moved or spoke and Haaland could feel the frustration building from within his new kin, but they held back, out of respect if not desire.

Haaland finally locked eyes with Jesse, who flinched ever so slightly at his attention, then Haaland slowly, deliberately moved his long thick coat away from his side, revealing his holster.

“Whoa, hold on there, Dutch,” Jesse said. “Just hold on.”

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” Haaland asked.

He was instantly aware his voice was different somehow and the looks on the three confirmed this. It was his voice, but deeper, harsher. Like he was speaking from the bottom of a well.

As if for dramatic effect, a hush descended over the storm. Jesse frantically looked around him as if just realising he was surrounded once more. Faces, eager for more slaughter formed then melted away in its midst.

“Don’t worry about them,” Haaland said. “You kill me, you can go. All of you.”

Jesse cocked his head with suspicion. He glanced at Cutter who shrugged. ‘Like we have a choice?’

Jesse pushed May to one side and deftly spun his pistol and let it slide into his holster. That old familiar look of confidence melted across his face once more.

“You never where too bright, Haaland,” he said. And with that let his hand fall to his side in line with his holster.

“Take your best shot,” Haaland said, a man without fear.

The pistol was in Jesse’s hand in a split second, and he had fired twice before Haaland even thought to reach for his own. Both bullets hit their mark, slamming within an inch of each other into Haaland’s chest and he went down in an instant.

There was an audible ungodly gasp from the shadows within the storm and Jesse screwed his eyes tight shut expecting them to tear into him anyway. He braced himself, but the onslaught never came.

“Yes!!” Cutter yelped breaking the spell.

He began to dance a jig.

“You did it! Jesse, you shot him dead. You always was faster than him.”

Jesse nodded, he had always beaten the Dutchman at everything, ever since he had arrived in Little Rock. And whatever strength and speed he figure he had gotten from these Godforsaken phantoms hadn't helped him for shit.

"Oh, yeah. You are the best, Jesse," Cutter rambled on.

May was giggling in sheer relief, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"We're safe now," Jesse told her.

Then there was a tangible shift within the writhing figures. They began flitting and darting, dark agitated shadows whispering mischief to one another.

"Shit!" Cutter swung his shot gun left and right as they ebbed and flowed around the saloon.

"Fuck," Jesse spat and cocked his pistol. So much for the deal.

"Whoa, wait, wait!!" Cutter said. All bravado at Jesse's victory had fled.

He let out a strangled sob. As some figures formed out of the sand and darkness. All too real, all too hungry for blood.

"You heard him!" Cutter pleaded. "You heard Haaland. Jess' beat him fair and square. He said we could go if he won. Look," he gestured to Haaland's body. "Shot him dead. Fair and fuckin' square."

Christ how Jesse hated the coward. He wasn't sure why, but he felt a strange sense of calm. He eyed the saloon looking for any possible way out. Over by the swing doors he saw a skinny kid on a tricycle and wondered if the calm he felt was actually just the beginning of insanity.

The boy was scowling down at Haaland's body. He shook his head in what looked like disappointment and slowly backed the tricycle out through the doors.

"Jess', they're leaving," May said from where she was clinging to the bar.

And sure enough the figures began, one by one, to melt back into the storm which then followed the boy outside.

"Jesus, Christ," Cutter gasped in disbelief.

Jesse moved over to the bar and he and May embraced. Their relationship had never been anything close to love. But in that moment, he held her closer than he had ever held anyone in his life.

"What were those things?" May whispered in his ear.

All he could do was shake his head.

“Oh,” Cutter said in an odd matter of fact tone.

Jesse looked at the man who was staring slack jawed at something behind him.

“What the fuck...” He began but stopped himself. Of course, there was a grim inevitability to it all.

He slowly let May go and turned around. He wasn't at all surprised to see Haaland, standing there with two ragged bullet holes in his chest, but bleeding an almost viscous darkness instead of blood. The Dutchman took off his hat and dusted himself off.

He had a neat bullet hole in his forehead.

“You always was faster than me, Jess’.” Haaland said with a nod of acknowledgement before replacing his hat.

Although Jesse still had his own pistol in his hand, it seemed too heavy to raise. And his gun hand just stayed limply at his side.

Jesse watched as Haaland slowly, deliberately drew his pistol and raised it. It was as if he was hypnotised by the movement. He was aware what the Dutchman was doing, and what that ultimately meant. But he was powerless to react beyond gawping at the instrument of his death as it finally levelled at his head.

May stepped further away with a sob of pity.

“Yer fucker,” he said to his executioner.

Not much as final words go, but he could think of no others.

Haaland fired, hitting Jesse square in the forehead and the round took off the back of his skull. He crumpled to the saloon floor as the blood fled his body in great jets like a coward.

Haaland, Cutter and May all looked down at the body as it twitched on the floor. Nothing more than death throws. They each knew unlike Haaland, he would not get up.

“Hell of a day,” Haaland sighed.

This snapped May out of her shock. She backed away shaking her head like she was trying to dislodge the whole sorry scene.

Haaland looked at her, he had the distant memory of someone like her, or maybe it had been a dream he had once had. Someone who just a few short days ago had been holding him tightly as he slept in her arms, oblivious to the harsh world outside their room.

Now he didn't know her at all, she was speaking, but he couldn't understand a word she was saying. He didn't even recognise the sound of her voice. She was a stranger now, perhaps someone he had met many years ago? Perhaps she was Dutch.

"H... H... Haaland?" It was Cutter. Now this guy he did remember.

"You still here?" Haaland asked.

The full force of the storm and its impatient residents blew in through the swing doors shattering the wood like glass. As they blew past Haaland he had to put a hand on the top of his head to stop his hat flying off.

They tore into Cutter with a rabid zeal. Haaland couldn't help but wince as they ripped him apart. Their pent-up energies had made them cruel, perhaps they had feared Haaland would indeed let the man go and so they attacked him with unbridled violence.

But Haaland knew as they dragged him kicking and screaming from the saloon and into the night. His death would not be quick. Haaland had promised them that Cutter, along with poor young Billy. Would be theirs to do with as they wished.

As he disappeared in a mass of sand, thick darkness and body parts, the shotgun he had been carrying dropped to the floor where it hit, butt first.

As could be common with that particular model, the impact set off the weapon and the shot hit poor May in the side of her head. Haaland felt the spray of blood hit his back and he turned to see her bloody body slump to the floor.

He looked down at her ruined face but felt nothing. The boy and the young woman formed out of the swirling storm next to her body.

"Don't you remember her, Sotiras?" The young woman asked.

"Don't think so," Haaland replied in all honesty.

Haaland could sense more than hear 'papa's' horseless wagon trundling up the street outside.

"Papa can rest now," he said.

The boy threw his arms in the air.

"The town is ours!!" He shouted.

The young woman smiled lovingly at his childish excitement.

"Sanctuary," Haaland said.

"Home," she replied. "Thanks to you, Sotiras."

He liked the sound of that.

“Sotiras,” he said it out loud and it sounded as familiar as his old name had been.

The storm blew back into the saloon and whipped around him with renewed enthusiasm. The figures within it began to chant, over and over.

“Sotiras! Sotiras!”

Haaland laughed and opened his arms to welcome them. As they embraced him, the one-time outcast and lost soul slowly disintegrated, and it felt like bliss. Until finally he was truly apart of his new family.

Louder and louder, they chanted merging into one euphoric voice.

The very foundations of the saloon rattled and splintered, the windows shattered, as the cacophony became a deafening roar.

But this was music to Haaland the Sotiras. He was home. They all were.

THE MOREAU HORRORS

London: May 1875

I feel I must put the record straight regarding the true nature of the events which led to my writing what you may or may not have read last month.

Whilst that gaudy pamphlet, which had proved so very popular does indeed bear my name as author. It is little more than pale facsimile of the original document I submitted to my editor.

The Moreau Horrors.

The title is mine, and I feel truly reflects the events as they were related to me by that poor surviving soul.

The publication as you will have read it is a mere fragment of the whole sordid story as I have written it. Watered down to little more than a shadow of the original text.

In all honesty, I was not completely surprised at the omission of certain, shall we say explicit parts of the piece. In truth, it at times pained and revolted me to put these

passages down on paper, as I knew it would be for anyone to read. But I believed then, as I do now that only the full account, regardless of taste and discretion, as I heard it related to me, would do justice to the whole sorry affair.

Afterall, lives were lost, and not to mention the sanity of my close dear friend Charles Oldman. It was Charles who narrated the events to me, and as such I owe it to him, and those others involved in this case to be nothing more than an impartial recorder of what I heard. In all its sometimes-horrendous glory.

Firstly, my thoughts on the piece as edited and printed. As I have previously stated it is, at its heart correct, if much edited.

Such as the fire on Fiddler's Wharfe on the banks of the Thames, where the building leased by now notorious Doctor Alphonse Moreau for the purposes of 'medical research' was completely destroyed by fire. The blackened and skeletal remains of the place are still there if you wish to see for yourself.

And according to the official police report, several 'bodies' were uncovered in the debris afterwards. However, to date only one has been definitively identified as human. The report then descends into what can only be described as vagaries when it comes to the others found in the aftermath.

Of Moreau, there was no sign. Some say he fled to the country, some that it was his body that was found amongst the ruins. And others still, myself included, that he escaped from the docks that same night and bribed his way out of England to Lord only knows where. No doubt to continue his blasphemous experiments, away from the prying eyes of civilisation.

For my part in all this, my good friend and colleague Charles Oldman and I worked as reporters for the Times here in London.

I primarily cover political matters and have on several occasions interviewed and written profiles on many politicians, of all parties, including the prime minister and many of his cabinet.

Oldman, who had been a medical student in his early twenties before his funds had run dry, was the perfect reporter for all matters medical and scientific. It was for this very

reason that our editor John Thadeus Delane had tasked Charles with investigating the shadowy figure of Doctor Moreau.

Moreau had over previous years, garnered a rather salacious and enigmatic reputation in certain medical circles. His secretive research which had rumoured to involve extensive vivisection had always been operated in an altogether clandestine manner.

He had on many occasions, and much to the chagrin of his colleagues, refused to disclose the full nature of his experiments and had made no attempt to publish or lecture on any of the findings his years of research had produced.

I personally had never heard of the man, other than certain outlandish rumours that had circulated around the newspaper offices at the time. But Oldman had been exited beyond anything I had ever seen from the usually reserved fellow upon receiving the assignment.

On the night before he was to take up his post as a research assistant with the doctor at that mysterious dock lands building. Facilitated through a contact at the Royal teaching hospital. Oldman and another colleague, Paul Meadows and I had gone out for a celebratory dinner.

Where my friend had spent almost the entire evening trying to convince us poor laymen of Moreau's genius. Oldman had in fact had the pleasure of meeting the scientist himself whilst he was a medical student and was clearly still enamoured by the man.

Seeing his delight at the assignment, I could tell this was in no small part to the fact that Charles had missed the opportunity, through no fault of his own, to follow a career in medicine. And to be fair, Oldman did admit as such when I gently reminded him that he was there to investigate and write an extensive article about what he could discover about the doctor's current experiments, and why the man had chosen to shun the public eye.

Thankfully, Oldman had taken this in the manner it was intended and had left us in great spirits to begin his appointment the following morning.

Callous as it may sound, part of me wishes that had been the last time I had ever seen my friend.

Several weeks later there had been a devastating fire that had engulfed Fiddler's Wharf. All told seven buildings and warehouses had been completely gutted, four of which had collapsed entirely.

Oldman had subsequently disappeared, and we had all feared he had been caught up in the conflagration. An early investigation had confirmed that the source of the fire had been Moreau's laboratory. That was when the first of the gruesome discoveries had been made.

At least one person was dead, but the body was too far burnt for any hope of identification of the poor victim. A number of witnesses had stated that there were also other bodies within the ashes, but these were of twisted and mutilated animals.

These latter rumours were no doubt fuelled by the poor dog that had been spotted running from the premises and later found dead by the docks. The poor creature had apparently been the subject of numerous and awful inhumane vivisection procedures. And according to a police contact of mine, should not have by all rights, been able to walk let alone run so vigorously from the flames.

And so, I had thought that was an end to things. My dear friend had been missing presumed dead for over four weeks after the fire. We had held a short memorial service for him, and I had begun to move on with my life at the Times.

I returned from lunch one day to find a young messenger boy waiting for me at my desk in the newsroom.

The lad told me that he had been paid to deliver the note directly to me here at the Times by what he could only describe as 'some poor soul.' I must admit the youngster's face took on a haunted expression as he spoke.

The note, which was in a spiderly shuddering scrawl, was barely legible and in a filthy state, and brief in the extreme. But it lifted my spirits more than I can explain.

It read.

John,

Kind George Tavern by the old docks – Limehouse.

I am always here.

Charles.

I knew the King George Tavern and the surrounding area more by reputation than experience.

It was one of the more disreputable regions of the city. The pub was situated on the very banks of the Thames and as such was always frequented by transitory dock workers and sailors as well as those, of shall we say, ill-repute.

Although I was of course excited to know that my friend was not only alive but that I would soon see him again, I could not for the life of me think why he would choose such a place for our reunion. Then I remembered the boy's three-word description and that ill-favoured look. 'Some poor soul.'

Despite by enthusiasm for the meeting, I took care to tell a colleague where exactly I was going. Although at this stage and for reasons I wasn't quite sure of, I omitted to say who I was going to see. I made sure to stop off at home first, not only to change into more casual attire but also to pocket my small revolver.

Much to my annoyance, I received a knowing look from the cab driver when I requested the address, which only strengthened by suspicions regarding the area. And as he dropped me off on Garford street, which was in sight of the pub, he gave me the name of a 'young lady' he knew in Limehouse who was very friendly to gentlemen from the city.

I paid the man but declined to tell him to mind his own business, as I must confess to feeling quite out of my depth in these new and forbidding surroundings.

Despite its brevity, as I stood outside the King George, I re-read the note, perhaps hoping I had somehow mistaken the location. But this was of course a fool's hope I knew.

Although it was not yet two in the afternoon and the sun was unusually bright for this area of industrialization. The illumination from outside scarcely touched the interior of the tavern. Indeed, perhaps in a vain attempt to create a warming atmosphere, all the gaslights were lit in the place, but this just seemed to me to accentuate the gloom in the areas around the edges where the light refused to reach.

I took in its surroundings, trying to hide my distaste. I am far from what you could call a snob, but I was all too aware just how different this place what to the pubs and restaurants I would normally frequent going about by job reporting on the political machinations of Whitehall. Not a snob, but certainly privileged and more than a little naïve of such places.

The pub was furnished in a kind of haphazard nautical theme, the tables and chairs rough and dark stained wood. And the air was thick with tobacco smoke. The floor felt

sticky from so many spilt drinks as I made my way over to the bar and hailed the bartender, who was conversing with another patron at the far end.

The man, in his early fifties, eyed me with that knowing look I had received from the cab driver, and I felt my cheeks redden, despite the legitimacy of my actual motives.

“What can I get you, young sir?” The bartender asked with a surprisingly light voice given his roughly honed features.

And hearing this welcoming cadence I promised myself I would put aside any preconceived prejudices I had regarding the place and its clientele.

“A small port, if you please,” I replied and turned to the murky room in search of my friend.

It was a sizable place, and the lighting only gave intermittent pools of orange light in which to take in those drinking here.

A group of who I took to be dock workers were huddled around a large table playing a card game I did not recognise. They were speaking in German as far as I could tell and seemed in great spirits.

Two middle-aged men in overalls were sat at another table drinking from a shared bottle of some kind.

“Here you go, threepence.”

“Oh, thank you,” I turned back and dug a threepenny piece out of my pocket and gave it to the bartender.

I took a tentative sip and was surprised how tasty the port was, and again I had to remind myself not to be so judgemental.

Then, movement over at a secluded table at the very back of the bar caught my eye. And what looked like a gloved hand rose from the shadows and beckoned me over.

“Charles?” I exclaimed and moved swiftly across, quite forgetting my drink.

The gloved hand gestured to the chair opposite as I approached.

Now that I was closer, I realised that Charles was not in fact wearing gloves. His hand was wrapped in a grimy bandage. As I neared the table, Charles deliberately sat back in his chair so that his face and body were in near darkness. I could see the lamp directly above him had been extinguished to allow for more discretion and that the table was in fact two pushed together so that there was a greater distance between us once I was seated.

“Charles! I can’t quite believe it.”

I instinctively moved forwards and extended my hand, but he raised both of his in a halting motion and I could see the left was as bandaged as the right.

He had a wide brimmed hat on which was tilted in such a way as to obscure most of his face, which as with his hands was wrapped in filthy bandages. I thought of the fire and gasped.

“Dear God!”

He reeked of a mixture of disinfectant and to be quite frank, burnt and unwashed flesh. A tilt of his bandaged head at my reaction made it clear my expression mirrored my disgust.

“Charles...” I was about to apologise when he dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

“I don’t bathe much these days,” he said. His voice was raw and rasping and seemed to pain him to speak.

Words failed me as I looked at him. Even through the shadows he hid in, it was clear he had been badly injured in the fire, and by the way the bandages were arranged it seemed to me he had been self-treating himself ever since.

His face was all but covered by bandages save for a slit cut in for his mouth and a thin strip for his eyes, which I was heartened to see still had a spark of life in them. The flesh around them, however? Even in the dim light I could see the skin was red raw and seeping.

“It’s good to see you. John,” he managed to say.

I couldn’t reciprocate given his condition.

“We need to get you to a doctor,” I said finding my voice.

He gave a low strangled laugh at this and took a drink straight from the bottle of gin that had been on the table in front of him. His damaged hands made this quite the task, but I have to admit it seemed a well-practiced manoeuvre.

“You need a doctor,” I insisted.

Again, that wet choking laugh.

“I have had quite enough of doctors,” he replied bitterly.

“You’ve been treating yourself this entire time?”

“It’s surprising what one can buy on the streets around these parts.”

We sat in silence for a moment.

“We, we thought you were dead, Charles,” I finally said. “That fire...”

“Not quite,” he replied softly. “Perhaps I should have been, but I was saved from the flames, just.”

“And what of Moreau?” I asked. “Did he survive? What happened in that place? People died, Charles. They found a body... Amongst other things.”

I was aware I was bombarding my friend, but I had so many unanswered questions that had built up over the weeks.

He took another long drink from the bottle and set it on the table. He sat back with an audible gasp of pain. My heart sank at seeing my friend in such a state.

“You don’t have to suffer like this,” I said. “Let me take you back. If it’s money you need...”

“Suffer?” He said cutting me off. “Oh, it’s quite the opposite, my friend. Despite appearances to the contrary, I have never been happier.”

It is surprising what a simple tilt of the head can convey when you cannot see someone’s facial expressions. It was clear from that slight movement the incredulity was written all over my own face.

He let out a sort of strangled chuckle which set my nerves on edge.

“I have everything I need,” he finally said. “An ample supply of morphine for the pain.” He gestured to the bottle. “And gin of course, which I can almost taste at times.”

Again, that laugh.

“Charles, please,” I implored. “You are not yourself!”

Even from this all too brief meeting it was clear to me that the dual effects of his terrible injuries coupled with the self-administered morphine, sourced from God only knew what illicit back street trader. Had distorted his usual good sense.

“It is true, I am changed. Both inside and out,” he said. “But for the better, John. I couldn’t begin to explain that aspect of all this to you. But the rest, how I came to be seated here before you now? That I can tell.”

He shifted awkwardly in his chair, clearly trying to get comfortable. Then he regarded me with those red ringed but bright, fierce eyes.

“It is good to see you, John,” he said again. And the grubby bandages tightened around his mouth and chin in what could only be a smile.

“You asked of Moreau,” he continued. “Take it from me, he was both a genius and a madman. The things I have seen... His work.” He regarded his current state with a sigh. “And its inevitable consequences.”

He seemed to drift off, his mind wandering, and I sat there studying him for a full minute.

“Charles?” I finally prompted.

His gaze fell upon me once more and for a brief moment there was no recognition in them. Then slowly they seemed to focus.

“John, how long have I been missing?” He asked. “It’s a strange question to ask, when I myself have known my whereabouts all this time.”

I didn’t quite understand that last turn of phrase. But the morphine I assumed was clouding his thoughts.

“Over a month, since the fire.”

His eyes widened in something akin to amusement at this.

“Over a month? Tempus Fugit as they say,” he whispered with an edge of awe to his raspy voice. “Time flies, when you are having fun.”

“Charles! What happened man?” I exclaimed more sharply than I had intended. This drugged fugue state was so un-nerving in a man I had known as nothing but rational and sober.

“Hmm...” Oldman paused, his eyes narrowed, and he began to tap his temple with a blackened index finger that protruded from the filthy bandage on his right hand.

Finally, after a good ten seconds of this action, he looked me in the eyes. His own were now thankfully clear once more as his addled brain fought through the fog of the drug.

“Let me start with this. What you see before you, is the luckiest man alive...”

What follows is an account of what my good friend Charles Oldman told me that long afternoon.

I convey it as best I can in his own syntax although freely admit in parts I have clarified without deviation from the ‘facts,’ his sometimes-rambling tone. But never I assure you to the detriment of the narrative, just simply to make the piece more readable and for my own part to better reflect my friend’s previously cogent voice.

I wonder if some of the more fantastical elements of the account are due in no small part to the hideous drug coursing through his veins and the trauma the whole affair no doubt inflicted on his state of mind. But that said, I have not censored a thing, that is most important of all to note.

As for myself, I did witness the aftermath of one part of this incredible tale when I foolishly, although with good intentions, followed Oldman home after our meeting. That was one event I did not put in my original article to the Times, and I only tell you now out of a kind of therapeutic exercise.

But more on that later...

Firstly, my dear John, I must admit that my initial delight at obtaining this assignment was soon tempered somewhat by a kind of melancholy.

It brought back memories of my much-lamented attempts at becoming a doctor myself. As I prepared, I was reminded of my natural aptitude in the area, not to mention great potential. All to be let down, through no fault of my own, by my financial situation.

It was peculiar that I would think of such things then, after all, my knowledge of medicine no matter how truncated had given me a fulfilling career at the Times. Yet this particular assignment had caused me to pause and reflect on past possibilities.

Perhaps, thinking back, it was the man himself. Doctor Moreau, who I had seen lecture at the University during my first months there and had been so utterly impressed by the man. That had rekindled those dormant feelings.

Well, be that as it may, such whimsical feelings soon faded along with the setting sun when I arrived at Moreau's secluded and quite unconventional laboratory. From its exterior it looked like little more than a nondescript warehouse, with nothing to outwardly distinguish it from the others that it sat amongst. That of course was a deliberate choice on the doctor's part when choosing the location.

I was greeted at the docks, if greeted is not too polite a word, by Moreau's servant, the boorish mister Cullen. An altogether disagreeable and uneducated man who I had, when he first approached me, thought was one of the many dock workers milling around the area in search of work, or indeed a vagrant.

But no, he worked for Moreau, and it was only later I would come to realise why such a distinguished member of the medical profession would need the services of such a man.

My contact at University hospital, Doctor Miles, who had been the one to furnish Moreau with my albeit enhanced credentials and thus secured me with the laboratory assistants position, had been at pains to warn me of Cullen. Whereas there was little known about Moreau at this time. Jacob Cullen was another matter entirely.

Although Miles had to admit it was little more than campus tittle-tattle, he had heard tell that Cullen was rumoured to have been a grave robber for some of the less discerning medical students in the past. Similar to the infamous Burke and Hare if you will.

Nothing could be proven of course, but I can attest that he had now changed his profession from acquiring bodies to the procurement of live animals for the purpose of vivisection which had, in turn, led him to the employ of Doctor Moreau.

Looking at the man as I stood there on the docks, with his ill-fitting and unwashed clothes, I would well believe the rumours. In time, I would come to understand his true role for Moreau. He was a bodyguard, animal procurer and all round villain.

Indeed, as he led me over to the warehouse, he took great pleasure in informing me that I was a hasty replacement for the precious laboratory assistant, who, in his words. ‘Had a terrible accident.’

“I trust you can keep your mouth shut,” he said unlocking a side door just to the left of the main heavy door which dominated the front of the warehouse. It was a statement, not a question.

“Of course,” I assured him.

“The doctor has certain ways of working. When he’s in the operating room, you never go in there.”

“I understand.”

He replied to this with little more than a grunt and opened the door and we went inside.

The door led to a large open area, where normally, if this were a warehouse holding goods from the docks, would be filled with all manner of crates and such. But despite its size there was nothing, but a solitary flatbed cart with a wrought iron animal cage half draped in a canvas cover on the back.

No doubt this was for the transportation of the animals Moreau needed for his work. There was no sign of the horse although I could see hoof prints gouged into the soft stone floor here and there.

The only artificial light was coming from a first-floor window to my right which was to the side of a closed double loading door, under which was our only means of ascent.

A crude lifting platform with a gate which barely came up the waist. A series of thick ropes attached the device to two iron wheels above the loading doors which fed down into a wooden box on the platform itself. I surmised the whole contraption was operated by a pulley system which was powered by a large double hand crank protruding from the box.

"This is the only way up," Cullen said redundantly. "I hope you're feeling strong."

I was about to protest but thought better of it, I had to remind myself of my position here, that of a simple assistant. And also, although I had taken an instant dislike to the man, I knew I would have to work with him. And I must confess of being more than a little intimidated, not only by his reputation, but his considerable size.

Much to my relief, the pulley system was actually very well designed, and it took surprisingly little effort to turn the crank handle and the platform moved smoothly up the ropes and to the double doors above. When the platform came to a halt, Cullen snapped on a heavy metal brake onto the gears and pushed open one of the loading doors to the side and I could now see this was on a sliding system.

We stepped off the lift and into a brightly lit if sparsely furnished office. Which consisted of a desk and chairs which were tucked away in one corner and a long row of filing cabinets along one wall. Cullen pointed to the desk.

"The doctor likes to keep very exact records of his work. He makes a hell of a lot of notes, and it will be either yours, or nurse Kinderman's job to work out his scrawl and write them up at the end of the day."

"I understand," I replied and eyed the cabinets with great curiosity."

"The doc hardly ever comes in here," Cullen continued. "He's the more hands-on type, hates paperwork, practically lives in the operating room."

I followed Cullen across the room and over to a door, as we passed the desk, I saw a woman's bag hanging from the back of one of the chairs.

"How many people work here?" I asked.

"Just me, the doc and nurse Kinderman. You'll meet her soon enough. She'll be in the operating room helping Moreau carve up some poor creature or other I imagine."

"And I," I said as we reached the door.

He turned to me with a dull look of incomprehension.

“You, the doctor, nurse Kinderman. And I work here.”

I must confess to a certain sense of mischief seeing the man’s mind ticking over at this. Finally, I got a grunt in response, and he opened the door. I moved to follow but he put a hand on my chest to stop me and I took a step back.

“You wait here,” he said. “I’ll let the doc know you’ve arrived. Take a seat.”

With this he went through into the next room but did not fully close the door. Naturally, I peered through the gap.

The room was large, but the part I could see was empty. With a double door at the far end, one of which was half open.

“Cullen, that you?” A man’s voice called from the other side of the door as Cullen approached.

“Who else?” Cullen replied.

“Help me with this will you?”

Cullen stepped to one side as a hospital gurney was pushed through the doors, getting wedged slightly. Cullen said something under his breath I could not hear and took a hold of the gurney and pulled it the rest of the way out.

There was something large wrapped in a blanket on the gurney, but it was impossible to make out what it was. I judged as best I could that it was the size of a large dog, perhaps a great Dane.

Then Moreau himself came through the doors and let Cullen take the gurney.

Doctor Alphonse Moreau. He was dressed in a surgeon’s gown and a bloody apron. When he pulled off his white cloth cap his grey flecked brown hair fell to his shoulders in a thick, unkempt mane.

Seeing the man again and in his element, Moreau looked even more impressive than I had built up in my mind. Cullen was a big man, but the doctor towered above him. I must admit I had to fight the urge to barge in and introduce myself then and there.

“Christ!” Cullen suddenly cursed as he peered under the blanket. “Another one?”

His insolent tone took me aback, but not Moreau.

“It couldn’t be helped,” Moreau explained.

“Doctor, you’re becoming far too trigger happy with these specimens!”

“Hazards of the job, Cullen, you know that,” Moreau insisted. “Besides, I was able to garner much from the autopsy.”

“I can easily dispose of your specimens, Moreau,” Cullen chided. “But procuring replacements is another matter entirely. After all, these aren’t fresh cadavers like the old days.”

“That my dear Cullen, is why you are paid so handsomely,” Moreau retorted.

“Indeed,” Cullen relented. “The new chap is here... Charles Oldman.

Hearing my name, I ducked back into the office and hastily sat down in one of the chairs. I noticed a copy of that day’s Daily Express on the desk, so I snatched it up and feigned reading it until I heard footsteps approach and the door clattered open further as Cullen came through pushing the gurney before him.

I stood up, expecting Moreau to be with him, but to my disappointment he was alone.

“You can go through,” Cullen told me. “Straight through the double doors, there’s a storeroom on the other side, wait there and someone will be through in a bit. Don’t go any further.”

I glanced at the bulk under the blanket.

Cullen gave an impudent chuckle and teased the corner of the blanket to one side. I was immediately struck with the unmistakable stench of formaldehyde.

It took me a moment to fully register what I was seeing. It seemed to be the hind leg of a large animal up to the thigh. I presumed it was a dog, but the fur had been shorn away and much to my surprise the ankle joint had been straightened and kept in place by two metal brackets attached to the flesh with pins. So that the whole part of the leg was completely straight.

As straight I had to admit as a human leg below the knee, complete with an ankle of sorts, despite the obvious anatomical differences.

Cullen laughed out loud at my obvious shock and pulled the blanket back over the strange limb.

“Best get used to sights such as these, Oldman,” he said. The sheer glee was thick in his voice.

And with this he wheeled the gurney over to the double doors and the lift.

One thing I learnt very early on in my all too brief time in medicine, is that to succeed in that profession one must become accustomed to all manner of strange and sometimes horrific sights.

I could, if there were time, regale you with some of the quite remarkable deformities and injuries I had encountered during a two-month residency at a pauper's clinic behind Kind's Cross station. How many of those poor souls survived beyond their twentieth year is beyond me.

But regardless of this, I was much taken aback by that brief glimpse of the doctor's work. I had heard the rumours of course, many of which had prompted my assignment. Of Moreau's unique application of the practice of vivisection. But just what was he trying to achieve here?

I made my way across the large empty room and over to the doors. I paused, wondering what I might find behind it, but any reticence was more than overtaken by my curiosity, and of course the prospect of meeting Moreau himself.

I opened one of the doors and slipped inside. It wasn't as I had first thought an operating theatre or indeed a ward occupied by strange and twisted animal experiments. Much to my disappointment I was met with a large and quite frankly cluttered storage area. The walls were stacked from floor to ceiling with all manner of boxes and bottles. Including several wooden hutches for keeping rabbits and small vermin. As well as sacks filled with various animal feeds.

A large wrought iron cage, much like the one on the wagon downstairs only considerably bigger sat in one corner. The top of the cage came up to my chest and was as long again in length. I absently tried one of the bars, but it did not move an inch. Whatever animal it had held would have been considerably bigger than the dog, if that what it truly was, I had just seen Cullen disposing of.

There were the remnants of straw bedding and what looked like animal droppings inside and I feared one of my first tasks would be to clean this.

I moved over to a long table which had many bottles and packages stacked on it. I picked up one of the bottles and read the label. Chloroform, this could be used to anaesthetise both human and animal subjects alike. I noticed several empty bottles of the same amongst the clutter.

The chaotic state of the partition put me in mind once more of my time at Kind's Cross whereas time was often of the essence, housekeeping was always the first task to fall by the wayside. As a lowly medical student, clearing up after a long shift was part of my more mundane chores.

Perhaps that was why, before I knew it, I had absently begun to tidy up a little here and there as I snooped.

“You must be Oldman,” a woman’s voice said from behind me.

“Charles,” I replied automatically as I turned to greet the speaker.

Now John, I am all too aware of my current, shall we say medicated state of mind. The morphine can at times not only dull the pain but also induce hallucinations and a sense of disassociation.

It may colour, I fully admit, my recollections of much of what I am about to tell you. That cannot be helped. But on this point, I am adamant when it comes to my first reaction upon seeing nurse Mary Kinderman.

She was standing in the doorway to the next room, dressed in a bloody surgical gown, much like Moreau’s and was holding her white surgical cap in her hands. Her pale young face was drawn and fatigued, but I can truly say I have never seen a more beautiful and bright-eyed woman in my life.

She was perhaps twenty-five at most, but in all honestly looked like she was barely nineteen her complexion was so fair. Her straw blond hair was cut much shorter than is the fashion these days, more out of practicality than style. She smiled and quite honestly, I could have written a dozen poems about how that made me feel. But this is, as you will agree, neither the time nor the place for such frivolity.

Strangely though it may sound, her perfect face was somehow accentuated by the haunted look in her eyes, at the things this young woman must have seen lately. A darkness in contrast to her visual luminescence.

She seemed to blush as I stood there dumbfounded and bowed her head as if to examine the cap in her hands.

“I must look quite the sight,” she said. Her voice was as light as a summer’s breeze, barely a whisper but with a musicality that set my heart racing.

“Oh, erm, no,” I stuttered like a love-struck schoolboy. “Not at all. You have been hard at work, I assume.”

I gestured past her through the doorway to the next room. I could what looked to be an empty bed, perhaps this was a recovery ward or some such.

“Indeed,” she replied and walked over to me.

She wiped her hand on the gown which left a faint trace of blood, then she extended it to me.

“My name is Mary Kinderman, Mary to you. I am Doctor Moreau’s assistant.

I took her hand instantly and gently shook it. She seemed pleased with this, and I realised in that moment that this had been some kind of a test. She was clearly fresh out of surgery and the fact I took her blood-stained hand without hesitation spoke volumes to her regarding my lack of squeamishness.

“Has the delightful mister Cullen advised you of your duties?”

“Not as such, mostly about note keeping.”

She gave the hint of a knowing smile at this.

“Yes, I hope your handwriting is up to scratch,” she said. “It may take you a while to decipher the doctor’s hieroglyphics, so I will help you with that part. I will dictate, you will transcribe.”

She spoke with a confidence and a directness that I must admit I found quite affecting.

“Understood,” I replied.

“Then,” she continued. “It will mostly be a matter of tidying up this pig sty and cleaning the instruments from the operating room. And assisting as and when required.”

“Can I see the operating room now,” I asked a little too eagerly.

That was when I saw a hint of fear in her grey eyes.

“No!” I could tell from her expression she was all too aware of how she sounded.

“As you wish,” I replied evenly.

She seemed to wrestle with some internal dilemma for a moment, then waved a dismissive hand.

“Time enough for all that later, the doctor is just finishing up in there at the moment and he does not like to be disturbed.”

She ushered me through to the next room, which was as I had first thought a small make-shift ward of sorts with four freshly made, but empty, beds.

“I’m sure you have seen one of these before.”

“Beds, for animals?” I enquired.

“That will not be the strangest thing you will see,” she replied with a light laugh. “If you do continue to work here for a time.”

This put me in mind of Cullen earlier. *‘You will see stranger things than this.’*

"I, for one hope I will be working here for some time," I told her. "And I am most eager to see more of what you are doing here. And meet the doctor, of course."

"All in good time, Charles. For the meantime, please restrict your comings and goings to the front office and the storage area."

Her face grew stern and again that flicker of inner conflict.

"What the doctor is doing here, will change the very perception of modern medical science." She seemed to check herself before continuing. "But, for the time being these things are of no concern of yours. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes of course."

"The doctor is very focused on his work, and if you do happen to meet him, he may seem very taciturn. But please, do not take that as rudeness. He is simply a man of very singular vision and focus."

She spoke of the man with such obvious reverence that I inexplicably felt a pang of jealousy. How strange our emotions can be.

Despite this odd reaction from myself, I truly could not wait to meet the infamous doctor Moreau. Perhaps more now than ever. And I had to remind myself of the true purpose for being here.

Although Moreau's work was shrouded in secrecy, their need for an assistance and the eagerness in which I had been approved, did show me on my initial first impression that they were not adept at subterfuge. And it was clear to me that their passion and single mindedness could be exploited to ingratiate myself into their inner circle and whatever wonders lay within before too long.

Cullen, I mused, might be a different proposition entirely, but I would just have to count on his utter dismissiveness at my being here as little more than a means to an end. If I stayed out of his way, he would no doubt stay out of mine.

"If you will excuse me," Mary said after a time. "For today, I would be grateful if you could make a start on the storage area. As you could plainly see we have a lot that needs tidying and disposing of. We have been a little short-handed since..."

Her voice trailed off, she was of course talking about my ill-fated predecessor. The one who had been in an unfortunate accident, as Cullen had so gleefully informed me.

"It would be my pleasure," I assured her.

She gave me a curt nod and went through the only other door in the room. And I got a brief glimpse of a metal operating table before the door closed behind her.

Much to my disappointment, I only saw Doctor Moreau fleetingly over the next week or so and was never formally introduced.

As Mary had advised he was a man of few words outside his conversations with herself and of course Cullen. I did, on occasion, warrant a grunt or a nod, which I at least took as a sign I could stay.

It was a strange few days for me personally. It was my first assignment of this kind and as I gradually felt more uncomfortable with my role in the scenario. I found myself questioning my integrity. As you well know I fair jumped at the chance to enter this clandestine world, but I had not truly realised what that actually meant.

I was used to attending lectures on the latest medical practices and procedures and visiting hospitals for the poor and such as part of my journalistic duties. But this was quite different, I was, for all intents and purposes, a spy here, and I had not really thought through what that would entail.

It did not help that I was growing closer to nurse Kinderman. We would spend hours together, going through the doctor's notes and observations. She would do her best to patiently explain to me the vague nature of their work, without, I noted, going into too much detail at this stage. Perhaps fearful of what I might think.

When I was alone, I made copies of several of the transcriptions, which I would study during my time off at home. But found my medical knowledge was sorely lacking in such advanced surgical practices. Indeed, in those early days I could barely understand the end motives of these increasingly bizarre procedures.

What I did glean though, was that Moreau was working towards some kind of animal evolutionary advancements. But through surgery and certain unnamed chemicals of his own concoction. Natural selection it seemed was too slow for the good doctor's liking. But again, to what purpose I could not say.

Thankfully on this front, as the days turned into weeks and I proved my worth to the project, Mary grew more and more open about Moreau's work. It was plain to see that he was the source of great admiration to the young nurse.

“I wish I could show you more,” she said as we sat on the docks watching the Thames flow by on a rare afternoon lunch break outside.

‘If you must eat,’ I had heard Moreau bellow on many occasions from within the warehouse somewhere. “Then eat on the go, eat on the go!”

I looked out over the water. This part of the Thames was hardly what one could call picturesque, but I found myself filled with contentment as we sat together sharing our modest meal.

“I know it will take time for the doctor to trust me with more important duties,” I told her.

“And he will,” she assured me. “He can have a sour disposition to be sure, but he is a brilliant man, Charles. Sometimes he just forgets his manners that’s all.”

“No doubt!”

That was when she turned and lightly touched my arm. I felt a chill run through me, but it was a welcome one.

“I trust you, Charles,” she said softly. “I will see what I can do. If anything, I’m desperate to share what I have seen with someone.”

It seemed to me in that moment that she was suddenly fearful that I would become disillusioned with Moreau’s lack of attention and leave my position, and her.

That lovelorn boy inside of me stole my voice for a moment, I squeezed her hand and looked her in the eye with a reassuring smile. And once again, looking into those twin pools of grey I was struck by the hint of darkness behind them, in such conflict with her delicate features. Her porcelain like cheeks reddened and she broke our eye contact and looked back out over the river.

“We are at the beginning of something quite miraculous,” she said wistfully. “Yet...”

Her nose wrinkled and I thought I saw tears forming in those haunted eyes.

“Mary?”

She let out a light, if forced laugh.

“Just tired, Oldman,” she said dismissively, and that moment of vulnerability was gone.

By God! I felt like such a villain, John.

If only she knew the true reason I was there, I think it would have broken her already fragile heart. She saw me as a would-be confidant, and what would I do with that

knowledge she was so desperate to unburden? Use it to sell newspapers, perhaps even a book on the subject!?

You don't know how hard it was for me to drag myself to work the following days after. But I did, for my sins I did.

Recalling time scales during this period is hard for me at the moment.

So much was packed into so little time, not to mention that tricky opiate coursing through these veins. But what I believe to be sometime into my third week or so there, I began to gain more trust from the doctor, at Mary's behest no doubt. Even the delightful Cullen seemed to begrudgingly accept that I was here to stay.

I was tasked with cleaning and replacing the surgical instruments in the small, crude, but functional operating room which had been set up in the room next to the recovery suite.

This meant I was left unsupervised to examine the place in peace. It consisted of a long metal table flanked on two sides by large gas lamps with round reflectors attached to enhance the light. I had seen similar such theatres in my time at medical school and this one put me in mind of a rudimentary and functional military field hospital. Stripped back to the very bare bones.

Along with the table and lamps was a small metal topped table for keeping the instruments on and a large sink against the wall.

At the other end of the room was a very curious door. It had been re-enforced with a sheet of metal bolted to the wood with a heavy bolt and padlock attached.

I had been given express orders from Cullen, and again more sedate ones from Mary, that under no circumstances, regardless of what I may hear from the other side, was I to enter that part of the building. Which as you can only imagine fuelled my curiosity.

Now that I was beginning to gain further access to the building, I began to compare the outside of the warehouse with what I knew of the interior.

I managed to work out where each room I knew of, was situated. But as I considered this, it became increasingly clear to me that there was still quite a lot of the structure that still remained unmapped.

I knew there must be at least one room beyond the operating room. But from what I could ascertain from the outside there must have been at least another two, perhaps three large areas beyond this.

No doubt where they kept their ongoing experiments.

During my time there, I had seen Cullen wheel out three covered and clearly dead of such specimens, just as I had that first day.

I had subsequently learnt that he stored the carcasses of such euthanized animals in a back room on the ground floor for disposal of later. The smell of which got worse by the day, but still he refused to remove the bodies 'until he had enough to warrant the risk.'

One thing I had noticed during my time there was that Moreau would often carry a large thick leather-bound notebook with him, about the size of a ledger. And I would from time to time, in his more unguarded moments, see the doctor reading through his notes and drawings, amending here and there. His face set in a frown of concentration.

As I had been unable to discover much from the cryptic notes Mary and I were transcribing and had only been given fleeting glimpses into the contents of the more curious filing cabinets in the office, which Mary always kept so diligently locked.

I knew if I had any chance of fully understanding Moreau's work, I would need to get my hands on that mysterious notebook.

Once or twice, when he had been at his busiest and as such most distracted, I had seen the book left on a table or in the operating room, left tantalizingly open, but I had barely noticed myself, let alone got a chance to read the erratically inked pages before Mary or Moreau had swooped in to reclaim the tome.

I had come to fear I would never truly be able to gain access to that book or the secret rooms beyond the metal door.

Then the incident occurred that would not only banish these frustrations forever and, although I did not know it then, set in motion the horrific chain of events that would lead me to be sitting across from you now, in this much changed state.

I was in the storage area when an ashen faced Cullen burst into the room.

"You need to leave," he snapped.

He grabbed me roughly by the arm and before I knew what was happening, he was half leading, half dragging me through to the office and over towards the lift, all whilst looking nervously back the way he had come.

“Cullen, what in God’s name is going on?”

“The doc, and Mary have an emergency operation to perform, no time to explain, just go!”

“Perhaps I can help,” I said and pulled my arm away.

The big man squared up to me and with one powerful hand in my chest he pushed me against the lift door. His always bloodshot eyes seemed to glow in rage.

“Do as you’re told, come back tomorrow, Oldman, I’m not going to argue with you.”

I was about to reluctantly do as I was told when what I can only describe as an unholy howl erupted from deep within the building. And the rage in Cullen’s eyes turned to fear.

“What in God’s name...?” I uttered in horror.

It was truly like nothing I had ever heard before. It put me in mind of the shriek of a madman. I had the misfortune of hearing something similar in the mercifully short time I had spent in an asylum for the criminally insane, where I had done a piece for the Times a year or two ago. Those horrible and desperate cries of anguish from some of the more disturbed inmates had haunted me for months after.

But even those poor tortured souls had sounded nothing like this. It was barely, if at all, human.

The look on Cullen’s normally stoic face was almost as unnerving as the cry. He was terrified and just stood there, eyes wide in horror staring at me.

“Cullen!” I prompted. “What in God’s name is going on here?”

Then I heard Moreau bellow in the distance.

“Cullen! More Chloroform, for Christ’s sake!! Where are you man?”

I could hear the panic in Moreau’s voice, even from here.

Cullen seemed frozen to the spot, he shook his head slightly, a motion that could have been either incomprehension at the order or a refusal at its instruction.

I thought of Mary, struggling with whatever ungodly thing they had back there.

“Cullen!!” I shouted and shook the man by the shoulders.

He looked at me for a moment like he had never set eyes on me before in his life, then seemed to come to his senses as that belligerence of his gradually returned.

“Cullen!” Moreau cried out.

“You,” he snapped at me in an almost accusatory tone. “Get out of here!”

As he turned away, I caught his arm, and he looked down at my hand incredulously.

“I moved the Chloroform the other day,” I lied. “You’ll never find it in time.”

It was a spur of the moment attempt at deception. How could I just leave this bedlam and simply return home? God help me.

He wrenched his arm free and gave me the most murderous look it has ever been my misfortune to see. He began to move away, and I thought that my ruse had failed.

“Well, come on the, Oldman,” he called over his shoulder. “Just be careful what you wish for.”

I followed the man through the office, across the interconnecting room and into the storage room. I paused as he stopped by the door leading to the recovery ward.

“Well, find it!” He shouted.

It was now that I realised what I had done. I had lied to the man so as not to be ejected. If I went straight to the Chloroform bottles, which I knew only too well were in plain sight where they had always been, Cullen might realise my deception. But if I took too long feigning a search, this might cause harm to the doctor or Mary.

I glanced at Cullen, who I now saw had drawn a revolver, and was paying me no mind. Something crashed to the floor in what I calculated was the operating room.

“Doctor! Watch her claw,” Mary called out. “The strap has come loose.” Despite the obvious panic around her I was surprised and a little in awe of just how calm and methodical her voice was.

Then it hit me. *Her claw.*

And was that a low animalistic growling I could hear?

“Hold it, hold it!” Moreau cried out. Then. “Cullen!”

I selected a bottle from the shelf and took it over to Cullen.

“Here, do you have any gauze in there? A syringe?” I asked.

Cullen clutched the bottle in his free hand.

“I’ll be damned if I know,” he replied curtly.

I tried to look past him and across to the door to the operating room, but he shouldered me back.

“You wait in here, no matter what. Under no circumstances are you to leave this room. Better still go back and wait in the office.”

I took two steps back but had no intention of going all the way back to the office. Cullen didn't seem to pick up on this as his attention was once again on the commotion taking place nearby.

“I'll call you if I need anything,” he said not looking at me.

He slammed the door shut and I waited, calculating just how long it was safe to pause here until I dared open the door to the recovery room and hope to see what was occurring in the next room beyond that.

After what was perhaps a full minute, I slowly opened the door and peered into the recovery ward. I came inside, the door to the operating room at the other end was only slightly ajar and I could see the two lamps inside were blazing away but not much else from this position and try as I might I could hear nothing of the previous commotion, nor any sign of moment from within.

Spurred on by this I came across the ward and paused by the door.

“Hello?” I said and braced myself for a torrent of abuse from Cullen, but there was no reply.

Emboldened by this, I nudged open the door a little further and poked my head inside. There was no sign of Moreau, Mary or Cullen and I must admit with no little relief that neither was their ‘patient’ that had wailed so hideously and caused such a commotion.

Before, if you will recall, I likened the small operating room to a make-shift military hospital and that was the scene I was presented with when I finally summoned up enough courage to step inside, and one after a particularly rough shift.

The instrument table was on its side, its contents spilt all over the blood splattered floor. One of the two large lamps was at an odd angle and was swaying slightly which created eerie shifting shadows on the walls.

There were dozens of bloody footprints and smeared patches on the floor some of which led to the metal door which was shut. I tip-toed to avoid the blood and discarded instruments and bundles of gauze and bandages which littered the floor.

It was then that I noticed the heavy table they used for the surgery had actually shifted some two feet or so, the base of the legs having gouged out deep splintered drag marks in the wooden floor.

The table itself was splattered here and there with blood and a tangled mass of what as I got closer, I could see were actually strips of leather. I took these for being what they must have used to strap the patient down as a precaution during surgery.

I ran my fingers across the cold surface and could feel several dents and also long indents in the metal. I crouched down so the light reflected better off the metal and could see they were in fact claw marks. *'Doctor watch the claw, the straps have come loose'*. I shuddered at the thought of just what powerful creature could have caused such damage.

I turned, intent on going back to the storage area as I had been instructed, fearful I was lingering too long. I had seen enough for now, indeed I had the feeling I had already seen too much. As I turned my foot kicked something on the floor, I glanced down thinking it was a box or some such.

It was the notebook laid amongst the debris. Moreau's most jealously guarded secret. Save whatever lay beyond the metal door of course, I mused grimly.

I picked up the book and placed it on the operating table. It had what looked to be a thin ivory bookmark placed between two pages towards the end. I opened it at that page all the while mindful I may be disturbed at any moment and thus, I only intended to take a quick glance. But what I saw on those two pages threw any caution to the wind.

At first glance it seemed to be a series of six sketches, each complete with highly detailed notes underneath. And showing what I can only describe as the theoretical evolution of a large normal jungle cat into some kind of grotesque human-animal hybrid. As I looked closer at the first drawing, I saw the distinct patterning of a leopard on its flanks.

The next showed the creature with its hind legs extended unnaturally straight, which reminded me instantly of the dog Cullen disposed of.

Each drawing was a more obscene and horrifying progression in this hopefully imagined process. The surgical changes to the thing's body would it seemed be kept in place with metal plates and leather straps. The legs by what looked like the type of callipers used to straighten children's legs who had succumbed to polio. All bolted or

stitched into the skin itself. Moreau had detailed the proposed methods for each stage with a kind of lunatic care.

I barely took in the remaining pictures as they grew closer and closer to some bastardized human form. I turned the page with a shaking hand and a growing sense of nausea. At once terrified and fascinated as to what I might find.

These next sketches were of the poor creature's head. Again, showing in several drawing the progression from simple animal to a final obscenity, which I must confess put me in mind of a child's animal mask, the type of which you would see at a carnival or one of those satirical political cartoons you can find in our very own Times.

Anthropomorphized they call it, animals given human traits, but this was to be rendered in flesh and bone and not harmless papier-mâché, newsprint or wood.

Most sickening of all, if such a thing were possible. It seemed Moreau intended to perform brain surgery on the creature. There was a detailed diagram of a human brain compared to that of a leopard, which highlighted motor function, speech and cognitive areas amongst other things.

I only prayed these were theological ramblings, but the evidence was all around me, and I dreaded to think just how far down this path of madness they were. But still! It was surely insane to believe it were possible to create such an abomination.

I closed the book as a wave of nausea overcame me. I looked at the tangle mass of leather straps and had to bite my lip so as not to shout out loud as the realization came to me. These weren't meant to bind and restrain the creature. These were meant to twist and maim. To force an animal's natural physiology from its God given design and into Moreau's twisted, blasphemous, man-made conclusion.

"Madness," I whispered as my thoughts spun like a maelstrom of monstrous images in my head. "Sheer madness."

I staggered back out of the operating room and into the recovery area. How many poor creature's, the victims of Moreau's tortures had lain on these very beds, I wondered grimly. I sat on the edge of one, suddenly not caring if Cullen and the others discovered me here or not. I was glad to be seated when a fresh realisation hit me like a blow to the stomach.

Mary was an all too willing participant in all this. Sweet, delicate Mary. She had called the doctor a genius and said they were on the verge of something great.

Cullen I could believe, it seemed to me his type would take great pleasure in the lunacy of it all. But to imagine Mary assisting Moreau in those experiments just broke my heart. And I vowed then and there to leave that instant and to expose this monstrous endeavour for what it was, and my feelings for Mary be damned.

And were it not for what happened next, I have no doubt that I would have. And yet, in all honesty, as I sit here before you now John, I thank Christ that I didn't. For if I had managed to leave that charnel house of a place and fled back to the warm reassuring arms of normality...

I would never have met *her*, and my life would have returned to that soulless day to day drudgery it had always been. Living, without truly being alive.

Oh, how destinies can turn on a sixpence my dear friend.

I was just summoning up the energy to get to my feet and leave, when all hell broke loose.

I heard the metal door burst open and I leapt to my feet and came to the operating room doorway. Moreau and Cullen came staggering into the operating room carrying Mary between them. There was such a chorus of howls and ungodly screeches behind them that I half expected a pack of demons to be at their backs.

I stood there dumbfounded as they led Mary over to the operating table and Cullen stepped away, ashen, covered in blood as Moreau help her to sit on the edge. Neither man reacted to my presence as they were too busy with Mary and whatever was in the room beyond the now open door.

"I'll kill the fucking thing!!" Cullen hissed through gritted teeth and drew his pistol from his belt. His eyes were as wild as a madman's.

"No!" Moreau bellowed in response. "Secure that cage, we have come too far to waste such a precious specimen."

It was now that I saw Mary was bleeding profusely from a wound on her left shoulder. She had her right hand clasped over the wound to stem the flow, but blood was still pouring through her finders and down her arm.

"Mary!" I exclaimed and flew over to her.

Cullen looked across shocked as I approached the table. He moved to speak but shook his head, he seemed wracked with indecision. He frantically glanced from myself to Moreau, Mary, then through the door to whatever was making that nerve shredding sound.

“What in God’s name happened?” I said as I scooped up a roll of discarded bandages laid amongst the debris littered on the floor.

Of all things. Moreau gave me a look of incredulity.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

I treated the remark with the contempt it deserved and went to tend Mary. She had clearly lost a substantial amount of blood, her features, which had always been pale at best, were sheet white and her blood speckled cheeks were waxy with sweat.

“Charles...” She said dreamily and gave me the faintest of smiles and I could see the dullness of shock in her eyes.

I gently took her hand away from her shoulder and pressed the bandage against the seeping wound. I only had the briefest of glimpses, but I caught sight of two deep claw marks, some three inches long through the blood and matted fabric of her surgical gown.

“Cullen,” Moreau’s attention was once more on the man in the doorway. “Secure the cage, nothing more.”

Cullen clenched his jaw in frustration.

“Doct...”

“Nothing more!” Moreau said cutting him off.

“Blast you, Moreau!” Cullen replied, but still he relented and went back into the other room and away.

“Moreau!” I exclaimed. “What happened in there?”

“She got loose,” he replied absently, still looking at the empty doorway.

“Moreau!” I shouted this time. Then softer. “We have to suture this wound.”

This seemed to do the trick and he focus once more on the task at hand.

“Yes, good man, yes.”

Although it had been sometime since I had assisted in an emergency procedure such as this. Working together, Moreau and I soon stopped the bleeding and the doctor disinfected and then stitched up the wounds on Mary’s shoulder.

I was amazed at just how calm Mary remained during this. Once we had finished, she even insisted on inspecting the doctor’s handywork before we dressed the wound.

And then it took much cajoling from the doctor to get her to take a rest in one of the beds in the recovery ward. In truth, she was soon asleep despite her protests, thanks to a sleeping tablet from Moreau.

“She is quite the woman,” Moreau said as he gently pulled the bedsheet up under her chin as she dozed.

“Indeed,” I agreed.

I was about to address him about the commotion in the back room, which had led to the injury. The book, perhaps everything, when Cullen came into the room. His face red with exertion, and probably I thought, the odd jolt of whiskey to calm his nerves.

“Fucking bitch will not settle,” he said breathlessly.

“Mister Cullen,” Moreau said calmly. “I can appreciate this has been a traumatic incident for all of us, not least of all nurse Kinderman. But please reserve that type of language for your drinking pals.”

“What? She can’t hear me,” Cullen replied with a nod to Mary.

“No, but I can,” Moreau retorted.

Cullen shook his head in disbelief at this. He even glanced at me, and I must admit I shared his assessment of the doctor’s reaction. After everything that had just transpired, a little salty language seemed the least concern.

“But is she secured?” Moreau asked after a moment.

“Well, it’s back in its cage, but it’s done itself some right mischief, I can tell you.”

“We cannot lose her,” Moreau said with great concern. “I will need to examine her straight away.”

“Huh! Good luck with that,” Cullen replied sullenly. “That’s what caused all this kerfuffle in the first place.”

I was amazed at how openly they discussed all this in front of me. Clearly, they could not hide what I had seen and heard, but the subject was never even broached from that moment on.

“We will need to give her a sedative,” Moreau said and without further ado set off back into the operating room.

I followed unbidden with a mixture of morbid curiosity and fear.

“Bollocks to that!” Cullen snapped with venom not moving from where he was standing in the recovery room.

This stopped Moreau in his tracks, he turned back.

“Need I remind you, who you work for? Mister Cullen.”

“I’ll shoot the thing if needs be, but I am not setting foot in that place again.”

There was an awkward pause as both men stood their ground.

"I can help," I said breaking the tension.

This won a thin, cruel smile from Cullen.

"Be my guest."

Moreau seemed to weigh this up and then he finally looked directly at me. Perhaps for the first if I recall correctly.

"Charles?"

"That's correct, sir," I replied as firmly as I could. "Charles Oldman."

He gave me a cursory looking over as one might when perusing a horse or some such animal for sale.

"So be it," he said and strode into the operating room. And I followed with my heart in my mouth.

"Straighten that instrument table, would you? And find me a usable syringe." Moreau ordered.

I was glad to see the metal door was closed once more and did as I was instructed.

The first syringe I found was on the floor and cracked and thus useless and I was about to do back through to the storage area for a fresh one, when I spied one amongst a pile of instruments in the corner. I picked it up and examined the glass. It was still intact and complete with needle, but not even remotely sterile.

"I will need to boil this," I told Moreau and held up the syringe.

"No time," he replied dismissively with a wave of the hand.

"Should I gown up?" I asked as I passed him the syringe.

"Yes," he replied and took a small brown bottle out of his white coat pocket.

He stuck the needle into the top of the bottle and began to measure out the dose. I set off towards the recovery ward intent on retrieving a fresh gown from the storage area when Moreau called out to me as I reached the door.

"No, wait, come as you are."

I turned and he looked me over again, then he did the same to himself comparing my civilian clothes to his white medical attire.

"I think perhaps, seeing someone not in a white coat, and all that is associated with that, might help," he added.

"If you think that is best," I replied somewhat perplexed.

“I understand from Mary, you are quite bright, Charles.”

“I like to think so.”

“What we are doing here... What you will see beyond that door. It’s like nothing that has ever been attempted before in the history of vivisection. It *will* shock you, but I must insist you remain as calm as possible.”

He sounded to me in that moment like a carnival barker at the entrance to the freakshow tent. ‘Roll up, roll up and see the unimaginable horrors right before your disbelieving eyes!’

I thought of the sketches in the notebook and wondered with a shudder as to what stage they were at in this artificial evolution.

“Can I trust you?” Moreau said as he held out the syringe.

I held his gaze.

“At this point, I don’t think you have any choice,” I stated firmly. “Do you?”

I think I caught the slightest hint of a smile on his weary face. He gave me the syringe, then turned the handle of the metal door and barged it open with his broad shoulder.

“Shall we?”

I followed Moreau though into the next room, my head full of the horrors that might await us. But to my surprise we entered a brightly lit room. I was put in mind of similar rooms I had encountered during my university days. Rooms usually situated away from prying eyes, where the medical department kept their animal specimens for use in vivisection.

Whereas the university could keep dozens of rabbits, countless mice and several dogs. There were only two dogs left in here and I could only imagine how many they had started off with.

There were in total ten cages of various sizes and strengths, eight of which were empty, but the first two contained a dog in each. Both I could see were beagles, approximately a year or so old.

One which seemed to be at first glance unaltered, lazily lifted its head as we entered, then rested it back on its paws. I could tell straight away it was drugged, probably to keep it compliant upon seeing what I imagined were the horrors inflicted on the other animals that came and went.

Such was the case with the animal to its left. This creature was less fortunate. As we walked briskly past, I glanced at it, but only briefly. Its body looked to have been dissected in two, length ways and then re-attached with what I can only describe as metal clips neatly in a row down its partly exposed back bone. It had a dressing on its head and again I was reminded of the sketches in Moreau's damnable book.

At first, I thought, hoped, the animal was dead, but much to my distaste it languidly lifted its head and tried to bark but the sound came out as a pitiful wet cough. As it moved, I could see one flank was open, but the innards were held in place by a clear material which afforded me an all too vivid sight of its organs. It was like some obscene living anatomy model.

"Christ, Moreau," I breathed and tore my gaze away.

And to think this was only a taste of what was to come.

"That was one of my more successful early endeavours," Moreau told me in an obscenely casual tone as we reached the next door at the other end of the room. "It's back was broken, but now with painkillers it can walk."

Somehow, I didn't think its spinal injuries were the result of an accident, but I held my tongue.

I could see a new door at the other end which was similarly re-enforced with sheet metal and a heavy bolt. I saw that there was fresh blood on the floor, from Mary's wound or the creature within I didn't know, but would, for my sins, soon find out.

Moreau slid the heavy bolt, and the door opened an inch. He paused and turned to me.

"No sudden movements, Charles," he warned in a whisper. "She's in a cage but beware she can be lightning quick.

And with this he eased open the door and I peered past him and inside.

The room was in near total darkness as the only light came from the room at our backs. The first thing I became aware of was the smell. An odour of animal droppings, damp straw, reminiscent of a visit I once made to the big cat animal enclosure at the London Zoo as a child. But also, the unmistakable odour of blood.

As my eyes became accustomed to the meagre light afforded by the gas light behind me, I could make out a row of three large cages lined up against the wall. The room itself

was much smaller than I had anticipated given the spacious rooms I had encountered in the rest of the building. It was little more than twenty feet square at most.

“In you go,” Moreau whispered. “It’s best I stay here.”

I slid past the doctor and took two tentative steps inside. As I did so I heard a low guttural growl coming from the farthest and largest cage which was situated in the corner. Followed by the sound of something big, shifting in the shadows within.

The light dimmed as Moreau closed the door slightly behind me at the sound. Leaving only the merest of gaps in which to illuminate the room. I felt cool brick at my back as I slid down the wall until I was sitting on the floor. There I waited, not only for my eyes to become accustomed to the light, but so I could better hear the creature in the corner.

It was breathing in short sharp breaths, and I could hear it shifting in the murk of the cage, perhaps raising itself up on all fours. Then a shadow within the shadow moved, lightning quick from one side of the cage to the other and again that deep unnatural growl, but this time tempered if I wasn’t mistaken with what I can only describe as pain. The sudden motion had clearly caused the creature no little discomfort.

Then it moved again, slower this time and two piecing circles of light flashed in the darkness. The eyes of the creature, suspended in little more than a dark shadow within a lighter one. Looking across at me with a weary cunning.

I clutched the syringe in both hands like a weapon and it took all my courage not to just get to my feet and run from the room. From the whole damned building if I am honest.

I suddenly became aware that there were still two other cages I had ignored, both of which were closer still. I peered into them and much to my relief saw they were empty. The creature, Moreau’s creation was alone in here. Alone and undoubtedly in excruciating pain from the attack and Moreau’s surgical butchery.

Those hideously detailed sketches in the doctor’s notebook came to my mind once more as I looked at the shadow, which was in turn looking at me. And again, I wondered at what stage in Moreau’s man-made evolution the poor creature was.

As my eyes adjusted, a kind of murky white body came to view. The creature, which now seemed massive, as it stretched out, panting on the floor of the cage, was wrapped almost entirely with bandages from head to toe. From head to toe, such a strange

expression, but this first meeting is, I must confess somewhat coloured by my later knowledge of her much-altered physiology.

I could not see much of her actual body in the paltry light coming from the gap in the door at this time, but what became clearer by the second were her eyes. So bright in the darkness, so alive and alert and yet so heartbreakingly full of pain.

It was her eyes that broke me in the end. This was not the dull unintelligent daze of a dumb animal. Whether by Moreau's design or not, there was a bright, sharp intelligence behind them, and it was as if she was looking deep into my very soul. In search of if I were truly friend or foe.

There was a definite sentience at work here, behind those eyes. The likes of which it is impossible for me to relate with any real clarity to you or anyone now.

I must have stared into those soulful eyes for quite some time, it was almost hypnotic, and I make no excuses for fair wallowing in her gaze. And without realizing it, I had shuffled along the floor towards the cage, and when I finally broke that connection, I found I was within three feet of the bars.

We had shared an instant undeniable bond in those few seconds. It was as if it were some primeval hypnosis, which I gave myself over to willingly. Thinking back, that was the moment I was truly lost to her. And before long, all the happier for it.

"Charles?" It was a whisper from a dream of reality, but harsh enough to break this wonderful spell.

"Charles, her leg."

It took me a moment to realise it was Moreau, squatting by the door, whispering to me.

The creature heard him too and let out a low threatening growl, but I was not afraid. It was Moreau the tormentor she hated, not me.

"Her leg, it's right up to the bars, inject it."

I looked down to the creature's bandaged back leg, unnaturally straight, held in place by metal callipers and bound with leather straps. Which were stitched and bolted, just as the notebook instructed, into the flesh and bone itself.

I remembered the syringe, which was on the floor by my side. The creature growled again as if in anticipation of what Moreau wanted.

I looked back into her eyes, which seemed to calm her.

“This will take the pain away,” I said softly.

Whether she understood the actual vocabulary or not, she clearly understood my intentions and that I meant her no harm. I was an unexpected ally in this house of horrors, and she knew it.

So much so that she then did something miraculous. She extended her front paw through the bars and held it out to me.

I leant forwards and gently took it. I didn’t examine the limb too closely, but I could see that her paw had been fashioned into some kind of rudimentary hand. An obscenity I hated Moreau for instantly.

I heard Moreau utter an oath behind me at the action. I gently squeezed her ‘hand’.

“I will help you,” I assured her as best I could.

And again, her eyes seemed to acknowledge this.

Then I heard a voice, as clear as day in my head.

Dea.

“Dea?” I whispered and to this day I will swear on my life she nodded.

My Latin is rusty at the best of times, but ancient mythology was a hobby of mine when I was a child.

Dea, the Latin word for Goddess. How fitting, I thought as I whispered it back to her again.

I injected her, Dea, and stayed with her as one would with an ailing loved one, until she drifted off to sleep.

“If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it!” Moreau announced as he paced the recovery ward, gesticulating wildly as he recounted the scene to a now awake, if groggy Mary.

“It seems you have quite the connection,” Mary said and sat up rubbing her temples. “Should I be jealous?” She teased.

She was still under the influence of the sedative Moreau had given her, so I simply smiled, but despite myself blushed all the same.

“Sounds downright wrong to me,” Cullen offered from where he was lurking by the storeroom door.

“It’s as you said, doctor,” I said, not believing a word of what I was saying. “It was probably due to my not wearing a white coat or gown.”

“Interesting,” Mary said.

“She undoubtedly associates our surgical trappings with her discomfort,” Moreau said.

Discomfort!? I held my tongue, not for the first time since we returned from Dea’s room. Whilst she was unconscious, I had insisted on dressed her wounds in the cage myself, not wanting to move her too much.

And all I could do as I tended to her, was to avert my eyes as best I could as I worked. The torment and sheer brutality Moreau had wrought upon that once majestic body sickened me to my very core. And for what? What possible medical advancement could this be leading to?

It seemed to me this as all just to feed Moreau’s ego and morbid curiosity. But I kept my council, content in the fact that due to my undeniable connection with his precious subject, I was now indispensable to the *good* doctor.

And it was during my trip home that night that I determined to use this newfound role to somehow free Dea from her tortured existence. But how? I could not, as had been my original reason for being there, expose Moreau for the heartless butcher he was.

The first thing the authorities would do would be to euthanize the poor soul and the two remaining dogs. Or worse still, keep her alive so they could study and conduct just as brutal experiments on her already desecrated body.

No, I would need to bid my time as best I could, until an opportunity and more importantly a solution presented itself.

Over the coming days, I was the only person allowed within the room with ‘the patient’.

Indeed, it soon became apparent that I was the only one she would allow to tend to her. And as such our bond grew exponentially stronger with each visit.

I would sit for hours, simply talking to her as I cleaned her wounds, fed her and changed her bandages. The latter of which I began to loath over those days. As this forced me to see the true extent of Moreau’s defilement of her body.

Her snout had been reduced so that her face resembled the drawings in Moreau's precious notebook. A child's mask but wrought in flesh and bone. Worse still, if such a thing her possible, the back of her skull had been partially removed so that the doctor could gain access to her brain.

Thankfully I never had to witness these monstrous experiments, but I knew they had included inserting needles into certain parts of the flesh to illicit the involuntary movement of her limbs and also to attempt at locating the parts controlling her vocality centre.

To this effect, Moreau had told me one evening that he hoped this tinkering would lead to the location of the portion of the brain which controlled speech. So, the madman intended his abominations to speak!

All her limbs had been broken and surgically reset into the approximation of arms and legs. Kept in place as I have previously stated by a system of brackets, plates, straps and callipers attached to the flesh itself. It was clear his intention was to have her walking on her back legs like some circus trick.

It was a wonder she hadn't, like so many others, succumbed to these invasive procedures.

Moreau for his part was more than happy with this new arrangement. His patient was complaint and had been healthier than at any other time since the surgeries and manipulations had begun.

Cullen was hardly ever around anymore and when he was, he had the appearance of being quite drunk more often than not.

I had even, and much to my own surprise, reconciled my feelings towards Mary. Despite her willing roll in this whole endeavour, she had always seemed genuinely concerned for her patient and even the two dogs. I had even seen her secretly feeding the two beagles treats whilst Moreau was preoccupied.

And yes, I had to admit my feelings towards Mary had grown beyond friendship and I flattered myself that she felt the same. Such as when her gaze would linger on me longer than normal and how she would laugh at my terrible jokes.

This all culminated one night when we were alone in the building. We were in the operating room, and I was checking on the all but healed wound on her shoulder, whilst she sat in the edge of the table. As I finished my work, she took my hand in hers.

"I'm so glad you are here with us," she said softly.

I looked into those haunted eyes, only now I knew why they were so inflected. And it took all my resolve not to simply unburden myself to her then and there regarding my plans for Dea.

She had a good heart and I believe she would have understood up to a point. But she was too loyal to Moreau to let me proceed or indeed help me.

Without thinking, I gently kissed her.

“Lord! Mary, I’m sorry,” I blurted out and pulled away.

She smiled and laughed lightly and took both my hands in hers.

“And I thought you only had eyes for your girl in there,” she said good naturedly.

She drew me close, and we kissed again. Lord how I so desperately wanted to ask her to help me free Dea. Alone as we were, it would have been the perfect time to take her away. But then my heart sank at the impossibility of it all. Away to where?

She slid off the table and pressed her head against my chest as we embraced. We slowly began to move in time together, dancing to some unheard melody, and I felt myself falling in love with this woman, who in truth I barely knew.

But despite the bliss, this was a bittersweet moment as I knew, soon enough, I would have to ask her to choose between a possible future together, away from all this, and the different but all too real love she felt towards the doctor. Deep down, as we danced, I knew which path she would choose. New love in truth is no match for hero worship.

I must confess to being in somewhat of a daze when I visited Dea later that night.

Whereas before she had always been affectionate and compliant in my presence. It was as if tonight she could sense my mood. She froze the moment I entered and the dim light from the room at my back glinted of her vicious teeth as she bared them in a snarl.

I did my best to sooth her as I approached, and as I held out my hand to her, she sniffed it and I swear I saw a flash of suspicion in her eyes. She back away until she could go no further.

My heart sank as I was reminded, all be it reluctantly, that deep down she was still a wild animal. She could smell Mary’s scent on me and if I didn’t know differently, I would have said that she was jealous.

I left her that night conflicted. I had been somewhat elated by my flirtation with Mary and the possibilities that might bring. But now this was tempered with a feeling I can only

describe as guilt. As if I had betrayed that miraculous creature by my fledgling affection for Mary. Who was, lest I forget, one of Dea's tormentors.

Thankfully, Dea's memory of our last interaction had faded by the following day. And she was once again attentive and calm, which was of much relief to me. But I knew I would need to take care around her when it came to my burgeoning relationship with Mary.

I spent most of that day in the room with her, quietly talking to her and soothing her wounds. We had also begun to play simple games with a ball, as one might with a dog.

Yet she was so much quicker to learn, and I did begin wonder if Moreau's intrusions into her brain had indeed had some sort of beneficial effect after all. But I was more of the belief that these improvements in her abilities were more down to my benign presence and gentle encouragements.

One thing I had noticed over the previous days that she had begun to develop a strange aptitude for mimicry, but even these seemed more pronounced today.

Little motions and ticks I had missed at first, but as I took greater note, I became more aware of these idiosyncrasies. The way she would tilt her head slightly when I spoke. Those eyes shining with concentration. She had even reached out of her cage to awkwardly pull her food bowl towards her before I'd had a chance to do so myself. She had even tried to pick it up with her surgically malformed hands, only to fail with what I swear was an audible sigh of exasperation.

I was of course acutely aware that I may have been projecting these attributes on to her, but that said I had the overwhelming feeling that, given time, she could truly develop some rudimentary human-like motor skills.

Unfortunately, as I left that night, full of the day's progress, I discovered that Moreau had been watching these interactions with that cold analytical eye of his.

I was in the office preparing to leave as I was due to meet with Mary later for a quiet dinner. We had much to discuss since our kiss and I didn't want to do so in the building where Dea was dwelling, after today's success' I did not want to jeopardise that relationship again.

Moreau entered with Cullen in tow as I was putting on my coat, my thoughts already on the evening ahead with Mary.

"She's quite the mimic," Moreau said, and I must have started in shock as Cullen let out a low cruel laugh.

“Indeed,” I relented, trying to make light of the progress.

“We should sell tickets,” Cullen sneered.

“It is quite remarkable,” Moreau added with a withering look to silence Cullen. “I must confess I had thought her usefulness was coming to an end. In the light of her attack on Mary the other day. But you, it seems, have a calming way with her.”

I shrugged as nonchalant as I could. The phrase ‘her usefulness was coming to an end,’ chilled me.

“All I did was show her a kindness,” I replied.

Moreau frowned slightly at this. And was that a flicker of humanity I saw cross his features?

“It’s a wild animal!” Cullen exclaimed.

“That’s enough Cullen,” Moreau snapped. “See to that matter we discussed,” he added curtly, and Cullen skulked off back into the building with a sour look.

“The man is a dullard,” Moreau told me with an exasperated sigh. “But in his brutish way he is correct. The leopard is quite a remarkable achievement, she had progressed far and above what I had expected.

“Due in no small part to your participation. But in the end, that’s all she is. An animal, a thumb nail sketch of what is to come.”

He fell silent as he let the gravitas of his words sink in.

“Best remember that Charles,” he finally added before exiting without another word.

My evening with Mary was a welcome distraction to the events of the day and my interaction with Moreau.

We skilfully avoided any talk of the laboratory, and it was clear to me, to both of us I venture, that our bond would undoubtedly grow closer in the coming weeks. A fact that had me fair walking on air as I escorted Mary, hand in hand, back to her lodgings.

As we walked, I finally broached the subject of her thoughts on what Moreau’s intentions were towards the patient. At this she grew reticent, rapidly changing the subject and distracted me with an impromptu kiss on the cheek.

After I bid her a goodnight and saw her safely into her boarding house, I could not help but worry something was a foot back at the laboratory. Perhaps it is in hindsight now,

but as I walked home, I had the distinct impression things would soon come to a head. I thought back to Moreau's dismissal of Dea and her place in his ever-expanding work.

Just a thumb nail sketch of what is to come.

Of course, if I knew then, what I know now, I would have returned to the laboratory then and there and freed her regardless of the consequences. But I suppose in the end, things eventually turned out better than I could ever have hoped for.

One death notwithstanding.

When I arrived at the laboratory the following morning, I could feel a sense of anticipation in the air.

My three colleagues it seemed had already been hard at work long before I had hauled myself up the rope lift and entered the office.

Just as I took off my coat and hung it on the coat stand, Mary appeared in the doorway, she seemed oddly flustered, but gave me a thin smile of welcome all the same.

"Mary?"

"Charles, now listen. Moreau has had a bee in his bonnet about all this mimicry with the patient."

"I don't understand," I said with a growing sense of dread.

I moved to edge past her, but she gently took my arm and I paused.

"Mary, what is going on?"

"I, I came back here after we parted last night, on Moreau's request." She paused and I could tell she was racked with indecision.

"Mary, please!"

I pulled my arm away, perhaps a little too roughly, and she gave me such a look of surprise, fear even.

"Charles, let me explain..."

I moved off through the building before she could finish, by mind was a maelstrom of horrific thoughts and scenarios as I stormed from room to room.

As I walked into the recovery ward and over towards the door leading to the operating theatre, I had visions of finding poor Dea dead on the table. Her body dissected into nothing more than a mass of flesh and bone.

I slowed as I approached the closed door, suddenly afraid, torn between the need to know her fate and what I might find. I heard Mary rushing to my side. She took my arm again and I allowed myself to be pulled to a stop.

“Charles, please let me explain,” she begged.

“Is she dead?” I asked plainly.

“Dead?”

It seemed to take Mary a moment to take in what I had asked.

“No, Lord no,” she replied.

The door opened and Cullen came out. I could see his clothes were more dishevelled than usual and his face was flushed and bruised. A thin trickle of blood ran down his left temple, which he wiped away with his sleeve. He looked shocked to see me.

“What have you done?” I asked with venom.

Cullen composed himself somewhat and straightened his shirt.

“Stand down,” he said and jabbed a finger at me. “Calm yourself, Oldman or I will knock you out.”

I clenched my fists and glared at the man. Truth be told I knew I was no match for him, but in that moment, I didn’t care, fuelled as I was by a red rage.

“Get out of my way, Cullen,” I ordered, but I was not surprised when he did not move. Still, I got no little pleasure from the shock on his face at my belligerence.

Mary squeezed my arm.

“Charles, you need to calm yourself,” she said. “She’s alright, scared, hurt a little but no more.”

“Where is she?” I asked, my gaze still on Cullen.

“Back in her cage,” Mary replied. I could hear the emotion in her voice. “You should go through, go to her.”

This won a snort of derision from Cullen. He moved his tatty shirt to one side to reveal the pistol in his belt.

“Huh, I could calm the thing easily enough,” he said.

“Cullen, enough!” Mary said.

She then stepped between us and took my hands in hers, much the way she had done on that night we kissed. I looked at her enraged, but my temper lapsed seeing the tears in her eyes.

“It was a mistake,” she said. “We should have waited until you came in. But Moreau wasn’t sure you would even help.”

“Help with what?”

“Come,” Mary said softly and led me passed Cullen and into the operating room.

As I stepped inside, I braced myself for what I might see. But of all the horrors I had expected to see as I entered that accursed room, the surreal sight of Moreau setting a table with cups, saucers and a silver tea service was about as far from anything I could have imagined.

Moreau smoothed out the tablecloth which had been spread out over the operating table and straightened a teaspoon next to a China cup and saucer. And moved a chair so it sat in front of them.

Words escaped me momentarily as I took in the strange scene. I could see the floor had been freshly swept and a pile of smashed crockery was in one corner. Here and there specks of blood were flecked on the wall and floorboards.

The doctor looked at me as he straightened his back with an audible crack and winced. Just as with Cullen he looked to have been in a fight, he had a freshly cleaned wound just above his right eye and his surgical gown was splattered with blood and ripped in several places. Dea’s handywork I thought with no little satisfaction.

But what of her condition?

“What in God’s name...” Was all I could muster at such a sight.

Moreau studied me closely for the longest time much as he would one of his experiments in a cage.

“You are quite the enigma, mister Oldman,” he finally said. “I have mapped that creature’s anatomy down to the minutest detail. I have altered its limbs, manipulated its brain, in an attempt to create something almost entirely new, or at this stage a flesh out sketch of its potential.

“Yet despite all that, I am unable to control its actions without medical intervention. And then here you come and in just a short period of time, you have gained its trust, taught it things even I would never have thought possible.”

Again, he ran his eyes over me as if looking for the source of his vexation. And I had the feeling in that moment, that he would have dissected me if he could.

I looked again at the contents of the table, and the smashed crockery.

“You tried to get her to drink tea!?” It was lunacy to think of such a thing from one so well educated, but the evidence of my eyes could not be ignored.

“A mistake, I admit,” Moreau said ruefully.

“This is madness! She can copy simple gestures, she’s not some circus freak you can teach tricks!”

“That’s exactly what it is,” Cullen said from the doorway behind me.

“Cullen, enough!” Mary snapped from my side.

“The mistake was to attempt this without you to guide her,” Moreau said. “For whatever reason, Oldman. You are the key.”

“I want no further part in this madness,” I told him firmly.

And by God I meant it, but again my resolve was tempered by what fate would befall Dea if I left.

“We are in the process of procuring another specimen,” Moreau said, all the while observing my reactions through narrow slitted eyes. “A panther, courtesy of our good friends at London Zoo. It will be a much better subject than the leopard, which is half dead itself. And if you will not help us...”

He deliberately let his voice trail off.

Mary pressed herself to my side.

“Charles, I know you care for her. But without you we cannot control her any longer.” She gestured to the debris on the floor. “Look what happened when we tried...”

“Look, for Christ’s sake!” Cullen announced and stepped forwards. “The doctor and nurse Kinderman are too kind and cultured to spell this out to you. But I’m not.”

“Cullen,” Moreau cautioned, but the brutish man cut him off with a look.

“That thing in there, which was once the good doctor’s proudest achievement. Is but one thing now. Considering the panther is apparently better suited for this kind of butchery.”

Cullen sneered and theatrically paused for Moreau or Mary to object.

The silence from both was deafening. I looked at Mary who flushed and looked away.

Cullen’s not so subtle inference was all too clear to anyone, but still the man continued his crude soliloquy.

“That thing,” he repeated and pointed redundantly to the door. “Is... How did you describe it, doctor? Arh, yes. Now we are to secure a new, better subject. That accursed

creature, in its current belligerent state, is only useful at best for one thing. As a template for his new experiments on the panther.”

“What mister Cullen is trying to say,” Moreau finally said taking a step closer to me. “Is quite simple. Alive and with you assisting in its training. She can still be of great use to me.”

“And if I don’t help?” I asked as my stomach hit my boots.

“Regardless of your help, she will be, either way, as mister Cullen so eloquently put it,” he fixed his coldly indifferent gaze on me. “A guide for which I can use to transfer her existing surgeries to the panther. The only question is, and this is entirely down to you, mister Oldman. If she is a living breathing guide, or just another dead specimen I can utilise in the exact same way.”

I heard Mary let out a long forlorn breath at my side at Moreau’s bluntness and cruelty. But still, she did not protest.

So that was to be Dea’s fate. To live or die and only I myself would be the one to choose.

As I stood there, with three pairs of eyes boring into my very soul, I wrestled with this monstrous dilemma. I cursed myself for becoming so attached to her. But it was true, I felt a strange kind of kinship with Dea, and at her own telepathic request, even named her Goddess.

If I refused, she would be killed. Then at least her pain, and my tie to this accursed place would be over, I reasoned. I could for my part return to normality, and with a renewed conviction to expose Moreau as the butcher he was.

And she would be at peace. But in that moment, I felt as if I were deciding the fate of a family member, and indeed, yes, a loved one. And would it not be reasonable to fight for that life in any way I could?

“Charles...” Mary lightly touched my shoulder. “You can make her life better, she responds to you. Think of it, with you by her side, she would be so much less stressed and afraid. And think of the things we could all achieve together.”

The anticipation to my response was like a physical presence in the room.

“I must be here for every single session,” I said firmly and looked Moreau in the eye. “You, or anyone never so much as looks at her without me. That is my condition.”

Moreau raised an eyebrow at my demand and seemed more amused than threatened.

“Agreed,” he finally replied, and I thought I caught a hint of admiration in his voice.

“Very well,” I said. “Let me go to her now, in time I will try and coax her out, show her that with me present, this room can be a place of calm, amusement even. And not just a place of pain.”

I emphasized the word *pain* and as I did so, I deliberately, coldly, look first to Moreau, then to Cullen, and finally to Mary.

Only Mary had the decency to look away.

Moreau gestured to the door.

“As you wish.”

“Don’t expect miracles,” I said as I walked over to the door.

“But miracles are what we do here, Charles,” Moreau replied.

I didn’t honour that remark with a reply, but simply made my way through the door and into the room with the two caged dogs in. The unmolested of the two sat up as I entered, it’s mutilated counterpart, lifted its head slightly and regarded be with soulful eyes.

To this day, I am unsure why, but as I passed, I gently slid the bolts from the doors of their cages. Perhaps it was that look from the dog or perhaps I intended to free the pair later when given the chance. And I would have done so, if events hadn’t soon escalated horribly.

I pressed my ear against the cold metal of Dea’s door and held my breath in a vain attempt to listen for any signs of life coming from within.

I braced myself for what I might find inside, I could only imagine the injuries that had been inflicted on her in that ludicrous attempt to have her sit at a table.

Utter, utter madness.

I slid the heavy bolt back and let the door open a few inches under its own weight.

“It’s alright,” I whispered. “It’s Charles.”

I did wonder if her pain and confusion might blind her to my benevolence. After all they had man handled her without any thought to her condition and I could only imagine the fear she must have felt.

“I’m coming in, Dea.” I pushed open the door further and slipped inside.

I peered into the darkness of the room and saw that the door to her cage was open, and it took me a moment to find her as my eyes adjusted. And it wasn't until she lifted her head that I saw the dark shape, she was curled up awkwardly in a corner at the very back of the room.

I stepped inside with my hands out defensively to show her that one, it was me, and also that I meant her no harm. And there I waited, unsure if she would recognise me at all, until finally I heard a whimper of pain, and she began to slowly crawl towards me.

Even in that meagre light I could see patches of exposed fur and flesh where her bandages had been torn away in the struggle. The bandage wrapped around her head and face was in a bloody state and a length of the material hung down by the side of her face which strangely put me in mind of an unravelling turban.

I moved over to her as briskly as I dared so as not to startle her, and she flopped to the floor with a strangled sigh. I knelt in front of where she lay, and gently took her head in my hands and shifted her onto my lap as best I could. She looked up at me and I could see the pain in her eyes. And I am not ashamed to admit that tears came to my own.

"Oh, beauty. What have they done to you?"

At the time I didn't truly believe that she understood every word I said. It was more the tone of my voice and my unguarded gentle manner around her.

I brushed the length of ragged material from her face and adjusted the bandage on her head so that it once more covered most of the surgical scarring around her shorted snout. Protecting her dignity in this much exhausted state.

Tears came freely now as I looked down into those deep mournful eyes of hers. And despite her distressed state and the darkness of the room, the sentience I had previously seen in them still shone through.

"Sssh, it will be alright," I cooed softly. "I won't let them hurt you anymore."

How could I continue to let her suffer like this? I asked myself as we sat there. It was almost as cruel to let her live than fool myself into believing I could truly save her.

Although it pained me horribly to admit it, she was a creature that, through no fault of her own, should not, could not exist in this world. To kill her as painlessly as possible would be a kindness.

And being the miraculous creature that she was, I believe she saw that in my eyes as surely as if I had said it out loud. She reached her cruelly fashioned hand up to my face,

and although, given my current, shall we say medicated state, I swear to you she wiped the tears from my cheek.

I caught a flicker of light as someone moved in the doorway behind me.

“Good Lord...” Mary uttered in shock.

That impatient fool Moreau must have sent her to observe my progress.

Dea stiffened at the sound of her voice. Her porcelain white teeth bared in a snarl.

“Easy, beauty,” I coaxed as calm as I could. “Easy now.”

I could feel her uncoiling like a spring in my lap and I swear I felt my bones rattle as she let out a low guttural growl. I remembered in that moment how she had reacted just at the faint scent of Mary on me that night we kissed.

Again, that flicker of light as Mary gasped and thankfully moved away from the doorway.

“Ssh, Dea, Ssh,” I tried my best to sooth her.

But it was too late. Mary was a threat, one of her tormentors, one of those humans in white coats who had caused her so much pain and anguish. But it was something so much more than that, she was a threat to that almost preternatural bond we undoubtedly shared, an interloper into those moments of bliss.

And this cocktail of emotions was something her true animalistic nature could only deal with in one way. She was an apex predator protecting her own.

I realised this all too late, I barely opened my mouth in an attempt to offer more calming words, when she leapt from my lap with lightning speed. Despite her injured state, she sprang up and for the briefest of moments stood before me on two legs. Oh, how proud Moreau would have been I thought bitterly in that split second before he finally pitched forwards and, despite the callipers, reverted to her natural four-legged stance.

I moved to speak, to try and somehow reassure her Mary was no longer a threat but she let out a most hideous roar and bounded from the room with remarkable speed and agility before I could draw breath.

I heard a crash from the next room followed an instant later my Mary’s shrill scream of terror and then Cullen shouting in shock and fear.

I scrambled to my feet and by the time I had reached the door, to my horror, Dea was already upon Mary knocking her backwards through the other door and into the operating room.

“Dea! Stop!” I cried and raced through towards the assault.

A shot rang out from within the next room. Cullen.

I had to leap over several overturned cages, including the two which had housed the dogs, both of whom were nowhere to be seen and despite my fear addled brain, I hoped they at least had managed to escape.

I stumbled through into the operating room and was met with a scene of utter horror. Dea was on her hind legs once more with her teeth snapping at Mary’s neck as she vainly tried to fend off her far superior attacker.

Cullen was on the floor, his nose a bloody mess and he got to his knees and aimed his pistol grasped between two shaking hands. Moreau had back away and was standing with his back against the far wall, his eyes twin saucers of disbelief and shock.

“Cullen, don’t!” I shouted and ran towards Dea and Mary.

“Dea! Stop!!” I screamed.

Another shot rang out and I felt the bullet zip by my head as it imbedded in the wall to my left. I instantly flinched and brought my arm up to my face. Another shot a moment after from that idiot Cullen who was firing blindly now. I felt a splash of blood hit my chest and splatter my face. My first thought was that I had been shot, yet I felt no pain.

It wasn’t my blood.

Dea had her teeth in Mary’s neck, who screamed but the sound was drown out by the fountain of blood which spurted out from the wound in alarming jets and bubbled up into her throat.

Dea viciously shoot her prey and came away with a large chunk of flesh with a sickening wet ripping sound. I stopped, frozen by the sight and it was only the sound of Moreau’s cry that pulled me from the brink of madness.

Dea picked up Mary’s now limp body and flung it across the room like a rag doll, where it crashed into one of the large gas lamps sending it crashing to the floor. The gas tube pulled out from the wall as it fell, and I could hear the unmistakable hiss of escaping gas. In seconds I could smell its oppressive odour as it filled the room.

I began to run to where poor Mary had fallen but instantly I slipped on the blood-soaked floor and landed hard on my back. I rolled over, now a bloody mess myself and scrambled over to Mary, who was convulsing violently.

I clamped my hands on her throat in a desperate attempt to stem the flow of blood from the deep wound, but her eyes had already glazed over, and she stared sightlessly up to the heavens as the last of her life drained away and a moment later she lay still.

“Stay back you monster!” Cullen cried.

I turned to see the old villain was propped up against the wall by the door, aiming unsteadily at Dea, who was still on her hind legs, as she moved slowly, deliberately towards him like the predator she was meant to be. She snarled, a nightmare of fresh blood and teeth.

I saw the back of Moreau as he made his way through the recovery room, wailing like a lunatic as he tried to make his escape. Against my better judgement, I called out to Dea to stop, but she dropped back down onto all fours into her more natural position.

The gas was now so thick in the room, it was becoming hard just to take a shallow breath and I could feel its effects starting to take a hold as my thoughts became clouded and I began to feel faint.

Cullen raised his pistol as she approached.

“Cullen, the gas...” I choked out, but it was barely audible even to myself.

One of the last things I remember, was Cullen firing just as Dea moved to pounce and then the whole air around me igniting in a hellish conflagration.

Then just fleeting images as I was engulfed in the inferno.

The room alight, poor Mary’s body ablaze as I rolled in a vain attempt to extinguish the flames ravaging my clothes and flesh. I remember Dea, a mass of flames herself crawling towards me and we held each other, waiting for death to take us. Together at least for one last time.

I have no recollection of the fate of Cullen and Moreau during this fiery nightmare. The last thing I do remember is the sensation of falling as the wooden floor beneath us gave way. Falling, I assumed to our deaths.

As his rasping voice faded, Charles Oldman slumped back in his chair.

His already painfully slight frame seemingly diminished all the more at the effort of unburdening himself. He reached for the bottle on the table, as he had done many times during his fantastical story. Only to pull away again realising it was empty.

His chest rose and he let out a long forlorn sigh, which clearly caused him great pain.

“Whether it was I who pulled Dea from the flames, or she who rescued me, I cannot say.”

I lent forwards conspiratorially, quite captivated by it all.

“And what of the creature?”

His eyes narrowed and he fixed me with a look of distaste.

“*She*,” he emphasised. “Is quite safe now.”

I held out my hands in way of apology.

My friend’s terrible wounds were beyond denial, and his sometimes-colourful tale did bear up somewhat to what I already knew of the aftermath of the fire on Fiddler’s Wharf.

It seemed more than plausible that this Cullen character had survived at least the initial fire, as his body was not found amongst the debris. And then spirited Moreau away before the authorities arrived. And now it sadly seemed I had a name for the only human body found in the ashes.

Nurse Mary Kinderman. It would be a little comfort for her family to know that she was no longer missing. They must have been worried sick these past weeks. They would finally know for sure, however painful it was, and yes, at least have their loved one’s body to lay to rest.

All this I could believe without question. But Charles’ assertion that this creature, Moreau’s blasphemous creation had somehow lived? Despite its injuries and not to mention the torturous experiments already wrought on its body, for God only knows for how long previously? That I could not reconcile with any good sense.

Charles was, after all, gravely injured in the conflagration. Then there were the weeks of self-administered medical care and the morphine he so freely admitted using. It was enough to turn any rational mind to flights of fantasy.

“It’s quite a story,” I said after a long silence fell between us.

“I can appreciate how it sounds, John,” Oldman conceded. “But it happened, more or less as I have told you.”

“But what happened to you after the fire? You were missing for so many weeks.”

“I must admit I have very little memory of the hours directly after our escape. Fleeting moments, seen through a veil of pain and shock. Small things, unfamiliar surroundings, as we half walked have dragged ourselves through the docklands as night drew in.

“I must have lost consciousness countless times. Until before I knew where I was, it was daylight, and from what I have gathered since, I came to some resemblance of consciousness in what I can only describe as a makeshift camp or commune which had been constructed under a wooden jetty by the river.

But somewhere the rising tide could not wash away, it must have been there for years. All I know is that my wounds had been dressed, not with any great skill mind and with less than sterile bandages. But the intention was greatly appreciated.”

I had to bite my tongue at this latest fantasy. Did he really mean the creature had somehow treated his wounds?

He must have read this on my face, as he let out a short grunt of amusement.

“We had been found and cared for by a small community of, what I would have once thought of as derelicts. Some twenty or so lost souls who had created a makeshift village of their own, made from the discarded flotsam and jetsam of an unfeeling, uncaring city. All of them forgotten by the rest of the... Shall we say, civilized world?

“A world I am now ashamed to admit to being a very willing part of, I too before this revelation would have thought nothing of passing them by in the street and turned my nose up at the squalid way they lived.

“But they, to a man and woman, accepted Dea and I for what we were, outcasts just like them. I can only imagine what a sight we pair must have made when they came upon us. But they accepted us, welcomed us into their world without judgement.

“And so, we were kept safe, and in time we could even move freely through the back alleys and hidden streets of the city. Even the police shunned us, after all, what were two more rag clad figures to them?”

This new revelation shocked me more than I can say. My good friend, terribly wounded and cast adrift in the indifferent streets of London. Had I myself, like so many others, walked past him during this time?

“My God Charles, you could have come to me, I would have helped you. Gotten you real medical attention, food, clothing.”

“That’s just the thing, John. I had everything I could ever need, right there. Our new friends kept us, especially Dea, safe. And then when I was able, I secretly returned to my flat with a small group. I had money there, and gladly let them take whatever they wanted, clothes, valuables to sell. I knew I would never return there, how could I after everything I had seen and experienced. And more to the point, I didn’t want to return to that old life.

“Moreover, my new friends, family really, showed me where I could procure morphine for the pain. And in time, they helped us secure a modest flat in Limehouse, where we now live.”

“Charles, listen to me,” I insisted. “You’re not thinking clearly, and with all due respect, look at yourself. You are in desperate need of proper, professional medical assistance. And all this talk of morphine? Procured, I very much doubt from a reputable chemist. It’s poisoning you!”

“I didn’t ask you here for a lecture, John. Just to assure you I am still very much amongst the land of the living. And so that, for myself, I could get these quite remarkable events in some semblance of order in my mind. Now that I have, you may do with all this as you will. I imagine it would make quite the article for the Times.”

With this he placed both damaged hands on the table’s edge and with great effort, pushed himself to his feet. I could see the pain such a simple motion had caused him in his half-hidden face.

“Charles!” I exclaimed. “Please...”

He silenced me with a wave of his bandaged hand, which I now saw was bleeding through the material.

“This is an end to it,” he said with a cold finality.

Still, I rose, I desperately wanted to say more, something, anything to urge him see reason. But deep down, as I watched him shuffling out from behind the table, I knew any reason he once possessed had long since been drown in a cocktail of morphine and alcohol.

“It was good to see you, John,” he said as he gingerly adjusted his wide brimmed hat to further obscure his damaged features.

“You too,” I replied. Resigned to losing him once again. “Do you need anything? Money, anything at all?”

“No, thank you. I have everything I need back at home.”

Back at home, where the creature is, I thought grimly. Had that thing truly survived? Was it even now, as Charles insisted, waiting for him to return?

I tried to push the thought from my mind. It was madness to think of such things. Wasn't it?

I watched silently, and with a heavy heart as my friend, Charles Oldman walked away and towards the door. He suddenly paused for a moment and shook his head and seemed to chuckle. He looked back at me over his shoulder.

"I was thinking, in his way, Moreau transformed me too. Just as he transformed my strange, wonderous companion. Perhaps I should be thanking him."

He laughed at the lunacy of this and went through the door and away.

I stood, looking at the now empty doorway.

I waited for a moment, conflicted, before striding after him with a renewed purpose. I knew the moment Charles left that I had to follow. Now my ego would dictate that at that time, my reasoning for this clandestine pursuit was solely out of concern for my friend's wellbeing. And that would have been correct up to a point.

But in hindsight, I no longer try to deceive myself into believing my motives were completely altruistic. I have tried during my remembrances of Oldman's outlandish account to be as faithful in recounting his words and my own feelings without prejudice.

So, I must continue to do so regardless or in the end the whole endeavour would be rendered pointless, and I might as well have left that crudely edited pamphlet version of what you are reading as the only public record.

Of course, I was concerned about my adrift, yet oddly contented friend. But I cannot say that this was my overriding reason. I simply *had* to follow, as would any curious soul who had heard such a story. To see for myself if this impossible creature, to which Charles so lovingly spoke of, and indeed named! Was not only real, but more even than this, an actual living, breathing creation eagerly waiting for his return.

To my surprise it was almost dark outside when I stepped out into the cool early evening air. I looked around and for a brief moment of panic I could not locate my friend. But then up ahead at the entrance to a dimly lit side street, I caught Charles' unmistakable gait as he walked slowly on, keeping to the darkening shadows.

As I have said before, I was aware of this area of London only by its dubious reputation, and as such I was glad I had decided to bring my pistol with me. Although it was approaching dusk, it was still quite early in the evening revellers to emerge, and the area was still quite deserted.

The folks working on the docks would not be off shift and out on the streets for a little while yet. Charles had chosen his time to exit with care. No doubt from bitter experience given his freakish appearance.

A little further on, as he walked up a particularly steep road, lined on both sides by large factory walls, he suddenly stopped, and I had to duck into a doorway for fear I had mistakenly not left enough space between us and that he might turn around to discover my prowling.

I waited a moment, then peered up the gloomy road. I hadn't been seen after all. Charles was crouched over, seemingly struggling with something in his coat pocket and was not aware of me at all. I was too far back to see what he was doing, but he leant heavily against the brickwork to his left and continued to wrestle with something.

He paused, seemed to stiffen for a moment, then his shoulders slumped, and he seemed to be breathing in short sharp breaths and I had to fight the urge to go to his aid.

Finally, he straightened and set off again at a surprisingly quick pace. I set off once more in pursuit and actually found myself having to jog just to keep a reasonable distance between us.

As I reached the spot where he had stopped, something on the ground caught my eye. My heart sank, it was an empty vial of what I can only imagine had contained morphine. To think this bright, eager and ambitious man had been reduced to injecting this poison into his body on some back street of London, just to keep his pain at bay.

Seeing that discarded vial, I felt a sudden stab of remorse. I had been so keen to see what wonders and horrors would await me if Charles' wild tale was true, that I had put his plight to the back of my mind. Yes of course I was curious about his supposed companion, but seeing him slumped there, in the grips of addiction, shamed me.

As I followed on, doing my best to keep pace with Charles' increased agility, I also couldn't help but wonder if all this talk of the creature and its alleged empathic nature, wasn't simply some drug fuelled fantasy he had concocted in his opium addled brain,

perhaps to physiologically ease his mental distress brought on from the undoubted trauma he had suffered at Fiddler's Wharf.

Presently, Charles turned down a side street and onto a narrow road which at first, I took as a row of derelict houses on either side. I waited by the corner and watched as Charles crossed the street and entered one of the less rundown buildings, and it was now I noticed a light shining from one of the upstairs windows.

I made my way down the road and stood in the shadows on the opposite side of the street and pondered my next move. Now that I was here, in this strange rundown area, I must confess to feeling more than a little reticent about my chosen course of action.

I reasoned as a cold fear gripped me, which was half tinged with curiosity and a more reasonable sense of self-preservation. That, as I now knew the location of Charles' residence, it would be more prudent to return during the day, if I was indeed to proceed, for better or worse in entering.

But could I in truth, after everything, wait that long?

From where I was positioned, I could see the front door Charles had entered through was slightly ajar. If I could summon the courage, I could gain entrance through there without any hindrance. I had, as my more curious side told me mischievously, come this far already, so it would be a folly to retreat now.

Alas, on this occasion that side of me won out all too easily.

The light in the upstairs window flickered which drew my gaze to it. I could see the outline of Charles, though the thin net curtains as he entered and threw off his hat and coat. He gesticulated wildly to I assumed someone in the next room and my heart rate quickened.

Although it was impossible to make out any of his features, especially with his bandaged face, it was clear from his exaggerated movements, no doubt fuelled by the fresh injection of morphine, that he was enthusiastically relating what I can only imagine was news of our meeting to his unseen companion.

Could it be the creature after all?

Charles rushed away from the window and out of sight. I silently cursed my indecision and glanced to my left and then right to ensure I was alone on the street, which thankfully I was, as I could not have cut a more suspicious figure if I tried.

Again, the light flickered, and I uttered an oath out loud. Two figures now! Frustratingly indistinct, silhouetted as they were by the dim light behind them. And then, to my utter amazement, they began dancing.

I recognised Charles' outline, but his companion, who he seemed to be guiding, as they spun awkwardly around the room, was little more than a shadow. And try as I might, I could not make out *her* features. Yes, I realised, it was a woman, seemingly wearing a dress and bonnet on her head.

Mary Kinderman was dead and so if his story was to be believed, this could be the creature. Couldn't it?

She was taller than Charles, even given her head wear, with her arms draped around his shoulders. They disappeared from view several times only to emerge again as they danced.

"Could it be?" I said out loud.

And before I realised it, I was making my way across the road and over to the house. My initial observation had been correct, the door, which in truth looked like it had been kicked in before, was slightly open, sitting as it did on uneven hinges. I could see the lock had been set but due to its warped condition, the latch bolt had slipped away from the brass bracket on the frame.

I gently pushed the door open and quietly stepped inside. The hallway was in almost complete darkness, but I could just make out the faint glow of gas light coming from the top of a rickety staircase.

The smell of damp and rotting wood was almost overpowering as I carefully made my way to the bottom of the stairs. I was almost glad I could not fully see their condition as I could only imagine how dilapidated they were. Any more illumination and I might not have had the courage to continue fearing for my safety.

I paused at the sound of manic laughter coming from the floor above. Then, satisfied no one was on the landing, I began to slowly ascend the stairs, testing each creaking step before putting my full weight on it and continuing to the next.

I held out my hand towards the banister to my left but pulled it away again sharpish as the whole length of it moved a good foot or so with the sound of soft cracking. Thus, I guided myself up the rest of the way using my right hand against the wall to my right, which was slick with mould, coating my palm in no time wherever I touched it.

When I finally reached the top of the stairs, I wiped my hand on my coat in disgust. The landing was short with one door to my right and another straight ahead towards the front of the building, which had light seeping through the crack underneath.

All too aware that I was trespassing, I proceeded with caution and as I approached the door, I could hear Charles inside, excitedly chattering and laughing almost to the point of hysteria and not for the first time I cursed that demon morphine.

I paused, should I knock? I raised my fist in an automatic motion to do so, but something stopped me. Charles' voice was, by the sound of it moving off into another room, further into the flat I presumed. This was confirmed when the light under the door flickered and faded as I imagined him taking the lamp through into another room. Then there was silence.

With my heart in my mouth, I reached for the doorknob and turned it as slowly as I could, honestly expecting it to be locked, but I was rewarded with a soft 'click' and the door opened.

What madness was this? The more logical part of me screamed. But this was all but drown out by the stronger, more reckless urge to discover Moreau's horrendous creation for myself. A leopard, my God, and one that had been surgically altered to walk on its hind legs, and, if my eyes didn't deceive me, dance! I was also drawn on my Charles' assertion that there was a spark of sentience behind those slitted feline eyes.

Terrified, I slipped silently into the room, which I now saw in the gloom consisted of a small kitchen and living room in one space. I recoiled slightly at the smell which was almost unbearable, even in relation to the damp and rot of the stairs case and landing. The stench of rotting meat and vegetables mingled with the damp and smell of weeks old unwashed clothes and much I could not identify.

The incessant buzzing of flies filled the rank air, and despite the lack of adequate illumination, I could make out stacks of unwashed dishes still lousy with rotting food laid by a sink filled to almost overflowing with stagnant water.

I noticed a pile of filthy bandages discarded on the floor and I could only imagine what poor Oldman looked like without them.

That manic, high-pitched laughter again, which set my teeth on edge, came from behind a door across the other side of the small room. And I could once more see the lamp light coming from under it through the gaps around the frame.

I froze at the sound of shuffling movement from within the room, and then the sound of something like a heavy weight falling onto complaining bed springs. The next room was a bedroom, and I was suddenly hit with the awful thought that perhaps Charles was in there with a normal woman, one of his beloved street people.

I had seen them at the window, dancing as one might with a lover. God, I had been so intent on believe in Charles' tale of the creature's survival, that I might easily have projected some other meaning onto the scene than a simple tryst.

I had a choice to make as I stood in that squalid room, to decide how my part in this surreal tale of mad doctors and twisted creatures would end.

I could leave, before potentially making a complete fool of myself, and also in no small part betraying the wishes of my friend. Or give in to my urge to discover once and for all what wonders and yes horrors awaited me beyond that door.

Now I think back, it was really no choice at all. I could flatter myself and call it my innate journalistic inquisitiveness, but that would be a lie. It was an overwhelming, morbid curiosity, and one I was powerless to resist.

I stepped back into the room and resisted the compulsion to just barge in on the pair. I had to remember I was the trespasser here, but I could also reasonably lay claim to a genuine concern over my badly injured friend's wellbeing.

"Charles?" I was taken aback at how loud my voice was within the small room.

I noticed the light coming from under the door had dimmed somewhat as the lamp had been turned down. Perhaps the pair were settling down to sleep.

I listened, but there was nothing but the incessant buzzing of the flies in response. And so, I waited for what seemed like a good half an hour but was I'm sure just five minutes at the most. Still nothing from within, the pair much be asleep I reasoned, more I'm sure to reassure myself than anything. Still, it made sense considering Charles' drugged state and the exertions the day's events must have taken on him.

"Charles? Anyone?"

Nothing but that buzz, buzz, buzzing in my ear.

I moved purposely towards the door, more to stop my nerve giving out than anything.

"Charles, I'm coming in."

Another step and I was at the door, I gripped the doorknob and turned it, then paused, waiting for any shouts of protest from inside. But there was nothing but those damnable insects, so I pushed.

As I opened the door, the first sensation that threatened to knock me onto my backside was one of absolute nausea. The air was thick with a mass of fat black flies, there were so many of the awful insects at first, I thought I had disturbed a hornets nest they were so loud.

I gasped and put my hands to my face as the smell then hit me. And were it not for the sight on the bed which terrified me into inaction, I would have fled screaming from that auditory and malodourous assault. And I don't imagine I would have stopped running until I was home, where sanity and reason reigned.

There, on a rancid and stained mattress was my colleague and friend Charles Oldman, stripped naked, exposing his burnt and gangrenous flesh to the ravenous appetites of the flies as they swarmed around him.

Worse still, if such a thing were possible, was the abomination he had in his embrace. At first glance I thought it was the mummified remains of a long dead burnt woman. Swathed in filthy, ill wrapped rotting bandages.

The face, which the bandages only partially covered, was malformed beyond all recognition its snout was short, a metal plate down the bridge of the nose to keep the illusion of humanity in place. What little skin was left, was a tangle of mottled, blackened animal fur.

Its right arm, which was draped obscenely over Oldman's right shoulder, ended in a kind of paw, which, as Charles had articulated, had indeed been fashioned into some kind of rudimentary hand.

Here and there, on the more exposed parts of its body, I could see leather straps, sown into the charred flesh and a pair of mangled callipers holding its legs almost straight, contrary to its natural state.

Moreau's prized blasphemy of made-made evolution.

Charles, who I now saw was awake, did not acknowledge my intrusion.

He was staring lovingly into the blackened pits of the creature's long-gone eyes. He began to gently caress its cheek, whilst whispering something I was all too glad I could not

hear. He then, to add horror onto horror, he passionately kissed the creatures' twisted mouth.

I think I screamed, but I couldn't tell for sure as Charles didn't so much as flinch and as for myself, I had the feeling of being out of my body. And in that brief moment, I felt what madness must be like. The impossibility of what I could plainly see with my own eyes but could scarcely believe.

As finally, the subconscious, sane part of my addled mind, pulled me back from the ever edge of lunacy. I turned and fled that accursed place and out into the night air, and just as I thought, I did not stop running until I bolted myself back in my own home.

I spent the rest of that night in a kind of malaise, haunted by what I had seen, and the sheer madness of it all. Half expecting Oldman and his unholy partner to come barging through my door, as I had theirs.

The night seemed to drag on for an eternity as I shivered and hid from the darkness, clutching my pistol for all the good it would do and awaited the light and the hope of a new day that would bring.

I wept like a child when that faint red glow began to appear over the rooftops outside my window, as the dawn finally banished the night.

When the bright early morning sun was fully over London, I ventured out and informed the police of what I had witnessed. In truth, I only told them the location of the missing Charles Oldman, and that he was badly injured and in a much-agitated mental state.

They would have to make of what they would, anything else found there.

Apparently, and much to my great sorrow, I later learnt from my editor that Charles had howled like a banshee when the police arrive and fought with such apoplectic violence that two of them ended up in hospital. All this despite his much-debilitated state.

But most telling of all, and despite my best efforts questioning the police afterward, there was no record, official or otherwise of anyone or anything being found with the unfortunate man.

And if I hadn't been given a knowing, haunted look from one of the officers who had been on the scene when I asked him, I might well have questioned my own sanity.

The authorities had plainly subdued this more disturbing aspect of the case. And I for one couldn't blame them.

Thus, when I submitted my account of what Oldman had told me in the pub, I said nothing of the creature in the bedroom. I imagine it is, as I write this, being examined under intense scrutiny somewhere as they try to understand how Moreau could create such a thing.

It is my heartfelt wish they do not try to replicate those many horrific procedures.

As I have previously stated, my newspaper published a much censored and sensationalized version of the text which is what compelled me to write this piece and for better or worse, include its horrific conclusion.

As of today's date, Charles Oldman is a patient at a secure hospital here in London.

I will, in time, summon up enough courage to visit him. I fool myself that my reticence to see my friend is due to wanting him to be in a better physical and mental state upon our reunion. But I know, in truth it is out of a sense of guilt that I have yet to venture there.

I have received much praise, not least from Oldman's own family for saving his life. But I am still haunted by that look of utter love in his eyes as he lay there with the dead creature. A more contented man I have never seen. And I wonder, if it might have been kinder to leave him to that fantasy, until he finally succumbed to the effects of his wounds and addiction.

I have spent much of my time since that fateful meeting with my old friend, drinking heavily, trying, in vain, to wash away the sight of that horrific couple on that squalid bed. A sight made all the more painful for the contentment they shared.

Sometimes, when I am at a low ebb, I see that creature... Dea, laid beside me in bed, but much as Oldman would have seen her, alive, sentient and strangely beautiful in her surgically altered feline uniqueness. I think perhaps I am jealous of what they had.

And in these moments of despondency, I wonder what other such creations are out there in the world, as their unhinged, but clearly brilliant creator toils away somewhere to perfect his obscene art.

Where he escaped to, no one knows. I just pray it is far away from these shores and any form of civilisation.

So that no other sane mind will ever encounter the Moreau horrors again.

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