

A REUNION

EC BYRNE

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*To Anon*

*You know who you are*

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## A REUNION

Then the boat from the slow, grey river loomed up to the coast of Dis and the little, silent shade still shivering stepped ashore, and Charon turned the boat to go wearily back to the world. Then the little shadow spoke, that had been a man.

"I am the last," he said.

No one had ever made Charon smile before, no one before had ever made him weep.

*Lord Dunsany*

In visions of the night, like dropping rain,

Descend the many memories of pain

*Aeschylus*

## I

John Walsh sits in his office and blows clouds of smoke at the ceiling. He watches, with a placid expression, the leaden tendrils curling in the evening light, eventually forming heavy grey coils hanging overhead. He yawns, absentmindedly scratching his chest and leaning back further into his armchair, and, after a brief moment of hesitation, readjusts his gaze so that he now examines his worn-out ankle-boots that are carelessly propped up on his desk. Something like a smile plays on his lips. He is a contented creature perfectly at ease in an environment of his own making.

This peculiar look turns to a definite frown when he hears someone knocking on the door behind him.

"Come in," he raps out. It is not an invitation, but a demand.

The door slowly creaks open and John Walsh can see clearly, in his mind's eye, the little, old woman nervously tottering through the doorway; perhaps stopping to sniff in disapproval of the gathering cloud cover, but more likely than not just standing there with her scrawny arms clasped behind her back and her wrinkled face bent low to her chest. It is this image of complete submission that makes his blood feel hot in his veins. When he doesn't hear her speak immediately; he bangs his pipe against the armrest and smiles at the sound of her gasping.

"And a good evening to you, dear Moira," he says, affably enough. "And what had brought you here? Hmm?"

Moira sniffs. "Mail, sir."

"And what portents does the tide bring in, dear?"

"Sir?"

“The mail, what of it?”

“Oh, yes, sir.” The old woman squints at the envelopes and carefully sifts through them. The flesh of her bony fingers is stretched and left taught by the large joint’s underneath – her digits are like thin, knobby tree trunks. When she speaks, her voice is low, tremulous, and deferential. It is this latter quality that her master appreciates the most. She clears her throat before saying: “The first letter is from Vicar Pemberton...”

Walsh makes a dismissive gesture with his hand. “Asking around for donations, most like.” He sighs. “Another one for the rubbish heap.”

Moira winces. “The next letter is from Hodges & Sons... the bank, sir.”

Walsh grimaces at this mention. He does not deign to give her a response.

“Umm.” Moira flips to the next envelope in the stack she clutches; she pauses, looking furtively at John Walsh who is still facing away from her – the only parts of him visible being his boots on the table and red mop of hair peeking from the top of the armchair. “This one is from Ms. Crawley, sir,” she says and takes a deep breath, “of the Mariner’s Relief Fund, sir.”

Walsh’s reaction is immediate. His feet fly off the table in a flourish of flying papers and falling pens, and he is on her – his grey eyes wide and bearing down on her in a cold rage; his usually ruddy face now possesses a bright, scarlet hue that startles her in its intensity; she realizes, belatedly, that his fists are curled. Moira holds the handful of mail up to her face, hiding behind the yellowing, fibrous shield.

Gradually, by degrees, Walsh composes himself. His face is still red but, mercifully, his hands aren’t balled up fists anymore. “I don’t want to hear anything from that collection of misbegotten brats and mewling women,” he hisses down at her. “I don’t owe them anything.”

“Of, of, of course, sir.” The Fund’s envelope flaps in Moira’s trembling hands. “N-not a c-copper, sir!”

Walsh’s countenance quickly softens. When he speaks, it is as if his outburst had been planned all along as part of some obscure and esoteric joke. His voice is affable and welcoming; he stands at ease and carries a ghost of a smile. Nodding to himself, he sits back down and slouches in his seat. “You get another letter from those beggars, toss it in the fire.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you don’t have to inform me of *everything* that comes in through the door,” he says kindly. “But can you tell me, dear, if Ian Hafford has sent me anything?”

“No, sir, nothing from Mr. Hafford.”

Walsh's jaw tightens, and he opens it after a long moment of deliberation. "Come to me as soon as you've heard from Hafford, don't bother me with anything else."

"Yes, sir, of course, sir," she says and scurries away.

Alone, Walsh hisses out his breath and turns to the window – it is half obscured by heavy, dusty drapes and the light pours weakly through and yet, judging by the fine orange slivers, he can tell that it is time. Quickly taking his coat off the hook, he hurries outside and is greeted by a crisp seaside breeze. It will be quite a winter, he thinks, and breathes in the fresh air, relishing its purity. It is more invigorating, more revitalizing, than anything he has ever known. It was worth it to buy the house here, to take the loan from the lenders (and that problem will sort itself out when Hafford writes him), and while the actual building wasn't anything to boast of, the location more than made up for it. He follows a narrow, sandy path that cuts through a field of tall grass that flows in the wind around him like an animated, golden tapestry. The sky is a dark blue streaked with scarlet clouds, all emanating from the explosion of color on the horizon that is growing in its intensity. Walsh quickens his pace; he has never missed this and will not for as long as he lives.

He hears it first: the waves in their multitudes crashing against the cliffs and the seaborne wind flowing up the intricate series of crags, cuts on the cliff faces, grooves, and depressions – creating a high-pitched fluting noise possessing a distinct, ethereal resonance. No man can create it. He reaches his favorite cliff top – one that juts out farther than the rest – just when the fluting reaches its crescendo, sending notes high into the air. In natural accompaniment to this wonderous sound is the sun – turning to a dull crimson as it falls to the horizon; it descends slowly, as if escaping the grip of the low hanging clouds over the sea, and at each stage of its fall a new color is revealed. First orange, leaking through the few openings in the dark clouds, then, as its bottom portion pierces the open space between cloud and sea, all is lit up: the cliff faces shine with a blinding radiance, the golden waves crashing against them send up twinkling spray, and the stratus shines – a polished plate of brass stamped onto the sky. This is what he lives for. The fluting goes on at a mad pace and a sudden, rising gust of wind nearly sweeps him off his feet, but he is smiling now. Truly smiling. In this moment all is forgotten; it is just him now, one with this marvel of nature. His heart is lifting, lifting, and then it falls with the sun that is now crashing into the horizon. Everything takes on a pink tint that darkens; the purple cloud cover rushes over him and the sea is a broiling mass of indigo. The spectacle is ending, and John Walsh is brought back to earth.

Nevertheless, he remains on his solitary mount and keenly listens to the winds' dying notes. The line between sky and sea is blurring now, their only being a faint afterimage of the sun's glow, but he thinks he can make out a peculiar blot just over the edge of the world. A storm most like, he concludes confidently, a better part of a lifetime spent at sea taught him to recognize such things. The airy notes fade away when he expects it, but there is a final note that makes him frown and scratch his nose. It sounds vaguely familiar, like a voice, maybe. Walsh turns around and walks back to his house.

He stops in the middle of the trail, shakes his head, and continues on his way.

The days march by as stolidly and organized as any column down a wide thoroughfare. Walsh wakes up later in the morning, spends a fair amount of time lounging in his office, listening to Moira listing off his mail and, late in the afternoon, watching the spectacle of the setting sun. Yet even this latter activity begins to lose its luster; the performance gives way to entropy, until all is just a jarring clash of contrasting colors and hues that gives him a splitting headache. This does not diminish his enthusiasm in the slightest; if anything, he becomes a more reliable audience, stubbornly persisting in his attendance against what is devolving into a garish and vulgar display, he will not let something thuggish like nature bully him into submission, to rob him of his enjoyment. Just being there, at the right time and place, is enough to lift his spirits. Indoors, he is much less resolute. At times he finds himself standing amidst an empty room; always in the middle of some activity he had forgotten about. It is in this stillness that old memories resurface: the creaking of the hull, the harping of the rigging in the middle of a gale, the great billowing of the white sails... He feels them as distant things – specters from an unnamable place that rear up their ugly heads at the most inopportune times. Yes, he thinks, ugly. What had happened occurred but just once; no reason it should haunt him.

Still, they do. Never at night, but in the middle of the day. He can be in the middle of fetching a coat from a closet or looking for Moira in the kitchen and, unfailingly, he will stop, glancing about him as if divining the meaning of what lay inside.

*Ian Hafford, where are you?*

Where was he indeed? John Walsh does not hear from the man in days, then weeks. He starts to interrogate Moira – asking the trembling crone whether she has not possibly misplaced a letter from the rat faced bastard of a man in question or, God forbid, she is hoarding Hafford’s messages to herself, keeping them as evidence for a terrible end that Walsh dares not voice even to himself. “So dear,” he asks her in the same condescending yet casual tone he always uses for her, “you wouldn’t be hiding anything from me now, are you?”

“No, sir!” she squeaks.

“Because if you are, dear, I’ll have to take matters into my own hands.”

“Of course, sir, very good, sir.”

“So, you haven’t gotten anything from Mr. Ian Hafford?”

“No, sir. ‘Pon my soul, no.”

Walsh takes a deep breath and stares at her for a long time. He gestures at the letters in her hands. “Give it to me.”

She does and scurries off.

He heaves a sigh at her departing back and relights his pipe before sifting through the mail. With his head down and his brow furrowed, the pipe clenched tightly in his mouth and his eyes squinting and his fingers carefully sifting through the thin paper, he resembles a scryer,

sitting alone in the dying light of his office and fruitlessly seeking a desired auspice. Nothing, he finds nothing. Even worse, he notices the scarce light trickling between the drapes changing ever so slightly in hue; he is going to miss his cliffside spectacle! Without bothering to grab his coat, he rushes outdoors and nearly sprints to his favorite precipice.

Upon reaching his desired spot, he finds that everything seems to be a subtly askew. It is as if he dwells in a portrait where the shading is a bit too dark or too bright, where random shapes and figures lurk in the corners. The usual gap between cloud and sea is gone; the horizon a barely distinguishable white line threatening to be extinguished by the spray of far off waves and a low hanging mist. The clouds are not merely dark, they are *black*. It looks to him as if someone smeared the sky with charcoal. There is no wind; the black clouds just hang where they are. Bringing this desolation into sharper focus is the lack of sound: no whistling of the wind or the smooth crush of waves, no squawking auks, or albatrosses; not even the miniscule sound of a rock tumbling down a cliffside can be heard.

Walsh takes a deep breath and walks forwards, looking over the edge.

The waves down below are few and far between, but the ones he sees are large and their crests are very, very white. The roiling sea moves silently and shines a bilious, faded green when the pallid sun briefly slides down the horizon. Belatedly, the chorus sings a few weak notes that degenerate into asynchronous, husky outbursts. Voices, he thinks, why do they sound like voices?

John Walsh shivers; it must be because he forgot his coat.

No point in watching this dismal affair; John hurries away before sunset ends. A storm is coming, he feels sure of that, a serious one, and he'd have to tell Moira prepare the house to receive it. That's all there is to it. He'd wait it out, no problem. After all, hadn't he seen worse?

Upon reaching his office, he finds a tidy stack of envelopes lying on his desk. Moira evidently did not want to read these to him and it soon becomes clear why – they were all from his lenders, and just by skimming through them he sees their building insistence, can hear their impertinent voices. Moira was wise not to bring these to him; his face grows red with a raw rage that wells up deep inside him; his hand clinches a letter so tightly that it shakes and then he tears it up before doing the same to all of them. He stomps around the room in circles and mutters wildly to himself. One name is on his lips: *Hafford*. Where the fuck is he? The businessman owes him so much, so bloody much!

Walsh spends the night dreaming, tossing and turning in tandem with the waves of the overfilled whaleboat that is flooding with claggy flesh and chilling saltwater. He is perched near the bow; drunken with exhaustion; intoxicated by the stench of piss, sweat, blood, and wet wool. Haggard and hollow-eyed men, sick with exposure and desperation, jostle one another for space and struggle to get their feet clear of the filthy slush sliding around their ankles. It is no use. Many call out to the surgeon, complaining of frostbitten toes, and the wiry medical student performs acrobatics as he makes his way between the jumbled bodies and to his chattering patients. Upon reaching a forlorn soul, the surgeon removes a pair of pliers he had kept carefully



hidden from the elements in an oilcloth rag and without further ceremony, proceeds to amputate the grey-black toes – *crack*, like the sound of an icicle being snapped off a branch – *plop*, as the useless phalanges go over the side and hit the black water. Hedging them on all sides are the massive cliffs of ice – a glowing blue near their bases and, as they rise higher and higher, they turn paler and paler until they are each capped with brilliant, blindingly white summits.

For the first few days, Walsh commands them to row around this desolate body of water in search of leads that may take them out of here. When the wind permits it, they raise sail and risk colliding with many of the boulders that have fallen off the cliffs and aimlessly follow the dark, inscrutable waves. There is no escape. The first mate volunteers to scale one of the cliffs, on account of his good health, he says, and Walsh reluctantly gives his acquiescence. They row towards a cliff that is slightly shorter than the others and latch onto it with a complex series of cables – one of the few pieces of gear they managed to salvage from their ship before it sank – and they slowly warp themselves over. There is a heart-stopping *bump* as they softly make contact with a wall of ice, and the first mate wastes no time hammering picks into its stolid surface that he will use to scale the glistening face and reach the top.

“There may be rescue ships on the other side,” he assures them as much as he assures himself, “I can signal them.”

As if answering in turn, a massive, white object frees itself from their chosen face in an explosion of shrieks, falling shards, and rushing air. They can all feel this frozen meteor’s descent. All those on the starboard side cut the lines and leave them trailing behind where they hang limp on the water, near the stern, where their rest is disrupted by the falling projectile slamming into the water and dousing them all in a wave of numbing water that floods the deck and sends the whaleboat rocking away. The sudden force nearly makes them capsize, and men scream and fight to stay in the center of the boat as freezing water splashes over the gunwales. Walsh has to shout himself hoarse when ordering the men to cease their panic, to evenly distribute their weight so that they all just might not be hurled over into the indifferent waters threatening to spill over the sides. Accomplishing this, the men take turns throughout the following day and night using pewter cups to toss the water and, too often, their own bits and pieces, over the side. Now useless digits are being discarded. A fight nearly breaks out when the carpenter accuses the surgeon of lifting the wedding ring from his amputated finger. Like a pack of starving dogs, cheekbones protruding and thin lips curling back to reveal the menacing canines, the survivors turn on the surgeon.

For the first time, Walsh takes out the pistol from his greatcoat’s pocket and waves it at them.

All is silent: the quivering men, the still rocking whaleboat, and even the near non-existent waves.

Walsh’s right hand is locked into an exaggerated, claw-like grip when he awakens. His cheeks are wet and, even under all the covers, he is shivering. He flies out of bed and descends the staircase with the vague idea of going to his office. Halfway down he hears a frightened

squeak and sees Moira, a flickering candle in one gnarled hand, gaping up at him like a suffocating fish.

“Well? What is it woman?”

“Nothing – just...You look like a ghost in your nightclothes, sir.”

John Walsh laughs; it is a harsh and grating noise.

“The only ghosts are in your head, silly woman.”

Walsh, the silky ends of his nightgown trailing behind him on the marble floor, glides off to his office. Moira follows, her own slippers marking their own pattering beat. He plops down on his armchair and dictates to Moira a terse message to be sent to Ian Hafford posthaste; in no uncertain terms, Walsh makes it very clear that he wants, no, demands to meet Hafford in his country home so as to better discuss the...*business matter* that was surely weighing on the ship owner’s mind as heavily as it did on Walsh’s. When he is done, Walsh taps his fingers on the desk as a sign for Moira to leave and it is only after the old woman scurries away that he allows himself to relax. Sleep is out of the question, but he sure as hell isn’t going to allow that nightmare to bother him. It was but a dream, and therefore destined to be forgotten in due time. The heavy drapes flutter and sigh; he watches the guttering candles. He checks the clock and frowns – it is past midnight – winds this early can only mean the early arrival of what might prove to be a ferocious tempest. It may arrive before Hafford’s arrival or just when he arrives...It is no matter, Walsh thinks. The picture of Hafford struggling to rein his horse in the middle of a dreadful flurry pleases him beyond measure. Let that bloated toff sweat for once, so long as he delivers on his promise.

*Haven't I suffered enough?*

Walsh props his feet on his desk and sinks further into the frayed upholstery. He closes his eyes and listens to the sibilant hiss of the drapes flowing in the cool night, whose movements are presently accompanied by the *drip-drop* of melting wax hitting the candle holder. Hypnotic, lulling...

His men are convinced that nature herself is conspiring against them. Her clammy nails are clawing at the gunwales, digging into the swollen planks, working frantically to climb over the side and freeze their blood while they sleep. The towers of ice, omnipresent and everlasting, are an indifferent jury at best and silent harbingers of fate at worst. They huddle together for warmth like so many miserable orphans in the night while her frigid breath lashes their hunched backs.

And the darkness is growing longer with winter's impending arrival.

Those who suffered the brunt of the falling ice block’s splash are the first to die. In the brief mornings – now more closely resembling an empty, grey twilight – the stiff, grey, blue-lipped bodies are separated from the clinging mass and dumped overboard. After doing so to the first mate, who had so stubbornly clung to life, a heavy silence smothers them all. They no

longer grumble or complain, and any mariner who has spent more than a day at sea knows that this is one of the worst things to happen to a crew.

“Sing,” Walsh tells them from on top his perch.

He is met with sullen refusal. So many have died that there's enough room for everyone to sit on the thwarts, jammed shoulder to shoulder yet out of the briny slime collecting below them; the tallest sailors lift their legs and hug their knees to their chests. Some of them look up at him rather cluelessly, as if surprised their captain is capable of speech.

“Sing you bastards,” he growls at them, drawing out his pistol and taking off the oilcloth wrapped around the cock so as to keep the priming dry. “Sing for our salvation!”

What's left of his crew begin a ragged, discordant chorus. They sing of angels and saints, heaven and glory everlasting, of the cross and His promise. Walsh smiles at their combined earnestness; he bobs his head up and down and sways to and fro with the beat. He joins in when they reach the final verse, adding his own deep baritone to their softer, chiming notes. From where he sits in the bow, Walsh imagines himself to be a unique kind of waterlogged priest, attending to his soggy congregation sitting before him on rows of thwarts now serving as pews. This fancy inspires him, and without open acknowledgement, the singing of hymns becomes a daily ritual. Walsh is a believer, in himself, anyway, and it is only natural that he takes on this new role. He makes them sing cheerful shanties when they finish suckling on the freshwater caught in their canvas sail, and he encourages them to sing canticles for the dearly departed when their food casks run empty. He prevents his crew from tossing them overboard, there may be food yet, he tells them. The drawn, pale faces star back listlessly, until the carpenter breaks out into song and they all join in as if their lives depend on it; the carpenter's eyes are filled with tears.

And John Walsh's own are too when he awakens on the floor. His chair had fallen over sometime during the early hours, and he scrambles to his feet before Moira can find him in this embarrassing situation. *Damn! Not another one!* He was not a romantic, not one to indulge in, even unconsciously, any unnecessary flights of fancy. These nocturnal occurrences are not only peculiarities, he thinks, but abnormalities – symptoms of an intangible sickness of his being. His anger at himself may explain the abrupt arrival of the need for, in this case, drink. Tobacco won't cut it anymore, not even the exotic stuff he has hidden away...No, but, he remembers, there is the sizeable quantity of wine he keeps down in the cellar – in bottles stacked neatly on shelves carved into the rock and in barrels of aged wood – and while he would prefer something much stronger, he does not want to leave his house and be cut off when the future deluge comes down and floods the roads.

Still clad in his gown and slippers, Walsh crosses the foyer – a lavish, open room composed of redwood paneling and a multitude of rich rugs and carpets, all in warm colors – and ducks into the entranceway leading down to the cellar.

Immediately, he can tell something is terribly wrong.

Upon passing through the threshold, the little flame on the sole candle he carries struggles and nearly extinguishes itself, and an uncomfortably alien damp soaks through the thin fabric of his clothes and settles on his cool flesh. He lifts the light and sees his clouded breath. Too stunned even to breathe, he cautiously steps down into the gloom. There are no torches down here, he always relies on memory, instincts, and his eyes naturally adjusting to the dark, but now everything is misconstrued. The humidity throws everything off, making the time where he could grab his favorite vintage with his eyes closed a distant, far-off memory. He barely suppresses a groan of disgust when his feet fall into still, tepid water reaching up to his ankles.

*A fucking leak!*

It's ruined, all ruined. If the floodwater hasn't already tainted it, mold is most likely growing in these conditions, rotting the wooden barrels and poisoning everything within. All that money – which came from the lenders', not from his illustrious career on the high seas that was so tragically cut short – is wasted! *I should've had this insured*, the thought, in spite of everything, brings a humorless grin to his lips. If only. At least he can recover the bottles; those are sealed and safely kept away in the back. As for the leak, that's something best left up to Moira's two boys. Something for them to do after the storm, of course. Anyhow, after the Hafford meeting, the question of money will no longer be an issue; of that he is sure. So, with a new sense of confidence and purpose, he sloshes onwards.

The water is rising; progress comes with increasing depth, and he is around the middle of the cellar when he feels the water tickling his knees. Christ, he thinks, it's worse than I thought; I might find the bottles floating around. Wading through the steadily growing body of water, he struggles to keep his candle lit. Cupping his hand around the miniscule lick of flame does not help. Sweating stone walls, the dim outline of jutting barrels, and his bone-white hand clutching the candleholder are all that is visible.

He keeps going down, travelling deeper. His gown rises with the water, spreading and trailing behind him like a shroud thrown overboard. It's getting colder – he can tell by his gooseflesh and chattering teeth – yet, oddly enough, it doesn't really bother him. It's not so much about retrieving the wine bottles anymore; to go back now would be to concede defeat. To what, though? Moira, no, not her. Himself? Probably, he recognized himself as a prideful man, but he was no fool.

*The voices he heard the last time he was on the cliff?*

John Walsh halted and shook his head in amazement at this thought leaping, unbidden and so quickly, into his mind. Where the hell did that crazy notion come from? Nowhere good. He forces himself to focus on the task at hand and moves on. The end of the cellar can't be far now.

The dying light finally goes out just as he unexpectedly lurches forwards, inadvertently dropping the candleholder and splashing his face as he desperately flails around for balance. "Shit!" he cries, and the oath bounces off the walls and crashes back against his ears. Only then does he realize how confined he is, can imagine the truly claustrophobic nature of this

environment. Christ, he thinks, but where is the wine? Blindly groping about like a drunk stumbling home from the pub after a particularly hard night, he only succeeds in grasping air. With a heavy sigh, he lowers his hands to the water, and feels around in the wet murk, ignoring how it makes his skin crawl.

He stops when his right-hand bumps into something. Only one, he can count it as a victory if he can bring up just one for himself. He moves his hand towards it but the ensuing wake makes the object float away. Swearing under his breath, he lifts his hand clear and reaches out and grabs what is decidedly not a glass bottle: it feels like wrinkled leather, and, turning it around, he finds that it is not too long and very lightweight. Naturally curious, he holds it up to his eyes; blinking, adjusting them to dark, he can make out a small thing resting neatly on his palm. He brings it closer, squinting, and sees a finger – mottled but well preserved, he can feel the wet bone at the severed end of it.

A wedding finger, if he has to guess.

He shrieks and hurls it away, hearing a reverberating *plop* not a few inches away from him. He whirls around, sending up a tidal wave of stale, black water; and against that background he fancies seeing dozens of truncated shapes. Frenzied wailing is indistinguishable from the resounding echoes. He runs out, or tries to; the wet gown weighs him down and he is gasping for breath after taking a few steps – the water is sucking at his feet and dragging his legs down. It is like so many nightmares where, no matter how much effort he puts in, he cannot move the least bit away from the impending danger. And danger there is. He hears, no, *feels* something surging behind him. Gaining speed; its progress marked by the patting of dismembered digits slapping against the wall, upset by its rushing mass. He stumbles and staggers out into a wide, empty space, and for a debilitating moment he cannot tell where he is. All he knows is that he must get away from the thing rising from the depths and is closing in on him. He throws off his sodden gown and, free of that restraining fabric, sprints away with high, loping strides.

He falls face down on the steps; his jaw slamming on solid stone and his body scraping against its rough surface. Dimly aware of his own, warm blood running slick down the steps along with the dredged-up water, he heaves himself upwards, to safety, and upon reaching the top he looks over his shoulder and catches a glimpse of his gown – now, in this half-moment, standing upright, rigid, so damnably erect. John Walsh lets out a final scream and hurls himself away.

Moira, hearing the commotion in the foyer, gingerly tip-toes to the disturbance and finds her employer naked, wet, and shaking on the floor. His knees are kept firmly against his chest and his long arms are wrapped around his white legs. His exposure and vulnerability reminiscent of a freshborn babe. “My word!” she exclaims.

Gunmetal eyes lock on her.

“Lock the door! Lock the cellar door, woman!” John Walsh bawls up at her, “Lock that fucking door, TIGHT!”

Moira fusses over the trembling man, but he won't have none of it until she does as he says. She patters to the cellar, looks within, shakes her head, and closes the door, locking it shut with a key kept safely in one of her aprons many pockets.

“Did you see it?” Walsh's voice is a hoarse whisper when Moira returns, fussing over him with a towel.

“I've certainly seen the mess you made, sir,” she softly chides.

“No,” he rasps. “Not at all. I'm talking about the cellar...”

“The cellar, sir?” she sounds surprised. “You know it's too dark to see anything down there. After the storm, I can have my boys put in some torches.”

“Oh.”

“Or, even better, we can look into installing some of those new *cheh-mick-ul* lamps,” she says excitedly while dabbing his cuts with a cloth. “Of course, we'd have to take out another loan.”

“No,” he shouts, but it comes out as barely a cough. “No, we can't afford more.”

“Can you walk, sir? We need to get you to your room.”

He leans on Moira's shoulder and the old woman bends under the weight, but, surprisingly, supports him and together they go up the stairs; precariously swaying ontop each step and, just as it looks like they are going to roll downwards, they pitch ever onwards. The only sound marking this haphazard passage his labored breathing.

“Oh dear,” Moira says as they go down the hallway, “we're tracking water.”

He ignores her; keeping his head down, and forcing his feet to move across the richly embroidered carpet. Moira shoulders the door open and they barrel into the bedroom. Walsh happily loosens himself from his servant and flings himself upon the bed. Immediately above him are two crossed harpoons, gleaming even in this fading candlelight

*My God, how long have I been down there? How long did it take me to get up here?*

All along the walls are shelves lined with books, tables covered in nautical bric-a-brac, and various oil paintings – all of them so unfamiliar. He peers up at them, trying in vain to discern their origins, their nature, and only gives up when Moira pulls the sheets over him.

“You need to get some rest, sir,” she says and feels his forehead. “Looks like you have a fever, I'm afraid. Best to keep you wrapped up.” Ignoring his feeble protests, she goes around the

room, blowing out each candle one by one. “Did you know, sir, that during the plague, the Pope hid away in his room, surrounded by two braziers of fire set on both sides of him. To keep his bodily humors in balance, you see. All alone, surrounded by those twin flames while pestilence raged all throughout the entire continent...I really do wonder, sir, what was going through his head in those moments? Maybe nothing, I don’t know whether he lived or not. The Vicar of Christ may have faced eternity the minute he was locked away. Since I cannot be so certain whether those two flames of his saved his life, I shall plunge you in absolute darkness, sir. If you don’t mind.”

“Leave me,” he croaks. “Prepare everything for Mr. Hafford.”

“Shall I call on you when our guest arrives, sir?”

“I’ll be down.”

“Very good, sir.”

Moira is near the door; lengthening shadows obscure her features. It is hard to tell what is playing across her face. Slanting light from the hall reveals a glassy eye, half of her nose, and a corner of her lips, and she vanishes; the door closing shut and fulfilling Moira’s promise. He is alone now in the darkness. At long last, he is safe. But the proper precautions must be observed, lest that thing come creeping up and take him unawares. So, he sleeps with one eye open. His lids are heavy, but he keeps them half-open and trains his eyes on the opposite side of the room. His heartbeat builds in speed and intensity as all else drifts away.

Foreign hands are patting him down. Instinctively, in a single, fluid motion, John Walsh draws out his pistol from within the folds of his greatcoat, presses his muzzle against the chest of the intruder while he himself is still opening his eyes, and fires. The report comes out as a curiously muffled sound. He draws himself up and stands, legs firmly planted either side for balance, and watches the carpenter fall back into the hands of his crowded mates. Walsh watches in idle fascination as a bright red rose blossoms over the carpenter’s heart. A direct hit; the bristly craftsman lays dead in the surgeon’s arms. So, it has come to this. Why is he not surprised? Considering the matter, he realizes that it was really only a matter of time.

The men, nevertheless, huddle around the fallen body and hold onto him, doing their best to keep him clear of the accumulating filth below and removing his layers, granting the surgeon better access to the wound. They are like a frantic herd of cattle crowding around their fallen. They ignore their captain as he takes out a cartridge bag from under him – he is sitting on a growing pile of cast-off material the men deem useless; he appreciates how it slightly elevates him over everyone else – and takes his time reloading the pistol. He is all too aware of how they can all rush him at any moment during this drawn out process, but they are too busy occupying themselves over their useless task. No need to rush. He makes sure the cartridge is dry, tears it open and pours most down the barrel, pulls back the cock, blows off the pan, and charges the pistol with what powder is left in the cartridge. The flint is dry and uncracked, there is no chance of a misfire, but he swaps it out for a new one just in case. Nothing is left to chance. Only when all is done does he stare silently at his frightened flock. The fragile bravery of an individual in

contrast to that special hysteria endemic to crowds is not lost on him. He decides it is better not to speak, to let nature run its course.

The men take turns pressing their hands against the profusely bleeding wound, making an effort to stem the blood flow. An admirable, but ostensible display. Their true intentions reveal themselves, however, when they remove their mittens and gloves and press their bare flesh against the blood – it is no longer a matter of treating the wound, Walsh sees – taking them away to, perhaps unconsciously, rub their hands together. The blood, he knows, is warm; he can feel the heat's radiance pouring out of the carpenter's body, and it's only with an extraordinary amount of self-restraint that he resists going down and joining his crew in their bright ceremony. In this ever-shrinking period of half-light the blood appears to be a bright scarlet. All the men's hands carry stains of it – caught red handed, Walsh observes with a hint of humor – but the marks mean so much more. The spilt blood is uniting them, creating bonds more unyielding and real than any captain's tenuous authority. The men's drying, crimson hands are all badges proclaiming their allegiance to a new society still taking shape; one born from the blood of a martyr in a far-off sea.

It is time.

Walsh beckons for the body with his pistol and the men, unthinkingly, oblige. He pulls his mittens off with his teeth and eagerly wipes his numb hands against the remainder of the gore. The sensation is so strong that feeling not only returns to his hands, but shoots up through his arms; it is almost painful. He revels in it for a while, craning his face upwards to the silent, yawning sky and mouthing a grateful prayer. Awareness of prying eyes brings him back down to the north water where he finds that the wound has stopped bleeding. He looks into all their eyes, commits every face and name to memory, pauses for a significant moment; and spreads his arms, opening his hands and turning his palms upwards. Between his arms and laying on his lap is the fallen carpenter, a red dot over his heart. The falling sun lights up the ice and they shine, like a host of mirrors, all around the two figures.

“There is more blood,” John Walsh announces to his captive audience. “This is not the end.”

He hopes they don't notice the irony – the carpenter acting as host to a rite he found obscene – but if they do, they pretend total unawareness. The surgeon removes an assortment of blades from his valise; Walsh relinquishes the body and the carpenter is passed around; the air swells with a coppery stench. They are not mates anymore; they are brothers now, sharing the blood of another. They are coming together, like how a disorderly mass of lines and tackles can come together to form a three masted ship's rigging, and he no longer worries about mutiny. Although, it certainly helps he is the only one with a functioning firearm. When his turn arrives, the portion is so pungent that his body turns against him. His head rolls around and he emits a gurgling cry. The warmth goes down his throat, into his chest, and burning vines crawl over his bones, choke his guts, and tear up his insides. *But strength still goes out from your thorns.* A conflagration consumes his innards and he chokes on the flames. It is as if someone is pressing a



burning coal to his lips. His eyes roll up and flies off his haphazardly put together chair and is whisked away to pitch darkness.

## II

There is a horrifying moment of disorientation and confusion. He cries out for his men and receives no answer; it must have been lost to his whistling breath or the blood rushing in his ears. He swings his arms all about and grapples with empty air. He falls down and shrieks, fearing that he will fall forever, but he softly lands on a pile of pillows and cushions. Instead of the rough canvas and wretched odor of salt and bodily fluids, there is only the smooth touch of satin and the cloying scent of fresh linen. He is home. What's more, he hears the steady pattering of raindrops outside; the monotonous rhythm pervades the room and fills the shadows. He shuts his eyes and listens to the rainfall, wondering how long he was trapped in that nightmare. He opens his eyes and imagines that he is in another room of his, one that he hasn't been in for decades; what he is experiencing has more in common with the night terrors he suffered from as a child. After all these years, he remembers. He reflects on the past, and, eventually, the future.

### *Hafford!*

The very thought jolts his body forwards. The businessman must be here by now, if he hasn't already been here for a while. An alien sensation fills his breast, and it takes him awhile to recognize it as hope. It is no longer a desire for alleviation of life's burdens, but a cure for these nervous symptoms. How Hafford, of all people, can do this, he has no idea, but nothing really is making sense anymore. Walsh tosses the blankets off of him and finds his body drenched in a cool sweat, the perspiration cooling his body and making him shiver. It is sweat, isn't it? he cannot help but wonder; and he shudders, wrapping his arms around his broad frame, acutely conscious of his heart hammering against frail ribs. This is nothing like waking up from a deep sleep: he actually feels more like a captain again, returning from a long and arduous voyage to some hellish sea at the end of the earth. In many ways, this is not an exaggeration. A bewildering wave of déjà vu washes over him.

A pair of half-heard voices bring him back – one is undeniably a man's, being loud, deep and loquacious; the other definitely belongs to Moira, possessing her usual meek tone and fastidious way of speaking. The fact that they may be talking about him while he is not personally part of their discussion is all he can think about as he gets out of bed, cleans himself off, puts on some clothes, and leaves for the foyer.

He finds them on the first floor, sipping tea and making pleasantries in the sitting room. Moira squawks and leaps to her feet at the sudden appearance of her employer on the threshold, her porcelain cup and saucer clattering to the floor; nimble hands reach out and catch them before they can shatter, and Walsh hears the familiar noises of amusement – a kind of hollow noise echoing from the back of the throat – and Ian Hafford springs forwards, clasping Walsh's hands firmly in his. The creases and wrinkles of his face, crisscrossing his visage like lines on a topographic map, deepen and stretch as a large smile crosses the old man's face. The downy, cotton-white tufts of hair bob up and down when he energetically pumps Walsh's own, clammy hand. All the candles Moira has so conscientiously setup all around the room, covering almost

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