

With trepidation, John scanned the faces of the first-year students as they filed into the great hall. The older students whooped and cheered for the new ones, while John clapped slowly, his gaze intense. This anxious scanning was becoming his tradition, as much as the welcome banquet was Hogwarts' tradition. He peered into the fresh, young faces that proceeded down the central aisle amid the banquet tables. They seemed somehow to look younger and more innocent every year. There were nervous faces, proud faces, cheerful faces, awe-struck faces. For the past two years, his search had ended in relief. Each unfamiliar face was a pardon. He knew, however, that the amnesty was only a reckoning delayed.

Suddenly, his heart stopped as if it had been clutched by a cold hand. There she was. Her copper curls bounced as she walked, and her smile spoke to a thousand happy expectations. She did not look straight ahead, but this way and that, drinking in the splendor of the great hall. A friend tugged at her sleeve and pointed off to the side, perhaps at an older student. Caitlyn leaned toward her friend and giggled. Her smile sent chills down John's spine. He hoped with fervent sincerity that she was happy, as he might hope that a pig is happy with its bounteous last meals before the slaughter. A wave of self-loathing suddenly rose up in him with a ferocity he had not felt in many years. *So, this is how it begins*, he thought. *Or rather, how it ends*. As usual, he did not have a plan. No, that was not entirely true. Deep down, he did have a plan. He just felt sick to his stomach thinking of it.

~ December 25th, 1846 ~

"Ooh!" puffed Theodora, rising from her curtsy. "I dare say I'm spent. I don't recall the waltz being so taxing."

John graciously extended his elbow and she took it in her gloved hand, allowing herself to be led off the dance floor. He ignored the sly glances that followed them, as the attention of the lords and ladies flickered like the candles in the chandeliers above them.

"That was nice, wasn't it?" John mused amiably.

"It was, until you began speaking," said Theodora. She was a slight woman, half a foot taller than he, with raven hair, gray eyes, and rounded, hawkish shoulders. She looked anywhere but his eyes as she spoke.

"Is the sound of my voice so odious even when I am being polite?" John asked sweetly.

"I am enjoying the music."

"I thought you didn't like music."

"No, I merely dislike your music."

"You just don't want to admit that I am a great musician."

"You could be great if you played something nice," Theodora complained, "instead of your somber dirges."

"My music has a heart," retorted John. "Perhaps one must have a heart to be able to appreciate it."

His wife calmly detached from his arm as gracefully as she had taken it. They were approaching a ring of comfortable, tapestry upholstered chairs in one corner of the ballroom. About them sat an elite circle of friends and relations who were visiting for the holidays. Outside the circle more guests milled about, some of them joining in the conversation, others listening, others pretending they weren't listening. No one had touched John's chair. There was a wine glass beside it that must have been his. John braced himself for conversation as he and his wife settled back into their seats.

"You dance beautifully, Theodora," said her cousin Charles warmly.

"Indeed!" cried the baron Bernard Maxwell, a lifelong friend of hers. "I haven't seen you smile like that in years."

She laughed softly. Her face was flushed, perhaps from the dance, or from the compliments, or both. "I was just telling John that I feel carried away by this delightful music."

“The last three pieces have been Italian if I’m not mistaken,” chimed in Thomas Hargrave, a prominent banker and a good friend of Charles’. “An interesting choice.”

“Will we get to hear your music tonight, John?” asked Alice, Theodora’s younger sister.

“Mine? No, no, not tonight,” he replied modestly.

“I didn’t know you were a musician,” said a man standing just outside the circle, to whom John had been introduced an hour earlier but whose name he could not recall.

“He plays the violin like an angel,” said Alice.

“Or like the devil himself,” said the baron languidly.

John smiled and traced his finger about the rim of the wine glass sitting on the table. “Well, the devil is merely an angel who lost his way.”

Nobody spoke for a moment, and the jaunty allegro notes filled the silence.

“Lord John, this is Walter Morris, Lady Dormer’s nephew,” said the banker Hargrave, gesturing to another man standing just outside the circle. The man bowed respectfully. “You remember I told you about him?”

“Ah, yes of course. The one who moved to America. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” John inclined his head politely.

“The pleasure is mine, my lord,” said the stocky man through an enormous mustache.

“You’ll recall Morris owns a successful shipping company.”

“Do you?” asked the baron Maxwell. “Somehow I’d gotten the idea you were all farmers out there in America.”

The mustached emigrant smiled good-naturedly. “No, Lord Maxwell, there are a good deal of those, but I assure you every industry you can think of is either established out there or is gaining a foothold.”

“The land of opportunity, is it?” asked Hargrave.

“Quite right!” replied Morris. “When I landed in Charleston at the age of twenty, I had only a trunk of clothes and five dollars to my name.”

“But how much was the name worth,” muttered John.

“And now Liberty Shipping employs more than a hundred workers,” Morris continued, apparently not hearing him. “As we grow, we want to think of ourselves as less of a shipping company, and more of a transportation company,” his eyes gleamed with ambition.

“Do you ever feel isolated out there?” John had picked up the wine glass and was looking into it pensively. “Cut off from developments in Europe?”

“No, I can’t say that I do. In fact, we get so much news from Europe that I sometimes forget that it’s an ocean away. Of course, there’s a bit of a delay, but we hear everything worth hearing. We’ve even heard of you, my lord.”

“Oh dear, none of it flattering I’m sure,” laughed John.

“Oh, I’d say it’s a bit of a mix,” said Morris grinning. “I had heard of your good looks, which is flattering and I see it is true.”

John chuckled. “Good-looking is going a bit far,” he said, pushing back a lock of chestnut hair that had settled in front of his eyes, “but it’s true that the young face runs in my family. Old age doesn’t catch up to us until about sixty.”

“Now Lord John,” cautioned the baron, “you’ll have dear William rolling in his grave if you refer to *those people* as your family in public.”

John flashed him a barbed smile. “Oh dear me, here comes another lashing from the flame-tongued wrath of the legitimate aristocracy.”

“A flame that does not burn, it seems, as long as one has the queen’s blessing,” replied Lord Maxwell. “How you charmed her remains the greatest mystery of our generation.”

“Perhaps he charmed her with his violin,” declared Alice.

“Nonsense,” snapped Hargrave. “He charmed her with his politics.”

“At least we can all agree it wasn’t his personality,” said the baron.

“Bernard,” hissed a woman sitting beside him remonstratively.

“Now, Helen, no harm done,” said John, waving a hand in her direction. “How many times must I insist that I would rather have honest insults than dishonest flattery? As the old man used to say, ‘Only a man as rich as I am can trust his enemies more than he can trust his friends.’”

He took a long draft of wine. By the time he put the glass back down on the table, he knew that something was wrong. The conversation turned back to Morris and another question about America, but John only half-listened, his attention being drawn toward his own shifting experience. His pulse was quickening irregularly, and he had begun to tremble. His breathing was becoming short and strained. The wine had been poisoned. Whatever it was, it was acting extremely quickly. The conversation around him grew distant and indistinct, as if he were on the verge of sleep. Without a word, he leapt out of his chair and dashed across the ballroom.

He pushed his way through the throng of startled party guests, who balked as he passed. By the time he reached the dining room, he was shaking violently. His breath came out in ragged gasps. Surely he had only a few moments before he would be altogether unable to breathe. He tugged on his necktie, managing to loosen it a little. The dining room was sparsely populated as dinner was still being prepared. Striding across it, he silently cursed its lavish enormity. Where was he going? He needed to be alone, some place where he wouldn’t be seen. He barged through the kitchen door, but then hesitated. If the clamoring, bustling servants noticed him, they did not show it. Drenched in sweat, he fought to breathe but he could not. His lungs no longer obeyed him. Beside him was a broom closet. He ducked into it and sank down to the ground with his back to the door. Darkness swallowed him. His head throbbed as sight and sound disappeared entirely. There amid the mops and rags, John Coventry, 7th Earl of Coventry, quietly died.

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Dying was always the easy part. The hard part was returning to life. John had died dozens of times over the last four and a half centuries, in myriad ways. Regardless of how it was done, the return was always the same. It began with ecstasy. Death’s ecstasy was not exactly a happy one, but a kind of religious ecstasy, a liberation. Freed from the shackles of the material world, he glimpsed truth—no, he *was* truth! He was something greater than himself, and he felt that certain that that expansiveness was who he really, truly, was. Everything up to that point had been a dream, a lie, for in that expansive ecstasy, everything finally made sense and all was as it should be. Then, an instant later, it began to slip away. The tyranny of everyday consciousness began to take hold. It was as though for a fleeting moment he had been a butterfly, but then he was immediately shoved back into his dark cocoon. The feeling of being John, which he ordinarily so took for granted that he hardly noticed it, was suddenly obtrusive and irritating. He stirred in the broom closet, and a mop came tumbling down on top of him. John felt like crying, like moaning, like kicking something. He picked up a sponge from a pail beside him and hurled the sponge against the closet wall. It bounced feebly off the wall and fell silently to the ground. The walls of the closet seemed to be pressing in all around him. John wanted to mourn the death, or rather the loss of it. But now was not the time. Now it was time to re-enter the world and pretend that he belonged to it.

When he returned to the ball a few minutes later, he apologized and claimed that he’d suddenly remembered that he had an important message to convey to one of the servants. The others did not pay the incident much mind. They had grown used to his eccentricities, and they had already been used to those of the 6th Earl before him.

Lord William Coventry, the 6th Earl of Coventry, had been a very capable man in spite of his occasional foibles. He had married an heiress, the daughter of a wealthy businessman who’d made his fortune in India. Rumor had it that Lord Coventry had truly loved her lady’s maid. The joke went that

he was one of the few lucky aristocrats who had married for love, only it was love of the maid rather than of the wife. He had loved his wife's fortune, too, though he did not need it. He was a wealthy man already, but frugal and even miserly at times. In spite of his penny pinching, he was prone to the occasional extravagant fancy. It was due to the former quality that he had acquired his fortune, and due to the latter quality that he had acquired one of the world's first batteries, a zebra, and the preserved heart of a Duke of Milan. He had a tendency to fixate on people, in either a positive or negative sense. For instance, when once he determined that a certain petty nobleman had been publicly mocking him, he sued the man no fewer than seven times on the most trifling charges, until the judge refused to hear any more of his cases.

John was one of the people upon whom Lord Coventry had fixated in the positive sense. John had been commissioned to paint a portrait of the earl, and the earl so enjoyed his company that another portrait was commissioned, and then another. The commissions became a steady patronage, and the patronage became a friendship. Rumors swirled concerning the odd familiarity between the earl and the young artist.

When John discovered that the earl adored him, he'd had a choice to make. It was not until many years later that he came to appreciate the gravity of that choice. At the time, he'd reasoned that he was simply doing what anyone would have done. John was tired of being poor. He was tired of scavenging oils and pigments to make paints that were never as good as the expensive stuff. He was tired of playing an inadequate violin with no one but the rats for an audience.

More than that, John was simply tired. He had made his peace with death by the time he was ten years old. By two hundred years old, he had yearned for it. Now at well over four hundred, he was at his wit's end. At the tender age of twenty-something, his adoptive father had shoved an immortality potion down his throat and expected John to be grateful for it. John had fought against immortality then, and he fought against it now. Immortality was agony, a hot, thirsty, trudge through a wasteland with no beginning or end. The only thing like relief was love, but love was a spring of stale, sandy water that dried up too soon. Everyone he'd ever loved had either betrayed him or died, and the deaths were feeling more and more like betrayals. Love had lost its sweetness, for who could enjoy a sweet treat knowing that it would be snatched away in an instant? Whether the relationship lasted one year or twenty, it was too brief, for twenty years was but a moment to him. He felt he could not go on this way, grasping at little snatches of love that were not worth the long stretches of pointless toil. He'd inquired with earth's greatest potions masters, and even with experts on other planes, about a cure for immortality. He'd spent decades conducting his own research on the topic. He'd experimented with all manner of spells, totems, rituals, and alchemical concoctions. It had all been in vain. There was no cure. John was a gifted magician, capable of feats that wizards and mages regarded as impossible. The only thing he absolutely could not do was die.

With no cure for immortality, John sought the palliatives of money, art, and sex. That was one thing he and the earl of Coventry had in common. The two of them distracted each other from despair, Lord William delighting John with money and John delighting Lord William with art and music. On some level, each understood that the other was using him to escape from some unspoken pain. The fact that neither of them spoke of it was the foundation of their friendship. Eventually, the earl came to regard John as the son he'd never had. John, for his part, was reasonably fond of the earl and the earl's eldest daughter, Theodora. Mostly, though, he was fond of the earl's money.

William Coventry's greatest exploit was when he quietly adopted John as his son, and wedded his new son to his eldest daughter. Even more shocking than the marriage was the discovery that it was technically legal, since there was no explicit prohibition against the marriage of adopted siblings. The marriage saved the earl from paying a dowry and ensured that his own grandchildren would inherit his estate. The blood line remained unbroken, granted that one link in the chain was a woman. Most miraculously of all, the queen gave her blessing to the happy couple—partly due to the earl's

accommodating politics, and partly because she was making an unpopular political move at the time and was grateful for the distraction that his scandal provided.

In this way, John had become John Coventry, Lord William's son and heir, and had duly become the 7th Earl of Coventry upon William's death. When John had first come to Croome, he'd been dazzled by the earl's wealth, imagining that no one with that much money could possibly be truly miserable. Now that Croome was finally his, he was finding that he had been mistaken. Money no longer had the allure it once had. He was trying to hold together his fragile happiness like a house of cards in the breeze. While William had been alive, John had been more or less able to convince himself that he was happy. Now with William gone, he was struggling desperately to find pleasure in wealth alone. It was for that reason that he was planning an enormous landscaping project, which would shape the grounds of the estate precisely to his taste. He longed to once again feel dazzled by Croome and its opulence. John refused to accept that even now, when he was one of the richest men in England, money might still abandon him like everything else he'd ever loved.

The Christmas ball had lasted most of the night, and John had slept through the morning fitfully. The midday sun thrust itself into his bedroom. He and Theodora had ceased to share a bedroom shortly after Lord William's death three years earlier. John's bedroom was large, with a four-poster bed of richly carved oak with scarlet satin pillows and silk draperies. Golden velvet wallpaper enveloped the room, its ascending columns of floral motifs rising like the bars of a gilded cage. The wallpaper was relieved by several paintings of ancestors and landscapes, some of which were painted by John. Somehow the room always felt dark, in spite of the garish wallpaper and tall windows. As the sun approached its zenith, John sat huddled in a large armchair by the window, still in his nightshirt, hugging his knees to his chest.

The massive grounds of his estate unfolded before him. Shafts of sunlight illuminated thick, dramatic clouds. Rolling hills dusted with pure white snow became a forest that was stately even in winter, its bare trees proud in their noble resiliency. John gazed outward and felt nothing. He was in a foul temper from the previous night's death. Death always had that effect on him. It had a way of poisoning everyday life.

He did not stir when he heard the valet enter.

"Good morning, my lord. Or, rather early afternoon," the valet said brightly. Edgar Lawrence was slim and wiry, with thinning brown hair, a modest mustache, and a few streaks of gray about the ears. His uniform was always immaculate, and he was a man of a sprightly and energetic demeanor. He was one of the few people in the world whom John trusted. Lawrence was everything one could ask of a servant—loyal, humble, honest, and, should the situation demand it, discreet.

"I have your clothes ready when you want them, but there is no great hurry," said the valet as he laid a small tea tray on the table beside the window. "Your first appointment is not until half past two, and your guests are just beginning to wake up."

"Hmm," John grunted, still looking out the window.

"Is everything alright, my lord?"

John spoke distractedly. "The canal will pass by my window just there, at the foot of that hill. And then it will lead into the valley there. Those trees will be gone. I wish we could move them, like the others on the west side of the house, but it just doesn't seem worth the expense."

"Oh, yes, the landscaping. Well, it is an ambitious project."

"Do you think it is too ambitious?"

"Oh, no, my lord. I only meant that I'm sure many difficult decisions must be made."

"Lord William always said that appearances were important, for appearances give one's creditors confidence. I only hope I'm not taking it too far."

"He would not have bequeathed his estate to you if he did not have the utmost confidence in your judgement."

John sighed. Lawrence set John's customary cup of tea—sugar, no milk—on the little table beside his armchair. The sight of it turned John's stomach. He thought of the poisoned wine and involuntarily shot a suspicious glance at the valet. John would not eat or drink anything comfortably again until he knew who had tried to poison him last night and why.

"Is there anything else I can get for you, my lord?"

"Oh Lawrence," he sighed, "if only you could get me any of the things I really want."

Lawrence smiled down on him kindly. "You seem troubled. Perhaps last night's festivities did not go as smoothly as they could have?"

"I suppose that's a matter of perspective," said John thoughtfully. "From the guests' perspective, I'm sure it was a lovely evening. From my perspective, it was a disaster. From the perspective of the person who poisoned my wine glass, it was also a disaster, though for entirely different reasons."

The servant blanched. "I'm sorry, my lord?" he asked with a nervous chuckle. "I must not have heard you correctly."

"Oh you heard me," said John, his gaze lingering on the untouched tea. "Somebody tried to murder me last night. I don't know who, and I'm not entirely sure what to do about it."

"Good God!" breathed Lawrence, his eyes opening wide. "You're quite serious? Then there's only one thing to do! You must go to the police at once!"

"No," said John firmly, looking up at Lawrence while still hugging his knees to his chest. "I have my own reasons for not wanting to go to the police."

Those reasons were that first, John did not wish it to be widely known that he was uncannily difficult to kill. A small but stubborn minority had suspected John of sorcery ever since he'd first won William Coventry's heart, and John did not intend to add fuel to that fire. The second reason he did not wish to go to the police was simple pride. Earth's greatest chaos magician did not go running to the police for help, least of all when the problem was under his own roof.

"You don't mean... You don't suspect...?" Lawrence trailed off.

John's curiosity was piqued. "What is it, Lawrence? Suspect whom?" A sardonic smile crept into the corner of his mouth.

"No, no, I wasn't going to say anything," he protested.

"Yes you were," said John playfully. "Come now, out with it."

"Oh, I..." stammered the valet "I only thought... well, you do not suspect the countess?"

"Ha!" John laughed. "You know us too well. Certainly Theodora wishes I were dead. But we were dancing while the glass was left unattended, so she was not my top suspect."

"Of course," the valet hurried to agree. "It only occurred to me because you didn't want to go to the police. I thought perhaps you meant to protect her. I should not have mentioned it."

"I'm glad you did."

"With all due respect, are you certain it was poisoned?"

"Quite certain."

Lawrence looked at him skeptically, and John read the question in his eyes.

"Oh, I have a high tolerance to many poisons," he said, waving his hand vaguely. "My father, that is, my other father, was an apothecary. Suffice to say that during my childhood I was exposed to many toxic compounds. This one did not kill me, but I felt it intensely."

Lawrence looked at him with his brow furrowed in an expression of deep concern. "My lord, this is terrible," he said.

Again the cold smile danced across John's face. "Do you really believe that, Lawrence? Or do I merely pay you to say such things?"

The valet looked taken aback. "Of course I believe it," he said emphatically. "And you will forgive me for being concerned that you seem to be taking this whole matter rather lightly."

John returned to gazing out the window.

“No, I do not take it lightly,” he said. “It’s just that I’m not frightened. I am... disappointed.” He knew that this was a lie. He was frightened. Someone, somewhere, was beginning to suspect that he was immortal. They might make another attempt on his life, one that could be even more of a spectacle than the first. The murderer might strike again at any moment, and John’s secret might be laid bare before an ignorant, superstitious public.

He rose from his chair and stood beside the window, crossing his arms. The sunlight cast shadows on his face. “I want to know who did this,” he said. “And I will show them that I do not take this matter lightly.” Out of the corner of his eye, John saw the valet fighting back the urge to say something that was on his mind.

“I think it must have been someone in our little circle,” John continued. “I could imagine the baron doing it. He despises me more than the average nobleman. I have long suspected there is something more than friendship between him and Theodora. Of course, cousin Charles would stand to gain much, since he would be the custodian of my estate until Henry comes of age. And then there’s Alice. She has the best reason of any of them to wish me dead.”

Lawrence wrung his hands, but he spoke resolutely. “My lord, if you will not go to the police, that’s your decision. It’s not my place to advise it, nor is it in my power to compel you. But I must recommend that you go to some sort of professional. I am certain I’m not the best person with whom to consult on this.”

John paused, thinking. Then a glimmer came into his eyes. “I think you are just the man for it, Lawrence,” he said eagerly. “You could keep an open eye and ear for me. Especially among the servants. You will help me solve this mystery!”

The valet sighed and looked at him dubiously.

“Don’t make me admit it, Lawrence,” said John quietly.

“My lord?”

John ran a finger gently down the window sash.

“That I haven’t got anyone else to talk to,” he muttered. His hand reached the sill and rested there. Cold air seeped in through the cracks and kissed his skin.

Lawrence bowed. “I will keep an open eye and ear, my lord.”

John nodded. He would find the person who did this, and he would ensure that they would not expose his secret. He would rectify the matter before it got out of hand. And yet he already felt it slipping from his grasp, like a magic spell gone wrong.

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“It would be more natural this way.”

“If I wanted it to look natural, I wouldn’t be landscaping.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then say what you mean.”

The landscape engineer sighed. “We want it to look the way people *expect* nature to look.”

“Ah,” said John, pulling a twig off a shrub beside him and twirling it between his gloved fingers. “And how do modern people *expect* nature to look? Setting aside the specific plants for a moment.”

“They think nature ought to be peaceful, and pristine,” said the landscaper as he rubbed his gloved hands together. “Nature as refuge. The old celebration of man’s dominion over nature is passé. Nature is beautiful in itself now, in its innocent simplicity.”

John smiled. “So, nature is innocent now. That’s a relief,” he said with amusement. “But I’m not convinced that putting the rose garden out here, rather than at the start or the end of the walk, constitutes a celebration of man’s dominion over nature.”

John, the landscaper, whose name was Burnhardt, and the head groundskeeper were standing at the edge of a meadow dusted with sparse patches of snow. The former two sported thick greatcoats and shiny top hats, while the third wore short woolen jacket, knitted hat, and cracked leather boots. The walking path snaked between the edge of the woodland and the meadow. It would be a couple of months before they broke ground on the landscaping project. Nevertheless, both the earl and the landscaper were deeply passionate about the project, so they met about it regularly, discarding, redrawing, revising and re-revising their plans.

“Oh,” huffed the engineer with impatience, “but it would be wasted out here. Far fewer people would see it.”

“That’s the point,” John countered. “Things are more beautiful when they’re rare. Even more so when you have to exert some effort for them. Like a meal that tastes better because you’ve worked up a sweat cooking it. And besides, we’re not terribly far from the house.”

“What do you think, Davies?” asked Burnhardt, turning to the groundskeeper. “Where would the roses fare best?”

The groundskeeper, a burly man with graying whiskers and a weather-beaten face, pondered for a moment. “I should think they’ll fare best where I can best keep an eye on ’em.”

“Aha! There you have it,” said the landscaper triumphantly.

“Come now, Davies, don’t be cheeky,” said John.

“There is something to be said for his argument,” Burnhardt interjected.

“Begging your pardon, m’lord, I was only having a bit of fun,” said Davies in his easy, gruff tones. “It’s hard to say where they’ll do better. Best way to know’s simply trying it. If I had to guess, I’d guess the soil out here ought to be richer, and they’d have more space. Most roses want plenty of sun and open space.”

“Well, it sounds like there are advantages and disadvantages, then,” said Burnhardt diplomatically.

John had turned away from the meadow, and was glancing at a small mound of soil at the base of one of the nearby trees.

“Still battling with the groundhogs, Davies?” he asked, pointing to it.

“Aye m’lord. You know I’ve been after the little devils for years.”

“What strategies have you employed to control them?”

“I fill in the holes when I find ’em. And I’ve used traps, smoke, poison... once the former Lord Coventry bought a few hawks for the purpose. I told him cats would’ve been just as good, maybe better, but well, you remember his way.”

“What sort of poison do you use?” asked John with sudden interest.

“Rat poison works best. Same stuff they use up in the house.”

“Did the hawks help?” asked the landscaper.

The groundskeeper chuckled. “No, sir. They just up and flew away.”

“Such is the innocence of nature,” said John thoughtfully.

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“Here it is my lord,” said the valet, carefully producing a small glass bottle, which he held distastefully between two gloved fingers.

“Excellent, Lawrence, excellent!” John took the bottle and strode over to the lamp to inspect it more closely. The fire had been going in the fireplace for some time, which made the bedroom rather stuffy. He loosened his cravat. He had just retired for the night, having finally fulfilled his social obligations. These were more burdensome than usual, since most of the guests who were staying with them at Croome would be there all week.

“Have you heard anything that might be of interest?” he eagerly inquired of the valet.

“Two points might be of interest to you, my lord. The first one, I admit, probably has no bearing on our investigation.”

“Pray go on,” said John, fiddling with the little bottle.

“One of the maid servants caught Mr. Hargrave’s son rummaging about your study.” Thomas Hargrave, cousin Charles’ dearest friend, was among the guests staying at Croome, along with Hargrave’s wife and his teenaged son.

“Rummaging?”

“He was trying to break into the cash box on your desk.”

“Why wasn’t I informed of this immediately?”

Lawrence began to remove John’s coat, which John had unbuttoned before becoming distracted by the bottle. “Well,” said the valet, “the girl is of a gentle nature and the boy is, if I may say so, something of a ruffian. She asked him to turn out his pockets and he did so, and seeing that they were empty, she saw no harm in letting him go with a stern warning.”

“I’ll give him a far sterner warning,” said John as he shrugged off the coat.

“Please my lord, I beg of you not to. I may better serve as your eyes and ears if the other servants trust that I will not betray their confidence.”

“Hmm,” John paused, thinking. “Very well. We’ll keep an eye on both Hargraves. If the son’s a miscreant, it may be that he learned that from his father. I don’t trust either of them. Thomas Hargrave has been trying to break into my own cash box in his own way, metaphorically speaking, by touting several projects he hopes I might invest in. Every time I turn him away, he comes back with renewed energy. But what was your second point?”

Lawrence began to undo the shirt buttons at John’s wrists. Taking the hint, John waved him off and resumed undressing himself.

“Well,” Lawrence began, “Since I was already in town this afternoon to see the draper about those curtains in the morning room, I took the liberty of calling on Dr. Linscott. I would have consulted with you first if you had been there, but, the idea occurred to me quite suddenly. I called on Dr. Linscott and inquired, as discreetly as I could, whether anybody had attempted to procure any sort of poison from him, or a large quantity of any medicine that could be poisonous in such quantities.”

“Oh-ho, good show Lawrence! And what did he say?”

“He said he had not had such an inquiry in years, and he swore that if he had, he certainly would not have accepted it. I pressed him. I told him that a man’s life is at stake, and, I hope you’ll forgive my saying so, but I even suggested that you might reward him for offering up any valuable information.”

“I would.”

“It was all to no avail. If he knows anything he will not reveal it, but more likely he knows nothing.”

“Ah, well it was an admirable effort. You have gone above and beyond your duties, Lawrence.”

“I hope I have not overstepped.”

“On the contrary, I am exceedingly grateful for your assistance.” John tossed his shirt to the valet and asked, “Nothing more to report?”

“Those are the only points that seemed to be of interest. Charles complains that his asthma has been worsening during his stay, and he has talked of leaving Croome earlier than planned. He misses the sea air of the coast, he says.”

“Mmm.”

“Lady Alice has been going into town every day that she’s been here, but her servants are not sure where she goes.”

“Aha, now that is interesting.”

“Is it?”

“I want us both to keep a close eye on Alice.”

“You said yesterday that she has a better reason than anyone to wish you ill...” The valet trailed off suggestively.

John picked up the nightshirt the valet had laid out for him on a rack by the fire. “You’re asking me about her motive?” he asked pointedly.

Lawrence bowed his head slightly. “If you think it might assist me in assisting you.”

John was silent for a moment as he pulled the nightshirt on over his head. Then he slipped his drawers out from under the gown and tossed them to the servant. “Alright Lawrence,” he said, “but just as you are trusting me with your friends’ secrets, I hope that I can trust you with my friends’ secrets.”

“I will not breathe a word of it to anyone.”

“Neither a word nor even a betraying expression on your face. If someone confronts you about it, you must lie.”

“Upon my honor, I will.”

“Very good. You remember Alice and Theodora’s grand tour of the continent about twelve years ago?”

“Of course.”

“And you did not find anything odd in the whole affair?”

“I thought it a pity that their mother was not alive to accompany them.”

“Indeed it was,” said John. “The tour was arranged because Alice was with child. It was not so much a tour as a retreat to the French countryside, where she had the child and where, as far as I know, the child is still alive and well.”

“Good heavens,” breathed Lawrence.

“William funded the trip, but when his daughter returned begging for more money to send to the orphanage, she reached the limits of his generosity. She must have remained in contact with whomever took the child in, because when William died, she turned to me with the same request. It was for the child’s education, she said. I told her that William had already been more generous with her than I would have been. Either keep the little nipper or be done with it, I say.”

“Oh dear.”

“So you see my point. She’s gotten nothing out of me. She might feel that she would have better luck if Charles were the custodian of the family fortune.”

“What a dreadful business.”

“Family usually is. Don’t be fooled by her sweetness, Lawrence. She despises me.” Finally dressed for bed, John was gazing into the fire. He tore his attention away from it and turned toward the valet behind him.

“I must commend you on a day’s work well done,” he said brightly. “You’ve really outdone yourself. If I didn’t know better, Lawrence, I might say you were rather enjoying working on this little puzzle.”

“Oh no, my lord,” Lawrence insisted. “I assure you I take no more pleasure from it than I would from any of my ordinary duties.”

“Very good. See that you don’t,” said John, smiling playfully at him. “Now then,” he said, and he returned to the table where the little iridescent green bottle stood beside the lamp. He picked it up and again inspected the menacing liquid.

“There is just one more thing, my lord,” said Lawrence with some diffidence. “It’s hardly worth mentioning, but, anyway, it was Eunice who showed me where I might find the rat poison.” Eunice was one of the maid-servants, a quiet, older woman. Lawrence continued, “When I asked her about it, she seemed, well... her demeanor changed. She grew... cold.”

“What do you mean, cold?”

“As if she were suspicious of me.”

“Of course she was suspicious of you, you were asking her for poison.”

“Well, I...” Lawrence faltered. “It struck me, that’s all.”

“Yes, of course,” said John gently. “I appreciate your not sparing me the slightest detail.”

“You are very kind my, lord.”

“Oh Lawrence,” he sighed. “I wish you had known me back when that was true.” John uncorked the bottle, sniffed the contents, and then drew back from it. The stuff smelled like burning rubber. Then he unceremoniously drank a tiny amount of the liquid.

“No!” cried Lawrence in horror, and he lunged for the bottle. He snatched it a moment after John had already pulled it away from his lips.

“Agh!” John squawked. His face contorted with disgust. “That’s not it,” he said, grimacing as he reached for a glass of water that sat nearby. “I would have tasted that in my wine, even if it was only a small amount. And from the effect that it had, I do not think it was a small amount. Bleh!” he spat. Then he shuddered like a wet dog shaking off water.

“For God’s sake!” cried Lawrence, abandoning his usual formality. “What on earth are you doing, drinking the rat poison? The whole purpose of this investigation is to prevent you from dying, not to get you killed!” The valet looked at him with wide, fearful eyes. “You must promise me you won’t do anything like that again! Promise me!” he demanded fervently.

When John set down his water glass and looked up at the servant, he was smiling with contempt. Something in Lawrence’s demeanor turned his stomach, and John suddenly found himself repulsed by the man for whom he had felt such fondness a moment earlier. The fact of Lawrence’s mortality and John’s own immortality reared its head, like an ugly monster that stood between them. Again, John was reminded that he was not of this ephemeral mortal world, where people like Lawrence were snuffed out as easily as candles. And his love for Lawrence dried up like a dew drop in the sun.

“Forgive me my lord,” said Lawrence, his face flushing. “I don’t know what came over me. I ___”

“Hush,” John interrupted. “Go.”

“Would you like me to—”

“Go.”

The valet bowed low, still red in the face. As he turned, John added in a caustic voice, “And remember the whole purpose of this investigation, Lawrence. It is to find and punish the unhappy fool who thought they could get the better of me.”

The valet bowed again and hurried out of the room. John turned toward the fire that flickered and swayed in the drafty fireplace, and the water pail beside it. He saw no reason to put the fire out. So he simply slipped into bed, and watched the light and shadow play on the golden walls.

~

Dead grass and sparse patches of dirty snow crunched beneath the hunters’ trudging feet. The wild oats stretched out before them like a brown, barren sea. Life scurried to and fro beneath the surface. Above, death prowled in crimson overcoats.

Shooting for sport had always made John feel a bit dirty. There was surely something sinful about an immortal person killing mortal creatures for pleasure. Mortals had some right to kill, for they were all equal participants in the cycle of life and death. They would, in the end, pay their balance. John was not part of that cycle, and so killing seemed to him unsportsmanlike at the very least. Yet he could not deny that a part of him found the moment of the kill exceedingly satisfying.

The occasional bare tree or clump of them rose like islands from the sea of grass. John, Charles Coventry, Thomas Hargrave, Hargrave’s teenaged son Nathan, and the baron Bernard Maxwell drifted like a little raft. The two Hargraves were the oldest and the youngest in the group. The older one was shorter and stouter, but they had the same mop of curly, straw-colored hair. Charles was of a medium build, soft-spoken with a round face. Maxwell was broad-shouldered and muscular, with dark hair and quick brown eyes. John was the shortest of them and the slowest while they walked, but was proving

himself to be the best with a shotgun. The shooting party was on foot, the horses being well behind, in the hands of the grooms. Ahead of them, the gamekeeper conferred with the beaters. John knew his land well, but the gamekeeper knew it better, so John and his associates chatted in their own little group while the gamekeeper decided where they would go next. They'd already amassed a sizable bag of pheasants, but since there was no shortage of the birds, they'd go on shooting until the party became tired or bored.

"For heaven's sake, Nathan, don't wave it around like that," Hargrave remonstrated, as he grasped the barrel of his son's shotgun and pointed it down toward the ground. "It's not a walking stick." John looked nervously at the armed teenager, who was once again needlessly cleaning the action of his gun with a handkerchief. John had had some reservations about allowing the lad to join them. In the end he'd consented, deciding that the ruffian, as Lawrence had called him, was probably no less liable to cause problems while unattended in the house than while chaperoned by the men.

"Listen to your father, Nathan," said John. "Henry will never forgive you if you make some blunder that forces me to raise the minimum age for our shooting expeditions." Henry Coventry, at eleven years old, was much too young for shooting, but that had not stopped him from making a fuss that he couldn't join.

"So, John," said Charles affably, "do you have any plans for this area?" Since they were seeing so much of the estate that morning, the landscaping project had naturally been a recurring topic of conversation.

John nodded. "We'll be thinning out a lot of these trees. These thick clumps, like you see here and here." He pointed into the distance. "Let the grassland be grassland and the woodland be woodland. Those in-between spots aren't useful for anything."

"Ah," said Charles attentively. A chill breeze suddenly picked up, and the air was reinvigorated with energy but no scent.

Maxwell said, "There's a question that's been on my mind, Lord Coventry, if I may be so impertinent as to ask it."

"You are always impertinent with me, Lord Maxwell. I was not expecting today to be any different."

"What is your true reason for this massive landscaping project?"

John rolled his eyes. "I've told you the true reason. I think it would be a sound investment."

"And I have tried to advise you, John, that there are wiser investments to be made abroad," interjected Hargrave.

"William did not leave me his fortune so that I might send it away."

"No," agreed Hargrave, "he left it to you that you might grow it."

"I am growing it. The project will be a boon for the local economy. The estate will be renowned for its beauty, and Coventry will become a household name."

Maxwell muttered, "Coventry already became a household name the day that you married your sister." John eyed him malignantly.

"Now Bernard," said Charles gently. "I think Thomas is right that it is always sound to diversify one's investments, but on the other hand, John is doing right by the family. He is not careless with the expenses, which he and I have discussed at length. Henry will inherit no small fortune, along with an estate that is beloved by the common folk and respected by the aristocracy."

"Upon my word, Charles," cried Maxwell in exasperation, "if Croome caught fire you would find a way to be an optimist about it."

"And if it blossomed into a national treasure, you would find a way to be a pessimist about it," snapped John.

A whistle and a wave from the gamekeeper indicated that the party was ready to move on. The little circle dissolved as Charles and Hargrave spirited ahead, leaving John and Maxwell behind and Nathan Hargrave in the rear.

"I know why you're doing it," said Maxwell softly. "The landscaping. You're doing it because it's not enough for you to simply *be* powerful. You have to *feel* powerful. But no amount of money will change the fact that you're not noble and you never will be."

"You're right, Maxwell, I wasn't born noble," retorted John. "I earned my place here. Still, I'll be generous and call it even."

"Ha!" Maxwell scoffed. "If you earned your place here, then so did William's zebra. And you have as much chance of fitting in with us as the zebra did with the horses."

"You know," said John, as if struck with a brilliant idea, "you're absolutely right. That's it, I'm calling off the landscaping project. I'll send word to the architects and the landscapers and the workmen that their services are no longer needed. We'll cancel the whole business because Lord Maxwell's incisive comments have opened my eyes to my own foolishness."

"You jest, but at least I'm honest."

"Oh yes!" said John with feigned delight. "One of your many virtues, Lord Maxwell! You are also cunning, calculating, bold beyond all standards of propriety, and your insults are delightfully clever."

"Why Lord Coventry, I had no idea you were so fond of me."

"Well then, I must sing your praises more often." The fact was that, while John could hardly be said to enjoy Maxwell's company, he did appreciate the certain wholesome purity of their mutual enmity.

"Speaking of horses," said John, turning around, "are they keeping up—"

Just then, a deafening shot rang out, and John felt an impact on his chest that snatched the breath out of him. For a moment all awareness of his body shrunk to the iron vice that gripped his chest, and it was as if nothing else existed. Then his awareness slowly expanded, and wrenching pain blossomed out from the spot. His knees buckled but something caught him from falling. He breathed his first conscious breath and it stabbed him like a knife. Maxwell—yes, it must have been Maxwell—lowered him to the ground and propped up his torso on something soft. John's chest was heavy. With each breath he felt like he was being ripped in half. Gradually, the shock of the moment subsided and he understood that he'd been shot. A pandemonium of voices swirled around him.

"... enough, Thomas, now is not the time!"

"... no son of mine!" came Hargrave's impassioned voice.

"... fetch Doctor Linscott!" came another.

"No," moaned John. The voices hushed as he spoke.

"No what?" asked Maxwell, who was kneeling on the ground beside him.

"Doctor," muttered John, struggling to think straight. They couldn't bring a doctor out here, in the field, where he was surrounded by a small infantry of servants. He would be fully healed well before then. He needed privacy, quickly. Whoever intervened to treat him would quickly discover his immortality.

"I will," John gasped through shallow breaths, "ride to the doctor."

"Oh for God's sake," said Maxwell impatiently. "You'll do no such thing."

"Dixon will go," called an authoritative voice.

"I'll see to the wound in the meantime," said another voice, and John felt someone tugging at his shirt.

"No!" cried John, thrusting away the hand. He rolled over onto his side and pulled himself up onto all fours. His vision went dark for a moment as he did so, and he wobbled as the crushing weight on his chest threatened to drag him back to the ground.

"Help me up, Maxwell," John demanded.

"Coventry, don't be absurd."

"Help me up, damn you! I can ride," he gasped. "I'll ride with you. I'll get to the doctor twice as fast if I go to him than if you fetch him and bring him back here." John kneeled back on his

haunches. He swayed a little as the blood rushed back to his head. He looked down to his shirt and saw muddy red peeking out beneath the crimson blazer. There was hardly a trace of white. Then his head began pounding violently and he stopped looking down. He would die before he would heal. But he had to stay in control of the situation as long as he could.

“Come on!” John said as he reached out a hand. Maxwell pulled him up, and the feeling of being torn in half rent him again. John grunted and put his other hand to his chest, blindly attempting to put pressure on the wound. He was weak, and he put an arm around Maxwell’s neck and shoulder to steady himself. Maxwell stooped to support him.

“We would get there faster,” said Maxwell to the throng.

“Absolutely not,” said the gamekeeper. “We must see to the wound now.”

“Damn it!” John barked at the top of his voice. “I’m the bloody earl! You work for me! And I’m not dead yet, so you’ll do as I bloody say!” Then he concentrated his remaining energy on clinging to Maxwell’s shoulder.

A confused moment later, a horse appeared beside them. John detached from Maxwell and walked the few steps over to it. Maxwell swiftly mounted the horse, and then he lifted John up and placed the earl in front of him. The pain and disorientation of being lifted overtook him, and John struggled to remain conscious. His awareness came in intermittent flickers. People grasped at him. Maxwell shouted something. The next thing he knew, he and Maxwell were flying through the countryside. The icy air roused him. John felt pressure on his abdomen. Maxwell’s arm was steadying him. A wave of relief overtook John, and he knew that, for the moment, he was safe. As he relaxed, the confusion gave way to oblivion.

When he regained consciousness, there was no doubt that he had died. For the second time in three days, John briefly tasted the sweet ecstasy of death. He laughed with giddy delight. What nonsense had he and Maxwell been arguing about earlier? He couldn’t conceive of envy, resentment, or conflict anymore. He looked around and noticed he was still on the horse, and the landscape was still flying past. But it wasn’t the same horse, and it wasn’t the same world. It was a world where winter’s bite did not bother him, where Maxwell’s insults meant nothing to him, a world that was an altogether simpler, friendlier place. This world belonged to him. It was his for the taking. Fear melted from his heart, a fear he didn’t even know was there. He was a new man. Maybe he wasn’t even a man, but something better. He was freedom itself. And then, just like that, he was being torn away. No, not yet! Not yet!

He had the sensation of plummeting. He was plummeting under water. The surface was so close, just out of arm’s reach! He was suffocating, drowning in a mournful black sea. The ghosts of all those souls who’d been lost at sea swam around him. He reached a hand up, up toward the fresh air and the sun. The mournful cries of the lost souls filled his ears, and only a faint glimmer of sunshine penetrated the black waters. Take me back! He cried. He tried to remember the ecstasy, as if by remembering it he might be transported there again. But the harder he tried to remember it, the deeper he plunged. He could not go back, yet he was drowning here. The black water ebbed, but the crushing disappointment lingered. He did not belong here, on earth, in this body, any more than a zebra belonged in a stable.

John unleashed a string of profanities, including one or two colorful phrases he’d heard only in brothels and opium dens.

“Good heavens, and you kiss the countess with that mouth?” teased Maxwell.

“Oh do shut up, Bernard,” John snapped, without a trace of his earlier playfulness. “For once in your fucking life, just shut up. You think you’re so bloody clever.” He wavered in the saddle a little. “I’ll knock that thick skull of yours off your noble shoulders,” he muttered, trailing off indistinctly.

They rode in silence for a while, John alternately sitting up straight and leaning back onto Maxwell. The truth was that he was feeling stronger with each passing minute, but he had to keep up the appearance that he was getting worse. Emotionally, he was getting worse. Every time he died, it

was a little bit harder to come back. He cursed the world for asserting itself where it was so unwelcome. He hated these people who expected him to be John, because he was not John, he was that pure freedom of a moment ago. It crushed him, this lie, this pretending to be a human being.

“You’ll forgive me for speaking again Lord Coventry,” said Maxwell, “but I feel a certain sense of urgency. For a few minutes, I thought you were gone from this world.” John did not protest, but directed his resentment toward Maxwell’s hand on his torso. “I just want to tell you that I am sorry for how I’ve treated you over the years. The truth is that it’s because I envy you. It’s a poor excuse, I know. I have envied you since the day we met, but since that day you have proven yourself to be worthy of all you have. Even of Theodora. That’s why I’ve been such a brute to you. I am sorry. The way I’ve treated you is no way to treat a friend.”

John laughed a nasty, rasping laugh. His body and his voice trembled. With a sardonic smile he asked, “Do you really believe that we’re still friends?”

Maxwell said nothing. John was disappointed that he couldn’t see Maxwell’s face, for he wanted to watch the pain of rejection unfold upon it. He wanted to stab Maxwell and twist the knife. It wasn’t really about Maxwell, though. It was about the bitterness he felt at once again being dragged, kicking and screaming, back onto the stage of this theatrical production that was his life.

~

Clinging to Maxwell’s shoulder as before, John staggered into the physician’s home. Maxwell, Charles and the gamekeeper talked over one another in a chaotic flurry of explanations and excuses. Even though he was perfectly healed, John had no trouble giving a convincing performance. He groaned and gasped as Doctor Linscott led them into his small, dingy office. They laid John on the examination table and he winced with an agony that was not entirely feigned.

“Remove his coat while I fetch my tools,” said the doctor briskly.

John grunted as he struggled against the hands that had reached for his coat. “No!” He exclaimed.

“What now?” cried Maxwell in frustration.

“Out, all of you,” said John weakly, gesturing toward the door. “There are too many people here, I want privacy.”

“Ugh,” scoffed Maxwell.

“It’s alright, as he says gentlemen,” said the doctor. “I’ll take it from here. Thank you.”

The three men filed out and closed the door behind them. John sighed with relief. The doctor began undoing the buttons on John’s shirt. His fingers worked with a young man’s vigor, while only his wrinkles and his snow white hair betrayed his age. As he opened the damp, blood-stained shirt and examined John’s chest, which was perfectly intact, his face took on an expression of grave consternation.

“I don’t understand,” he muttered.

“How much do you make in a year, doctor?” asked John calmly. “One hundred pounds? Two hundred? I’ll give you three hundred if you’ll do as I say.”

“What is the meaning of this?” There was a note of irritation in the physician’s voice, but he did not speak as one who is truly offended.

“I don’t need your services. Though I wouldn’t say no to a spot of that medicinal brandy,” John sat up and nodded toward the bottle on the physician’s desk. “What I need is for you to stay in here as long as is appropriate.” He began buttoning up his shirt. “Then, once enough time has elapsed, you will go out there and tell my dear friends that the wound is a superficial one, and I’ll be as good as new in a day or two. Say whatever you need to say to make it sound medically plausible.”

The doctor started. “You mean this is all some kind of ruse?” he asked in a low voice.

“Obviously.”

“But where did the blood come from?”

“That is precisely the sort of question I am paying you not to ask. And it goes without saying that you would not breathe a word of this to anyone under any circumstances. Do we have a deal?”

The doctor looked at him dubiously. Then he turned and reached for a tumbler on the desk behind him and poured a bit of the brandy into it. Handing the glass to John he said, “Six hundred.”

John frowned. “I’m a rich man, doctor, but I’ve a rich man’s bills to pay,” he said. “Five hundred.”

“Fine. Consider it done,” said the doctor.

“Cheers,” said John, smiling and lifting his glass.

The physician busied himself at his desk for some minutes, apparently attending to his correspondences. John, weary from the day’s exertions and soothed by the brandy, rested on the examination table until he was on the edge of sleep. He was just beginning to drift off when he heard the doctor rise and approach the table. John did not stir. The foul mood still clung to him, and he did not wish to interact with anyone more than was necessary. He sensed the doctor’s eyes upon him, but continued to rest with his eyes closed. Apparently the doctor decided not to rouse his sleeping patient, for he left the room without a word.

John opened his eyes. He looked about the cramped office once more. The walls were of bare, dark wood. A small window afforded a little light. It streamed in and illuminated a skull on the desk, which sat atop several books on anatomy and one on craniometry. The skull stared at him with its vacant eyes. It was like the books on which it rested—cold, clinical, unfeeling. *So, that’s what at the core of each of us*, he thought. *A hollow rock*. He reached for the brandy bottle.

As he sipped from his glass, he noticed that under a small table in the corner of the room there sat an iron safe. He wondered idly what the doctor kept in there. Money, of course. Medical records? Something more sinister? There had been something about the doctor’s manner that John did not trust. It had all been a little too easy. He recalled that Lawrence had made blunt inquiries of the man about poisons. But what if someone had bought the physician’s silence, as was clearly easy enough to do? In that case, whatever sum he had been paid might be in that safe. Perhaps the poison itself might even be in there, if it was valuable and incriminating. Indeed, the poison John had drunk was so subtle and so potent, it was probably some exotic chemical that the doctor would not leave lying about.

John glanced toward the door. Linscott must have told the others that John was resting and ought not to be disturbed. John looked back to the safe. Lock picking had never been one of his strongest magical talents. It was not that he could not do it, but rather that he had a tendency to overdo it. He hesitated. Maybe this time he would get it right. As long as he did not destroy the contents, then no truly irreparable harm could come from it.

He put down the glass. Then he knelt beside the safe and gently touched the key hole. He grazed it very softly, caressing it as he might caress the tenderest parts of a woman’s body.

Gently... gently...

With a bang, the safe jumped and thrust itself back against the wall. John cursed. He listened for footsteps outside the room. Fortunately, he did not hear anyone coming. The safe looked as though it had taken a blow from a giant’s fist. The safe’s door was a concave wreck teetering on a single hinge. John sighed with resignation. Then he eagerly thrust open the deformed door and peered inside. There were banknotes, various contracts and receipts, a deed, and two birth certificates. There was no bottle nor anything that looked like poison.

He opened a crumpled, unmarked envelope and poured out its contents. Into his hand tumbled a single earring. It seemed to be a very fine piece, if it was genuine. It contained two rubies, a circular one at the top and a larger, teardrop-shaped ruby dangling below. Both were framed with diamonds. John held it to the light. Its edges glittered and rainbows danced on its surface. It was a stunning piece of jewelry, one worthy of a queen. He committed every detail to memory. He would draw it as soon as he returned to Croome. Satisfied that he had it in his mind’s eye, he returned the earring to its place.

Then he sat back and eyed the destruction he'd wreaked on the safe. He consoled himself with another glass of brandy, and with the thought that there are few problems in life that money can't solve.

~

"It must be connected."

"But it makes no sense, my lord!" Lawrence lamented.

John was in bed, pretending to convalesce. He'd only been confined to it for a day, per the doctor's false orders and per his household's vehement insistence. Still, one day had been enough for his bones to begin to ache and his muscles to feel tight. It irked him to be confined to his bedroom, which felt smaller the longer he stayed in it. He wished to be up and investigating, for he felt invigorated by this unexpected clue.

"Did you ask the men, too?"

"I did," said Lawrence with a note of exasperation. "None of your guests have even seen the earring before, much less misplaced it."

"Someone must be lying."

"But why would one of your guests use the earring to buy the poison? Why not use bank notes? Why use a piece of jewelry that might be traced back to them?"

"I don't know, but why in blazes would a doctor have a single fabulous earring in his safe?" asked John heatedly. "It can only have been payment for some expensive and probably illegal service."

"It must have been stolen," said Lawrence, shaking his head. "It came from a poor person, a thief or maybe a servant."

"But that is even more unlikely than its coming from a rich person!" John exclaimed. "Surely the earring was worth more than the doctor would have asked, and a poor person would not relinquish the excess so carelessly. Besides, as you say, no one has lost an earring."

"It might be one of the countess'. Even though she does not recognize it, she might have simply inherited it but never noticed it among all the other jewelry."

"Theodora is careful and observant. She loves Croome and its treasures enough that she married me to be with them. If she says it's not part of her collection, it's unlikely that she's mistaken."

The valet sighed. "Maybe it's not connected to this business."

"It has to be connected!"

"Now we're going in circles, my lord."

John groaned. "How much would you wager that if we searched Nathan Hargrave's things we would find the mate to that earring?"

"If the boy is clever he's hidden it well."

"I'd wager that he's not that clever."

"He's clever enough to know that if you press charges, you'll have no case. His shooting you was, to all appearances, purely accidental."

"Hmph," John grunted. "Still, a brush with the law could teach him a lesson."

"If you call for a formal investigation, the police will ask how it is that you drew a sketch of the earring *before* it was found among Nathan Hargrave's things."

John rolled over and buried his face in a pillow.

"I'm sorry, my lord. But you said you did not want to get the police involved."

John let out a long, muffled groan. It gave him some relief to unleash his frustration into the dark, silencing embrace of the pillow. Then he rolled over and stared up at the gold and scarlet canopy that topped his four poster bed.

"Thomas Hargrave must be involved somehow," he said, thinking aloud. "I suppose he thinks that if Charles took over my affairs, Charles would put the family fortune where I won't. It seems odd that he should put his son up to the foul deed, though."

“Yes, that does seem odd,” Lawrence agreed. “If only we could get the truth out of the young man.”

“I could make him talk,” said John darkly to the canopy above him.

Lawrence looked at him with apprehension. “Please do not think of such things, my lord. You need rest. Allow me to make some inquiries among the servants. I have a hunch that one of them might be involved.”

John threw him a skeptical look. “I don’t doubt that most of the servants despise me, but surely my noble friends despise me more.”

Lawrence shook his head. “I do not think it’s a matter of despising you.”

“Of course it is!” cried John. “I was already one of the most hated men in England even before I weaseled my way into the aristocracy. Now my infamy has reached international proportions.”

“Whether or not you are one of the most hated men in England, you are without a doubt one of the richest,” Lawrence insisted. “Whoever is behind this has a material motive. It is someone clever and desperate.”

“Well, that rules out the rich,” said John. He propped himself up on one elbow and turned toward Lawrence. “My guests are here for two more days. I’ll give you one of them. If you’ve made no progress by tomorrow night, then I will take matters into my own hands.”

“What does that mean?” asked Lawrence with agitation.

“It means I will extract the full truth from Nathan Hargrave.”

“Lord Coventry, please—”

John held up a hand as he rested back onto his pillows. “I don’t want to hear your protestations, Lawrence. You say this person has a material motive. Find it.”

~

Edgar Lawrence lost no time. The following day was New Year’s Eve, and while the Coventry’s celebration would be a quiet and intimate affair, most of the servants were nevertheless busy with special preparations. Lawrence, however, had finished his essential duties by midday, and so he devoted the afternoon to that delicate task with which he’d been charged.

He peered down the dark corridor toward the staircase that led up to the kitchens. He listened intently. In front of him was the room of interest. Lawrence had a theory. It was entirely speculative, and he still could not guess the suspect’s motive. But the theory fit with the evidence they had.

Lawrence stepped into the little room. He turned round and felt along the door jamb above him until he discovered a small key. He pulled it down and locked himself in. There were two beds, and he was not sure which bed belonged to his suspect. With a sigh, he simply picked one. With dismay, he saw that space under the bed was positively stuffed with odds and ends. He began to pick through the trunks, articles of clothing, and various nick-knacks. He was rifling through a trunk that contained clothes, a small sewing kit, and a stuffed fox toy when he heard someone bounding quickly down the stairs. Lawrence hastily slid the trunk under the bed and leapt to the other side of it, out of sight of the door. Even though the door was locked, someone might still look through the keyhole. He crouched, still and silent, as they tried the knob. The lock held. Lawrence scarcely dared to breathe. The person on the other side of the door tried the doorknob again, rattling the door in frustration. Then they bounded back up the stairs as quickly as they had come.

Lawrence feared that his time was limited. From where he sat on the far side of the bed, he spotted a wooden box that was slightly larger than a large book. He pulled it out and began rifling through the papers inside. They appeared to be bundles of letters. His heart sank. These letters were his best chance at finding the motive he sought, but it would take him ages to read them all. Even if he spent all afternoon reading them as fast as he could, he would have time for nothing else and it might well prove fruitless. He dumped out the contents of the box onto the bed. He fingered through the

bundles of letters, kneeling beside the bed as if he were saying a prayer. Perhaps he ought to say one. As he held the box, trying to decide what to do, he noticed that the outer base and the inner base were rather far apart. He and spread his hand out over the inner base. It wiggled ever so slightly. The box had a false bottom.

He tugged and struggled with the bottom, damaging his fingernails as he tried to extract it. Intermittently, he glanced nervously at the door, straining to listen for footsteps. Finally, he managed to pull out the false base. Out tumbled a single item. It consisted of several very large sheets of paper folded together. He unfolded them. At first, he had no idea what he was looking at. Soon it became clear that it was a map. It was, in fact, the most extraordinary map he'd ever seen.

~

John never felt more alone than when he was surrounded by happy people. His house guests were seated about the parlor room, chatting pleasantly. Henry and Martin Coventry, aged eleven and eight, were running about. The Hargraves sat as far from John as possible while still remaining in the group. Thomas Hargrave, unspeakably chagrined by his son's carelessness, had offered ample restitution and had offered to leave Croome at once, but John would not hear of either. To the astonishment of all, John had magnanimously declared that no harm was done and the matter should be forgotten. Now he sat in an armchair by the fire, torn between his desire to be alone and his desire to ferret out the would-be murderer. His servants and his guests had insisted that he need not entertain on New Year's Eve, just two days after he'd been shot, but he was determined to solve the mystery before the guests began to leave.

The last rays of sunlight were sinking below the horizon. The rain clouds that had been gathering all day threatened to break at any moment. The wind howled in wordless fury, the harbinger of a coming storm. It was unheeded by the guests, who were enthralled in their trivial chatter.

Suddenly, Martin Coventry seemed to materialize out of thin air beside him. John started a little when he noticed the boy lingering by the arm of his chair.

"Daddy, who decided that the new year would begin in the middle of winter?" he asked, looking up with wide, expectant eyes.

"I believe that would be the Romans."

"Who are the Romans?"

"An ancient and complicated people."

"Why?"

John sighed. This inquisitiveness was a new habit of Martin's.

"Because they created a lot of good things, but they also destroyed a lot of good things in the process."

"Why?"

"Because they were greedy."

"Why?"

"I don't know," said John brusquely. "Why don't you go ask your mother."

Martin looked down and shuffled his feet. He seemed afraid to say more to his father, but unwilling to leave his side. Bits of the conversations happening around them drifted to his ears. Charles and Thomas Hargrave were discussing a recent worker's strike at a factory in Manchester. Alice, Theodora and Maxwell were complaining about a mutual friend who had apparently concealed something from them.

"Daddy, can I give you a hug?"

John gave a weak smile. He leaned forward and briefly embraced the boy. His children's affections were distasteful to him. He was afraid to get too close, knowing that they would one day age and die like everything else he had ever loved.

"I'm glad you didn't die the other day," said Martin bluntly.

John leaned back in his chair. "I'm happy for you," he said.

"Can you tell me about it again?"

"Not now, Martin."

"Why not?"

"I'm tired. Your mother can tell you about it."

"But I want to hear you tell it."

"I've already told you I don't want to answer your questions," John snapped. "Why are you still here? Go amuse yourself somewhere else."

Looking chastened, Martin slunk away as quietly as he had come.

Just then, John heard quick, heavy footsteps in the hall outside. He looked up to see Lawrence striding toward him. The valet's damp hair and face told John that he had been outside, and that it was beginning to rain.

"I must speak to you at once my lord," he said furtively. There was a grave urgency in his voice, underscored by his somewhat disheveled appearance.

John nodded slowly, taking in the sight of him. "You've learned something?"

"Yes," said Lawrence, his eyes flashing with excitement.

"Very good. Go ahead. I'll meet you in my study presently."

Lawrence hesitated. John raised an eyebrow.

"Please don't delay, my lord. I don't like the idea of you walking about on your own." Then he leaned forward and in a whisper he added, "Your life is in greater danger than ever."

"Yes, yes," said John with a wave of his hand as if to dispel a gnat. "I'll be but a moment."

Lawrence bowed and walked away, attempting to smooth his rumpled hair as he did.

A few minutes later, John sauntered casually up the stairs. The truth was that he had no reason to make Lawrence wait except that he did not like to be ordered about by a servant. As he slowly plodded upward, he dragged a finger along the underside of the banister. To his great pleasure, his finger showed no sign of dust.

He had to pass his bedroom to reach the study. As he did so, he was suddenly struck with a craving for tobacco. He would fetch his pipe and smoke while Lawrence revealed his findings. Languidly, John slipped into the bedroom.

The room was dark and cold. Only the hall behind him threw a little light into it. The four-poster bed cloaked in its fineries emerged into the half-light like a great wrinkled beast. Rain drummed on the roof and tapped eagerly at the windows. John shuddered. He pulled his coat about him to keep out the draft. He strode defiantly toward the bedside table and probed about it for his pipe. Frustrated at not finding it, he magically lit the fireplace and the lamps with a single impatient wave of his hand. The familiar scarlet and gold room sprang into being, and generations of Coventries gazed down at him from their noble canvases. He proceeded to search another table, the mantelpiece, and the pocket of his smoking jacket with no luck. He then turned toward the large chest at the foot of his bed. He opened the chest. It took him a couple of seconds to comprehend what he saw there.

In the very instant that he recognized that he was looking at a man, the man sprang up and was upon him. John felt a cold, icy sensation spread across his throat. He waved a hand, but he was dazed and his magic stalled. The icy region began to burn. He felt several more cold, sharp impacts in his torso as he tried to push away the groping fiend. Time slowed as a long, piercing pain traveled up his stomach. He looked with bewilderment into the eyes of Davies, the sullen groundskeeper. John gasped for air as his mouth began to taste of blood, and his field of vision began to shrink. He sank to his knees, and watched the groundskeeper, bloody knife in hand, turn toward the bedroom door. The last thing John saw before the darkness took him was the ashen face of young Martin Coventry peeking out from the doorway.

Theodora was never happier than when she was in the company of friends. The ball a week before had been exhilarating, but now she was grateful to be sitting in intimate conversation with Alice and Lord Maxwell, just as they had done so often growing up. All her friends were dear to her, but she was quite certain that if she, Alice, and Bernard were condemned to spend the rest of their lives only with each other for company, they would not mind, and perhaps would be the happier for it.

“She is simply insufferable,” Alice was saying with annoyance. “Only *she* would have the gall to postpone a charity clothing drive out of the certainty that the thing couldn’t possibly carry on without her.”

Bernard sighed sympathetically. “Some people simply insist upon being the center of attention.”

“You must hold it without her,” said Theodora firmly.

“But Reverend Bates will not hear of it,” Alice lamented. “He always takes her side.”

“Then you must show him that he is wrong to underestimate you,” Theodora pressed. “Insist upon holding it in her absence. A little unpopularity in the short run is a small price to pay for the respect you deserve in the long run.” She reached out and clasped her sister’s hand where it rested on the arm of the sofa.

With a start, Theodora suddenly noticed Martin hovering between the armchair and the sofa. He seemed to be breathing heavily, as if he’d been running. Nevertheless, his face was pale, in livid contrast with his raven hair.

“Martin,” she gasped. “Dear, you startled me.”

He clutched her arm and tugged on it.

“What is it, Martin?” asked her sister kindly.

He slipped between them to stand in front of Theodora’s chair, and continued tugging on his mother’s arm, as if to lead her somewhere.

“Use your words, Martin,” said Theodora.

He looked at her and scrunched up his face a little. “I think Daddy’s dead,” he said.

The three adults gaped at him in horror.

“You mustn’t joke about such things, Martin,” said Bernard sternly.

“It’s not a joke!” Martin cried, and he balled his fists and angrily stomped one foot. Then the words came tumbling out of him. “It was Mr. Davies, he was hiding in a chest in Daddy’s bedroom. He had a big knife and Daddy opened the chest and Mr. Davies stabbed him again and again, and then they both saw me so I ran away.”

Theodora felt light-headed. Bernard was on his feet. He glanced at her with concern, and then ran toward the stairs.

“Go find Mrs. Sutter in the kitchen, Martin,” said Theodora. With a hug and a kiss, she sent him off. Then she, too, hastened up the stairs, her sister close behind.

When she arrived, Bernard was standing over her husband’s body. Theodora had not heard Thomas and Charles, but they must have noticed the commotion, for they stepped into the bedroom behind her. The sight of the bloody corpse, contorted like a rag doll, took her breath away.

“Come, Theodora,” said Charles, bringing a hand to her elbow. “You mustn’t see this.”

She shook him off and walked closer to the body.

“Oh sister,” breathed Alice. She linked her arm in Theodora’s, but didn’t try to pull her away. She understood that Theodora needed to look. There was a tremendous amount of blood. It covered John from the neck down, and flooded the carpet around him in a puddle. A gash across his throat gaped like a hideous mouth. She struggled to remain composed, and listened to the steady patter of the rain against the roof. John’s eyes were closed and his face looked calm, even peaceful. Amid the whirlpools of emotion churning within her, the predominant sentiment she felt was relief. To be sure, a

gruesome crime had been committed, but at least now John was released from his misery. They both were.

A flicker of movement somewhere about the body caught her attention. She peered down. Was she mistaken, or was the gashed throat no longer hanging open as it had been a moment earlier? As she searched for the wound, the whole body seemed to convulse. John rolled over to one side, and let out a series of ragged, choking coughs.

Alice screamed. She let go of Theodora and began to back away.

“My God,” said one of the men.

“I’ll fetch a doctor,” said another.

A strangled gasp emanated from John. A door slammed. Theodora turned round just in time to see Thomas backing away from the bedroom doors. An iron chain was wrapping its way around the handles of the double doors like silvery snake. More chains appeared, impossibly stretching across the doors, until the whole doorway looked as though it had been caught in an intricate iron web. Theodora could not believe her eyes. Stunned and bewildered, she looked down at John, who was still on the floor.

He was propped up on one arm, his other arm outstretched toward the doors. Then he retracted the outstretched arm and resumed lying on his side, cradling himself and coughing violently. Behind her, she heard Thomas trying the doors. The chains rattled. Alice shrieked again. John waved one hand and her shrieks became muffled. Theodora looked up and saw that Alice had some kind of gag in her mouth. Charles rushed to her and they removed it quickly, but after that Alice remained quiet. She was as pale as a ghost. All five of them watched the twitching, blood-stained earl in silent horror. John’s coughing had subsided into heavy breathing. Each breath sounded wet and viscous. The rain lashed against the roof, and a thunder clap resounded from somewhere beyond.

Slowly, he hoisted himself up into a sitting position. “Well,” he gasped, “I suppose there’s no need to solve the mystery now.”

“What mystery?” asked Theodora.

“How he charmed the queen, for one,” muttered Bernard under his breath.

“Not the right thing to say, Maxwell!” roared John, and with a wave of his hand, the fire leapt out of the fireplace and spread about the room at an unnatural speed. The curtains, the tables, even his own paintings, began to burn. Everything that could catch fire did—except the doors. Alice screamed again.

“Scream one more time and I will wipe those pretty lips off your face,” hissed John with a warning finger. Alice whimpered and clung tightly to Charles’ arm. Again, Theodora felt light-headed.

John stood, pulling himself up with the help of one of the bedposts. “This is the third time this week that someone has tried to kill me,” he pronounced. He spat a gob of blood. More blood still stained his lips and teeth. “Incidentally, it’s the third time that they’ve succeeded, but that is neither here nor there.” He paused and coughed a little. “Surely one of you is behind it. On the one hand, seeing as how the thing I was most afraid of—the exposure of my magic—has now happened, there’s really no reason to bother with the whole business.” The room was growing hot. Theodora began to sweat, and her mind frantically searched for some means of escape.

“But,” John continued slowly, through clenched, blood-stained teeth, “I want to know the truth. I hardly think that either Nathan Hargrave or Samuel Davies was the mastermind behind the whole endeavor. Who was it?!” he bellowed furiously. “Which of you thought you could get the better of me?” His eyes were wild and he trembled with rage.

Alice collapsed into Charles’ arms. John waved his hand. A wet cloth materialized on her forehead, and a fan appeared beside her, flapped by an invisible hand. Alice blinked opened her eyes, but her expression was vacant and confused.

“Oh dear me, we can’t have this,” said John in mocking sympathy. He took a couple of quick steps toward her and bent over her, gazing into her wide, glassy eyes. “Not when you’re my favorite suspect. Tell me, Lady Alice, was it you?”

“Get away from her, you fiend!” cried Theodora, and she pulled him back by the arm. As she released him, John looked down at the spot where she’d touched him in consternation, as if surprised to find that he could be touched.

A moment later, he resumed his unnerving playfulness. “Shouldn’t you be swooning, too, Theodora?” he teased. “Like a proper lady?”

Her hard, gray eyes narrowed. She looked down at the little man who had taken so much from her. In a way, it was a relief to learn that he was some sort of devilish monster. It explained many things. The more he revealed his own powers, the more relief she felt. A part of her wanted to see how terrible he really was.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she said in a cold, steady voice.

“If that’s true, my darling,” he responded mildly, “then you really don’t know me at all.”

~

Lawrence twiddled his thumbs in nervous agitation. He sat across from the earl’s desk, gazing at the empty chair before him. The wind and rain howled outside, rattling the old mansion from time to time. Lord Coventry should have been there already. The grandfather clock by the door ticked obtrusively. He glanced at it, trying to calculate how many minutes it had been since he’d spoken with his master. Had it really been very long, or did the minutes simply feel longer, given his present state of worry? Should he leave and investigate? That seemed imprudent, for he had no idea where Lord Coventry might have gone. Most likely, the earl had simply been engaged in a conversation from which he could not easily excuse himself.

The doorknob sounded behind him, and the door to the study opened. Lawrence turned eagerly in his chair. However, the person who stood in the doorway was not John Coventry. Lawrence’s heart plummeted into his stomach. It was Eunice, the older maid-servant. She had a sweet, unassuming appearance, being short, stout, and a little dowdy. This evening, though, her face was set and hard.

“Edgar,” she said stiffly.

“Eunice,” he responded with a nod.

She entered the room, closing the door behind her. Lawrence stood up from his chair. They eyed each other cautiously, and a silent understanding passed between them then.

“Can I help you with something?” Lawrence asked innocently.

“Yes, I think you can,” she responded with equal innocence. “Some rascal has been rifling through my personal things.”

Lawrence made a half-hearted effort to look surprised, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Where was the earl? If only he would come now!

“I’ve lost something,” Eunice continued. “And I’d like very much to have it returned to me.”

“Perhaps you should report it to the authorities,” said Lawrence.

Eunice gave a sad, knowing smile. “I’d rather simply ask you to give it back.”

Lawrence stood up straight. Amid the storm outside, an ominous clap of thunder resounded. Even if she was only an old woman, she was murderous, so his position was not a good one. At least she did not know that the map was in his pocket, just a few feet from her grasp. He decided to stall. Surely Lord Coventry would appear at any moment, and it was for him to decide what was to be done with her.

“How did you know?” he asked, abandoning all pretext of ignorance.

She sneered disdainfully. “You think yourself very subtle, don’t you? You think I haven’t noticed your long conversations with Lord Coventry this week, or your pointed inquiries with the

servants? A few inquiries of my own readily confirmed that you had been lurking about the women's quarters this afternoon."

Lawrence said nothing.

"What I am wondering," she continued, "is how did *you* know?"

Lawrence unconsciously glanced at the clock, and then took a deep breath. He just had to keep talking.

"Well," he said, straining to maintain his composure, "mainly, it was the earring you gave the doctor." She waited, with expressionless eyes, for him to go on. "You probably weren't expecting Lord Coventry to search the doctor's safe." As she continued to listen patiently, his voice grew steadier and more confident.

"Lord Coventry had already urged me to help him find the person responsible for poisoning his wine at the Christmas ball. But we had no idea where to begin. When he searched the doctor's safe, after he was shot, he found that ruby earring and was convinced that it was connected to the poisoning. It was still not much evidence to go on. That the doctor had been paid with jewels rather than bank notes suggested little to me, except that perhaps the culprit had made their decision in a hurry, or else had encountered some difficulty in trying to sell the earrings. I guessed that the culprit was a probably woman, since a woman would be more likely to have easier access to jewels than to notes.

"So we were looking for a desperate woman. Not very specific. Neither Lady Coventry nor any of the guests recognized the earring. Of course, one of them might have been lying, but there were other reasons to suspect a servant rather than a guest. A servant might easily have handled Lord Coventry's wine glass without being noticed. Only the servants knew that Nathan Hargrave was desperate for money, for we'd kept it secret among ourselves that he'd been caught with the earl's cash box. A servant would have just as much reason to act this week as any of the guests, for, with all of Lord Coventry's enemies under one roof, suspicion would surely fall on one of those enemies. So it seemed quite reasonable to surmise that a servant had poisoned the wine, and a servant had paid the young Hargrave to shoot Lord Coventry. The obvious questions then, were: first, how might a servant come by such a valuable piece of jewelry? And second, why might a servant want to kill the earl?

"As regards the first question, theft is the most obvious answer. But again, no one had reported the earring stolen. Then it occurred to me that theft was not the only explanation. It could have been a gift.

"There are, perhaps, few of us left at Croome who remember the days when you were not only Lady Elizabeth's lady's maid, but also Lord William's mistress. It would not be out of character for Lord William to dote extravagantly on his mistress. What better gift than red rubies, the color of love and passion?

"So, my theory began to form. Lord William gave you the ruby earrings long ago. You hung onto them all these years for sentimental reasons. Now, in your desperation to do away with Lord John this week, while his enemies were still in town, you used one earring to purchase a high-quality poison from doctor Linscott. When the poison failed to do its work, you used the other earring to pay Nathan Hargrave to shoot him, such that it would appear to be a hunting accident. However, that failed, too.

Lawrence glanced at the clock. The earl was late. Very late. "So I had a suspect, but I still lacked a motive. Why kill Lord John now, when he'd already been the earl for three years and had been a part of the household for many more? If you simply hated him, why not kill him sooner? If it was about money, what could a servant possibly stand to gain from his death? It was quite a stroke of luck that I noticed the false bottom in your box, and came upon that absolutely unique map.

"I really must commend you on such an astoundingly meticulous piece of workmanship. Surely, it would put many a cartographer to shame. A map of the estate, with hundreds of little circles, some open, others filled in. It took me some outdoor investigation to deduce that each circle was an oak tree, but my little expedition was well worth it. You can imagine my surprise when I found that at the actual trees which had been filled in on your map, there was a knot in the tree, and beneath it a little mound of

earth. In some cases the digging had clearly been done long ago, for the mound was subtle in shape and grown over with grass. It also took me some time to decipher your little scribbles denoting oak trees with multiple knots and those with none. It took me longer still to appreciate just how close you are to finishing your work, for most of the circles on the map were filled in. Still, by the time night and rain began to fall, I had quite worked the whole thing out.

“Lord William must have once confided to you that something of great value was buried beneath the knot of an oak tree somewhere on the grounds. Judging by the progress you’ve made, I doubt that you waited for him to die before you began to look for it. However, I do doubt that you did the digging yourself. It would be more prudent to enlist one of the gardeners. Perhaps it was Samuel Davies, the groundskeeper. No one would think twice if they saw Davies digging beneath a tree, and if anyone noticed the mounds of earth, Davies could attribute them to groundhogs.

“Finally, the whole mystery became clear. You two had been searching for Lord William’s buried treasure for many years. And now John Coventry proposed a massive landscaping project that would involve digging a canal, removing some trees, and moving others. At best, his work would merely require a redrawing of your map, or would interfere with your digging. At worst, a workman might discover the treasure you had worked so hard to find. And now, this week was the last time all his rivals would be gathered under one roof before the work began. So indeed, it was urgent to do away with Lord Coventry, not only this year, or this week, but in fact tonight.”

Finally, Lawrence stopped, breathing heavily from the exhilaration of his speech. It might have been his imagination, but he thought he smelled smoke. Perhaps it was only a whiff of tobacco smoke from Lord Coventry’s things. Eunice was in front of him, leaning against the desk, her arms crossed. She was smiling sadly. She shook her head, her bun of graying hair shaking to and fro with it.

“It was gold, he said,” she stated calmly. “Bricks upon bricks of pure gold. I could tell when he was lying to me, and I am certain that he was not lying then. He said it was in case there was ever a revolution in England, like the one in France. The rebels might sack his house or redistribute its fineries, but they would never have his buried gold. He would always be able to come back and fetch it at his leisure.”

Lawrence did not speak for a moment. The rain was coming down in sheets now.

“Why didn’t you sell the earrings?” he asked, for the question had been nagging at him.

She shrugged. “I tried. It was a rather last-minute decision to even try to kill the earl. Mostly it was Davies’ idea. I tried to sell the earrings, but the jeweler would only offer me half what they were worth. So I paid the doctor with one earring. A couple of days later, I managed to find another jeweler who made a better offer, so I sold that one and paid Nathan Hargrave less, in notes. The lad had been quite desperate for money, as he’d taken to playing cards. Like his father, he travels in social circles above his station,” she smiled wryly. “And so he’d gotten himself into quite a pretty bit of debt, playing with boys who had more cash to spare than he did.”

Lawrence felt unnerved to see sweet, gentle Eunice speak so calmly of plotting murder. Even now, when he knew for a fact that she had, a part of him struggled to believe it.

“There’s enough to share, Edgar,” she said, drawing closer toward him. “You, me, and Samuel, we could split it three ways and still walk away unimaginably rich.”

Again, the scent of smoke drifted to his nose. The hairs on the back of his neck began to stand up. He realized with alarm how long it had been since he’d spoken with John Coventry. Far too long. A new thought dawned on him and filled him with horror. It wasn’t only he who had been stalling. She had been stalling, too.

“What have you done?” he asked in undisguised panic. “Where is that smoke coming from? Where is the earl?” He looked toward the door, and then back to her, unsure which to pursue.

“Join us, Edgar,” she pleaded. “Say you’ll join us.”

His lips became a thin line, and he shook his head. He turned toward the door. As he did so, he felt a sharp, arresting pain in the left side of his neck, which shot down toward his left arm. Some

titanic strength within him seemed to take over, for without thinking, he grabbed a heavy candlestick that was on the desk and brought it down over her head with all his might. One blow was enough. She crumpled to the ground, a hideous bloody hole visible at the top of her head. There was a small knife in her hand. Lawrence struggled to stay upright. He hurriedly put his palm on the spot where she had stabbed him in the neck, applying as much pressure as he could to the profusely bleeding wound. He staggered toward the door and threw it open. A wall of smoke hit him. He managed to take a couple of steps into the hallway before dizziness overtook him. Looking down the hallway, he saw a great crowd of people gathered outside Lord Coventry's bedroom. He called out. To his immense relief, a few faces turned in his direction before he sank to the floor and lost consciousness.

~

Theodora was quite sure she was losing her mind. Perhaps she'd already lost it. She wanted to tear off her dress or jump out the window, for the heat was unbearable. The flames rose higher and higher. Panic and smoke tore at her throat. She felt as if she were breathing gravel. Outside in the hallway, there was shouting and the occasional battering of the bedroom doors.

She had to remind herself that it was John who'd gone mad. She still had her wits about her, for the moment. Again and again, she sought Bernard's eyes through the smoky haze. His eyes reflected back to her her own perplexity and despair. She wanted to run to him, but she dared not touch him for fear of what John might do. "Do something!" she mouthed silently to him. He glared at her. "What?" his lips said, and he pointed to John, as if that explained everything. She shrugged and glared at him in return, silently repeating her command.

Her husband stood on the bed, clinging to one of the bedposts like a drunkard. He was raving, as he had been for some time. The light and shadow of the swirling flames danced across his face.

"I hate you people. Not just you people, all people. Rich people, poor people," he swung his arm about as if to indicate the whole earth. "I even hate my own children. We would all be better off dead, wouldn't we? Heaven knows the earth would be better off without us. We tell ourselves that life is an adventure. Bollocks! Adventure is just a euphemism for hell. Perhaps beneath our feet there is some sinner stretched on the rack, the devil's arm halfway up his arse, and the poor bastard's screaming, 'It's an adventure!'"

With a crash, a burning armoire in the corner of the room caved in on itself. "John," said Bernard desperately, his voice hoarse, "It was I! Listen, it was I who tried to kill you! I've always hated you, and I simply couldn't stand the sight of you any longer!"

John grinned broadly and looked down at Bernard from where he stood on the bed. "How did I die the first time?" he said pleasantly through his red smile.

Bernard looked up at him with furrowed brows.

John spoke to him with excessive condescension, as if he were teaching a child to count. "I told you I've died three times this week. Once by stabbing, once by shooting. What was the first one?"

Bernard faltered. He opened his mouth but said nothing.

John laughed. "An admirable effort, my dear Maxwell."

"For God's sake, man!" cried Thomas, "if one of us were guilty, that person would surely have come forward by now! You m—" He began to say more, but was then overtaken by a fit of coughing.

John appeared not to hear him. "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live forever?" he asked to the room, leaning on the bedpost. "I'll tell you what it's like. It's just like this. Being trapped with a maniac, in a room that's on fire. Now just imagine this feeling, but forever. You can't die. You can't leave. What can you do? You can try to reason with the maniac, but that doesn't work. You can try to make peace with your situation, but that doesn't work either. Because at the end of the day, even if you know you're stuck in this room forever, you're still afraid of death. You can tell a

monkey he can't die, but you put him into a room that's on fire and he'll still panic like any other monkey."

Outside the bedroom, there was a renewed round of pounding on the doors. Alice moaned where she lay prostrate on the floor, Charles by her side. Behind John, a painting of a sunny landscape was being consumed. The flaming pieces leapt out of the frame and fluttered gently downward like soft feathers.

"I thought what made my life so terrible was the cycle of love and loss," John continued. "Outliving my lovers and my children, you know. But it's not the loss that's the really terrible part. The terrible part is the fact that the love was just a damned illusion all along. There was not one single truly happy moment in any of it. I thought I was happy, but I was merely ignoring that little note of fear that was always there. You want to know the truth?" he asked his dumbstruck audience, as he wiped sweat from his brow. "The absurd truth is that I am afraid of death. Imagine it! Unable to die, and yet afraid of death! That's the only explanation for this unceasing anguish. The fire was always there. There's no such thing as happiness, because the fire is always there..." John trailed off.

He was the picture of madness, with his disheveled, bloody clothes, his abstract gaze, and in the way he alternately slumped against and swung about the bed post. He was horrifying to look at, a gross perversion of the exuberant young artist she had married. There was not a trace of that man left in him. What stood before her was a monster in her husband's skin. Theodora sank to the floor. Her head was pounding from the smoke and the shock, and she felt she was on the verge of swooning.

"You know it's the truth!" he raved on. "Your enemy is not death but the fear of it! For death only strikes once, but the fear of death strikes a thousand tiny blows in every moment. You think that I'm the devil, but the devil is in you! The devil is your fear! It is this one lie, the ultimate lie, the lie that you are happy to be alive. I am not the devil, I am the harbinger of truth!"

Theodora's strength ebbed, and she again looked around for Bernard. The smoke was so thick that she could not see the corners of the room. She discerned something large skulking somewhere in the smoke behind the bed.

"Can't you see that I'm liberating you from your fear of death? You ought to be thanking me. Just give up! Admit that you've lost! Oh my dear friends, if only you knew how good it feels to admit that death will always get the better of us! It doesn't matter who tried to kill me. We're all dying. Even me. Especially me!" He cackled strangely.

John was suddenly propelled off the bed and onto the floor, where he lay like a rag doll. Bernard was standing on the bed, a bloody poker in his hand. He jumped down and proceeded to beat John savagely with it. Each blow landed with an unnatural crunch. He pounded on the earl, while the household pounded on the bedroom doors from outside. Then Bernard threw down the poker and ran to Theodora. He held her drooping frame in his arms.

"If we die tonight, I'll die holding you," he said passionately. She brought his face to hers, and they exchanged a long, slow kiss. Their mouths were dry and their eyes and noses leaked from the smoke, but in that moment they were transported to some heavenly state where no amount of agony could touch them. Relief washed over her like a tidal wave, even though her body remained cracked and broken. She fought through the pain and confusion that threatened to overwhelm her, and found the strength to hold him close.

A loud crash pulled them from their absorption. Through the haze she saw that the doors had been broken down, and the chains had fallen. Swiftly, Bernard carried her across the room, while she clasped her arms behind his neck. They crossed the threshold through the splintered remains of the doors. The fresh air filled her, and she was surrounded by a clamor of voices.

"This woman needs a doctor!"

"Water, we need more water!"

"Lord Maxwell, thank God!"

"Get out, all of you, out!"

“Where is the earl? Where is Lord Coventry?”

At this last inquiry, Theodora’s whole body quivered with fury. She thrust herself forward in Bernard’s arms. “LET HIM BURN!” she shrieked. “LET HIM BURN!!”

~ June 16, 1856 ~

The cabbie stopped for the clean-shaven young man with the chestnut hair. Coming and going passengers bustled about the country railway station, while the train patiently billowed occasional puffs of smoke.

“Where to, sir?” the cabbie asked as he hastened to help the stranger with his trunk.

“Croome Court,” the young man replied, already hauling the trunk into the dog-cart himself.

“Not a problem,” said the cabbie. “Just so you know, sir, that’s about 13 miles from here. A bit of a ride.”

“I am aware,” replied his fare in a distracted voice. “I’m in no particular hurry. I’m sure whatever you charge is fine.”

“Just so, sir,” said the cabbie crisply as he climbed into his seat. He wished all his passengers were so agreeable.

They rattled their way along the quiet country road, past sleepy houses and sprawling meadows strewn with colorful wildflowers that swayed in the breeze. The sun burst through patchy clouds.

“Beautiful weather we’re having today,” commented the cabbie. “Best we’ve had in weeks.”

“You don’t say,” said the other. “Good timing, I suppose.”

The little carriage jerked slightly as one wheel surmounted a bump in the road.

“It is a bit chilly though,” added the young man.

“That’s true enough, especially when the wind picks up,” the cabbie agreed. “My grandfather had a name for days like this. ‘Sneaky cold,’ he called it.”

“Sneaky cold,” the other repeated quietly.

They lapsed into silence again. The horse’s steady plodding accompanied the scenery, which was beginning to grow monotonous. Somewhere in the distance, a lone dog barked at some unseen disturbance.

“So, what brings you to Croome Court, if I may ask?”

“I have some business with the earl.”

The cabbie waited to see whether the young man had anything to add. Seeing that he did not, he replied, “Of course, I didn’t mean to pry, sir. Just curious whether you know what you’re in for. The earl being what he is, and all,” he said mysteriously.

“Oh?” asked his fare with interest. “And what is he?”

“Well sir,” the cabbie began. “You know about the fire.” The two were seated back-to-back, so the cabbie could not see the young man’s expression.

“I know he was burned and disfigured in a fire ten years ago.”

“Quite so. He hasn’t shown an inch of skin in public since. Wears a hood that covers his face.”

“He does go about in public, then?”

“Well, less and less over the years, as I understand it. In the beginning, though, the whole mystery made him more popular than ever. The well-to-do wanted to visit him. Ambitious young men wanted to work with him. People wanted to know if the rumors were true. If he really was a madman, or maybe something worse.”

“Worse?”

Again, the cabbie leaned in close and spoke softly. “There are some folk who say he sold his soul to the devil.”

The young stranger chuckled. “A colorful fancy of superstitious people.”

“Well, you may say so, but there must have been something that drove the countess to leave with the children after that fire,” said the cabbie darkly. “Superstitious or no, all folk who meet him agree he’s a queer fellow.”

“I fail to see how a little eccentricity of character puts a man in league with the devil.”

“Well, maybe you’ll hear the stories while you’re in town, if you’re staying in town. Strange things happen at Croome. And strange people visit.” Then the cabbie hastily added, “Not meaning you, of course, sir. Other people. People like that old hag.”

“What old hag?”

“A woman who visits him from time to time, or at least she used to. I drove her there once or twice. She wasn’t very old, most like. But let’s just say she wasn’t a pretty thing. A foul-mouth and a drunk, too. Lots of folk said she was a witch.”

“Do you believe she was a witch?”

It was the cabbie’s turn to chuckle. “No sir,” he said. “Between you and me? I’d wager she’s the only woman in England willing to take that ugly face of his to bed.”

The other didn’t reply. The cabbie’s intimate demeanor changed. “Begging your pardon sir, I shouldn’t speak so freely. You ought to meet the man and decide for yourself. I just thought, well, since you’re young, and not from around here, someone ought to warn you to take care.”

“You are not the first person who has warned me to take care.”

“Right then. Well, I wish you the best of luck with your, uh, what did you say your business was?”

“I didn’t,” said the young man. Again, they lapsed into silence, and remained silent for most of the journey.

It was more than two hours before they finally approached the long drive leading to Croome Court. When they reached the point where the country road met the drive, the cabbie noticed a young man with raven hair sitting at the base of a tree, drawing with a stick in the dirt. The cabbie tipped his hat to the youth, who peered up at the two of them. As the cabbie passed him and began to turn toward the drive up to the house, his fare called for him to halt. The cabbie pulled on the reins, and waited while the raven-haired fellow clambered into the little carriage beside the other. Then they continued on their way.

“Martin,” said his fare warmly.

“Hello Henry,” said the other.

“What are you doing out here? Why didn’t you go in?”

“Oh,” said Martin sheepishly, “I didn’t want to go in without you.”

They rode in silence for a moment. In the distance, the enormous country house grew ever larger, looming over the massive, manicured landscape. The cabbie heard shuffling behind him.

“Why do you still carry that old thing?” said Henry gently. “He probably doesn’t even remember that he gave it to you.”

The other said nothing.

Henry continued. “I just don’t want you to get your hopes up, Martin. By all accounts he is...”

“A monster,” said Martin quietly. “I know. But he’s still our father.”

At that the cabbie started violently. “Your father?!” He burst out.

“Yes,” said Martin, turning around to face the cabbie. “I’m Martin Coventry, and this is my brother Henry.”

“Oh— I— I beg your—” spluttered the cabbie.

“If I wanted your apologies,” said Henry coolly, “I would have introduced myself earlier.”

“All the same, I—”

“Just drive, please.”

The cabbie looked forward, blushing and silently cursing himself for his carelessness.

“He is our father in blood only,” Henry said to his brother. “Remember that. There’s more to being a father than just blood.”

Again, Martin paused. When he spoke, it was slow and soft. “Do you think he loves us?” Henry sighed. “Martin,” he said sadly. “He never loved us.”

~

They were shown into a familiar reception room. It was the same room in which the adults had been chatting, and Henry and Martin had been playing, on that terrible night ten years ago. It had changed little since then. The sofa and several comfortable chairs were arranged around the fireplace, which was cold now. Above the fireplace towered a portrait of the boys’ grandfather, Lord William Coventry. One thing that had changed was the floor-to-ceiling windows on the opposite wall, which were dressed with strange, white curtains that were gossamer thin but utterly obscured the view beyond. They still allowed much light to penetrate the room, but imparted upon it a hazy, dull quality.

And then, of course, their father had changed. He was standing in the farthest corner of the room when they entered, apparently conversing with a servant whom Henry recognized as his father’s valet. He couldn’t remember the man’s name—Langston? Leonard? As soon as the valet saw them, he parted from the earl with a quick word, and walked briskly in Henry and Martin’s direction. He bowed graciously and said, “My lords.” When he rose, he was smiling warmly. His hair was grayer and thinner than it had been, but his kind eyes shone as brightly as they always had. Then, he departed, closing the door firmly behind him.

Their father was, as Henry had expected, clothed from head to toe. His face and neck were entirely covered by a black garment that clung to his head like a sock to a foot. Over that, he wore a black hood that cascaded down his back into a cape. Between the mask, the hood and the black gloves, there was, as the cabbie had said, not an inch of skin exposed. While the rest of his dress was ordinary—a blue frock coat and finely embroidered waistcoat—the mask and cloak gave him a decidedly sinister aspect. Henry had expected all this, yet seeing the dark and villainous figure, in that room which was so marred with tragedy, unnerved him. He looked to his younger brother, who seemed to be paler than usual.

“Welcome, my boys,” said the figure, which glided toward them. Then he stopped before them and sighed. “But I see you have become men.”

The two of them bowed but neither spoke.

“Come, here into the light where I may get a good look at you,” said their father eagerly. Henry was surprised by the affection in his voice. They obediently stepped toward the window.

“Henry,” he said warmly, as he shook Henry by the hand. Then he turned and said, “Martin,” as he shook the other’s hand with equal enthusiasm.

“I see you, Henry, have inherited my coloring and Theodora’s build. And Martin is the other way round.” That was true enough. Henry had his father’s chestnut hair, but he had his mother’s height, as well as her aquiline nose and her angular, hawkish frame. Martin had his mother’s gray eyes and raven hair, but his father’s petite frame and boyish features.

“You don’t know how glad and proud I am to see you two again,” said John Coventry.

Henry was disquieted by his father’s kindness. The earl had rarely spoken to them in this way when they were growing up. When he had done so, it had been reluctantly, with a certain disdain. Henry detected no disdain now, though he could not read what might be hidden beneath the mask.

“It’s good to see you too, father,” said Martin, a little breathlessly. John’s chest seemed to swell with pride and pleasure. Henry looked at them both apprehensively, and still said nothing.

“Come, this way,” said John, ushering them toward the sofa. On the table before the sofa was laid a tea setting, and some biscuits, cheeses, crackers, and other morsels. “Please, help yourselves,” said their father, gesturing to the refreshments as he settled into an armchair. Henry took the spot on the

sofa that was nearer to the chair, so that he was seated between his father and brother. Henry paid no mind to the food, while Martin poured himself a cup of tea.

“We have a lot of business to get through over the next couple of days,” began the masked earl. “As you know, when your mother took you away ten years ago, she and I agreed that I would renounce my title and all that comes with it when Henry was of age and finished with his studies. In that way, he would come into his inheritance as soon as possible. In exchange, Theodora agreed not to carry out certain threats she was prepared to carry out. While we are here to conduct that transaction, it’s been ten years since we last saw one another. So in spite of our busy day ahead, I wonder if you might not indulge me in a little conversation before we begin with the tedium of business.” Martin’s spoon clinked against the sides of his cup as he stirred some sugar into his tea.

“Did you ever get my letters?” John asked, his voice hopeful.

The brothers looked at each other, puzzled. Then they looked back at their father and shook their heads.

“Ah,” he sighed sadly. “I was afraid of that. Well, I can hardly blame Theodora for wishing to protect you.”

Martin slurped his tea noisily while Henry shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“I am sorry,” said the earl with quiet earnestness. “I’m sorry that you’ve been cursed with a scoundrel for a father. I wish I could have been there for you, not just in these last ten years but before that, too. I was always distant, even when you were by my side. You deserve better.”

Martin seemed to be deeply moved. His eyebrows were soft and his lower lip protruded, as if to silently say that all was understood and forgiven.

Henry’s face was hard. “It’s a bit late for apologies,” he hissed. It was the first thing he’d said.

John nodded. “Of course,” he said, accepting the reproach. “I know I cannot make up for lost time. Still, I would like to know more about each of you. What sort of life have you had since you left? What sort of men have you become? What are your dreams? This may be hard to believe, and not without good reason, but I have missed you terribly.”

Martin answered his father’s questions freely, as eager to share his life as his father was eager to hear of it. Henry remained guarded, but he, too, talked of his life in the modest home he had shared with his mother and brother, and of the university from which he’d recently graduated. Henry’s interest lay in the natural sciences. Martin’s lay in theology, mostly, though he had no interest in joining the clergy. Henry had wide circle of friends, while Martin had only one or two, who were shy and thoughtful like he was. Henry had been in love once, briefly.

As Martin drained his third cup of tea, Henry reached the end of his patience.

“I think that’s quite enough about us,” he remarked finally. “We’ve answered all your questions, father, but you’ve answered none of ours. We have questions, too, you know.”

The grim mask revealed nothing. A moment later, though, John nodded. “Fine,” he said.

Henry was surprised. He glanced at his brother, who seemed distracted, as if lost in thought.

“Did you and our mother ever love each other?” Henry asked offhandedly, as if he were asking about the weather.

John leaned back in his chair. He looked up, and seemed to be considering the question carefully.

“We were fond of one another, in the beginning,” he intoned slowly. “We respected and cared for one another. It was not the passionate stuff of fiction, but I think you could call it love.”

Henry eyed him up and down. “What about our grandfather? Did you ever love him?”

John sighed deeply. “When I met your grandfather, I was young, poor, and opportunistic. I am not proud of how I behaved then. Did I love him? Yes, in a way. But not nearly as much as I led him to believe.”

Unexpectedly, Martin asked, “Is it true that you sold your soul to the devil?”

The earl laughed, apparently amused by the question. "No. I've never understood this idea of selling one's soul. If the devil wanted my soul, I do not think he would barter for it. He would simply take what he wanted."

Martin was pale again, and his voice shook a little as he spoke. "What really happened that night? The night of the fire?"

Henry looked from his nervous brother to his stony father. For a moment, the earl neither moved nor spoke.

"Theodora never told you," John said quietly. Henry could not tell whether it was meant to be a question or a statement of fact. John glided from his chair to the end of the sofa where Martin sat. Then he bent down and kneeled at his son's feet.

"What do you think happened, Martin?" His voice was passionate and intense. "What is it you think you saw?"

Martin looked more pale and nervous than ever. His ashen skin shone with sweat. He was struggling with some inner turmoil. Martin had never wanted to talk about that night. Henry knew only that he had seen something terrible.

"I... I don't know what I saw," he stammered. "Mother said I was so frightened that I imagined things. She said it was a kind of... hallucination. But then, what was it that frightened me into hallucinating the first place? I..." he trailed off, biting his lower lip.

John spoke like a lawyer interrogating a witness, as if fervently trying to will him to remember. "Do you believe that, Martin? That it was a hallucination?"

Martin was so distressed Henry thought he might swoon. "I'll believe whatever you tell me," he gasped. "I just want to know what to believe."

John spoke with conviction. "You know what you saw."

Henry couldn't bear to watch any longer. He stood, stepped behind his father, and tried to pull him from the spot where he kneeled. John would not budge.

"That's enough of this," Henry lashed out. "Can't you see you're tormenting him? Leave him be. Martin, please stop, this isn't helping."

They both ignored him. Martin was staring intently at the shrouded face, and it stared back up at him.

"Your mother lied to you," said John, in a voice that was only just above a whisper. "You've known it all along."

"If anyone here is a liar, it's you," snarled Henry.

John raised a hand to shoo him away like a gnat. His attention remained fixed on Martin. Very slowly, Martin reached out a hand toward his father. He pushed back the hood that covered the masked head. Henry was too surprised by this strange gesture to do anything but watch, transfixed. Martin gently tugged on the mask. The skin of John's neck was revealed first, as the mask rose up from under his collar. Finally, Martin managed to pull it off completely. More curious than angry, Henry darted around behind the sofa to get a good look at his father.

John Coventry looked exactly as he always had. There was no disfigurement. There was not even a gray hair. Anyone who saw him would swear that he could not have been more than a few years older than Henry. Twenty-five, at most. The two brothers gaped at him, dumbfounded. Martin recovered first.

"How? How is this possible?"

"You know the answer already, Martin," said John gently. "Magic. I am a magician." He stood and slowly took the mask from Martin's limp hand. "I thought you knew. You found out the same night your mother did. That night when my magic got out of hand and I accidentally set the house on fire. I had not imagined that she would keep it from you all this time."

"She knew," mumbled Martin in consternation.

“What is the point of keeping your face young and beautiful if you’re going to wear a mask?” asked Henry sharply, torn between confusion and anger.

“I am not keeping my face young and beautiful,” John said with an enigmatic smile. “This face is just another mask. It always was. Really, I’m grateful for that fire, which gave me an excuse to wear this.” He held up the garment that had covered his face and neck. “Until somebody develops a decent aging potion without side effects, I’m stuck looking like a young man. Unless I reveal my other face—perhaps you might call it my true face—which I never do. Only one person in the last forty years has seen my horrifying true face, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“Who was it?” asked Martin. “Grandfather?”

John smiled. “No.”

“His mistress,” said Henry. “The hag.”

“Henry!”

“I’d have been more offended if he’d called her a witch, like everyone else does,” said John good-humoredly. “Yes, she is the only person who’s seen the ghastly face that lies behind this one.”

A thousand questions came to Henry’s mind as he tried to make sense of what was happening. He had grown up hearing rumors that his father was some sort of sorcerer or devilish fiend. He had never for an instant considered that they might be true. Everything he thought he knew about his father, and by extension about himself, was suddenly called into question.

“Did you bewitch Grandfather?” Martin asked. His throat was dry, and his voice came out a little hoarse.

There were water glasses on the table. John picked one up and traced one finger up the side of the glass, starting from the bottom. As he did so, the glass filled with water. He handed the glass of water to Martin, who accepted it shakily.

“No,” John said calmly. “I did not bewitch Lord William. I merely lied to him. I told him his grandchildren would inherit my magic.”

Fury surged through Henry. Everyone else had known, even Martin had known on some deep level. And now just as soon as Henry learned that magic was real, he was in the same instant being told that he couldn’t have it. His weasel of a father would keep it all for himself, as he had always kept everything for himself.

Making every effort to sound nonchalant, Henry asked, “If it’s not inherited, then how did you get it?”

His father’s eyes gleamed malignantly. “Yes, that is the eternal question, isn’t it? How does one get it.” He slowly walked toward one of the windows, whose gossamer curtain not only prevented the earl from seeing outside, but no doubt prevented outsiders from seeing the earl.

Finally he shrugged. “Nobody knows.”

Henry walked toward his father, and Martin followed. “You must have done something, learned from someone. Surely it’s not pure luck.”

“No,” John conceded. “It’s not pure luck.”

“You could teach it, if you wanted to.”

His father turned to him with narrowed eyes. “I don’t teach magic.”

“Why not?”

“I have my reasons.”

“You have your reasons,” Henry said mockingly, no longer bothering to hide the belligerence from his voice. “I know your reason. It’s because you’re a selfish bastard. You always were. I’m tired of your half-truths and your feigned kindness. What’s the point of telling us that magic is real, if we can’t inherit it and you won’t teach it? So that you can lord it over us like everything else you’ve taken from us?”

“Henry!” Martin snapped for a second time. “Why are you so mistrusting of him? He’s told us nothing but the truth today!”

“Mistrusting?” Henry snapped back, his composure utterly lost. “How could you be so trusting? Don’t you remember what he was like? He’s trying to turn us against mother, and now he’s turning you against me! Can’t you see that he’s only pretending to care about us?”

“All I see is you not even making the slightest effort to repair this family!”

“And who do you think’s the one who broke it?”

“People can change!”

“He hasn’t changed! For God’s sake, even his face hasn’t changed!” Henry was at the end of his rope. He turned toward his father with rancorous eyes. “You,” he said, pointing menacingly at him. “I want to speak to you alone.”

John’s face was all innocence. Henry wanted to hit that deceitful, boyish face.

Martin sighed heavily. “Fine,” he said indignantly. “I need to use the toilet anyway.”

“Shall I... ?” John began.

“I remember where it is,” said Martin, his back already turned to them. As he stepped out the door, John put his hood back over his head and turned toward the window, so that no one might see his exposed face during that instant the door was open. Once it was closed, he lowered the hood again.

Then, a broad devilish grin spread across his face. It was a cruel smile that showed he was thoroughly delighted with this recent outburst. It was all Henry could do to keep from striking him.

“Our task today is a simple business transaction,” Henry said bitterly. “I am here to receive what is owed. So stop playing games with us. Let’s just do the deal and be done with it.”

The sinister smile grew even broader. “You want what is owed? You think I owe you everything I have?”

“No. I think you owe me more than titles and money. You owe me a decent childhood.”

“I’ve already given you far more than I ever got from my father,” he sneered. “More than a lot of boys ever get from their fathers. You want to know why I haven’t gotten to our business yet? It’s because I wanted to know whether you’re still the same fussy, ungrateful little shit you were when you left. As it happens, I have my answer.”

“You want to criticize my conduct? You, the self-confessed scoundrel?”

“Not particularly, since I’m not the one upon whose conduct his inheritance depends.”

It took Henry a moment to grasp what his father was saying. “You and Mother had an agreement,” he said with shock and indignation.

“Oh, we had nods and handshakes and promises,” said John playfully. “But promises are easily broken.”

Henry’s blood seethed in his veins. “Are you saying that when Martin comes back in here, you’re going to tell him and me that you are reneging on your promise?”

“I didn’t say that.” John looked out the window, which only baffled Henry, since there was nothing to see but white gauze. “I’ll give you the title. I’ll even give you Croome. But the family coffers will remain under my control.”

“So you’ll give me all the responsibilities but keep the power for yourself.”

“Precisely.”

“You’re a selfish bastard.”

“If you can’t handle the responsibility, then you don’t deserve the power,” his father spat. “I have guarded Lord William’s fortune carefully and I don’t intend to let you fritter it away as so many hot-headed young aristocrats do.”

“You don’t know what I would do. You don’t know me at all.”

“Excellent point,” John agreed. “Go ahead and run to your mother. Give me the satisfaction.”

“You haven’t changed a bit,” Henry said through clenched teeth.

“Consider this your first lesson in manhood, Henry. People only keep their promises as long as it’s convenient for them. You want my fortune? Prove to me that you’re worthy of it. The same goes for

magic. It comes to those who are worthy. And the fact that you would have the audacity to barge in here demanding magic lessons only proves that you are not worthy.”

Henry said nothing. He was furious, but he recognized that further admonishing his father would not help matters. “Speak frankly to me,” said Henry gravely. “No riddles, no games. How does one acquire magic?”

“I cannot help but answer in riddles, for magic is itself a riddle,” John said, shaking his head. “If you were meant to have magic, you will have it with or without my help.”

“Can you teach it or not?”

John shrugged. “That depends upon the student. I do not waste my time trying to teach students who do not show promise.”

“And I do not show promise,” said Henry flatly.

“Correct.”

Neither of them spoke. Henry had much to say, and yet he saw little use in saying any of it. He wanted to throttle his father, yet he feared to upset him, lest he should change his mind and give Henry an even worse offer than he was offering now. Henry also did not wish to set off whatever power had been set off that night ten years ago, a catastrophe that still haunted his mother and brother. This deal was a deliberate insult. Yet he saw no better option than to accept it.

Across the room, the door handle clicked and turned. In an instant, John had his hood up and was facing toward the window.

“One last question,” Henry said hurriedly as Martin closed the door behind him. “You never wrote us any letters, did you?”

That vile grin crept back across John’s face. Malevolence danced in his eyes. He donned the black mask again. “Come, Lord Henry!” he said jovially, tucking the edges of the mask into his collar. “I think that’s enough catching up for now. Onto business. Your future begins today. And with it, your chance to prove your mettle.”