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<td>Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, also i love the Leper and i have saved him. You'll see what I mean, everyone buckle up for Advanced Feels!, don't worry i'm a huge bleeding-heart so it only happens once, Team as Family, Team Bonding, Team Dynamics, Friendship, Friends to Lovers, Slow Burn, like...glacially slow, rarepairs, Flirting</td>
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**What Happened to the Candlemaker's Apprentice**

by bellepeppertronix

**Summary**

A story about what Dismas did, where he went, what he saw, and who he loved.

**Notes**

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

The Beginning of an Adventure. Some of our Heroes, introduced.

Chapter Notes

Something seems to be wrong...the site seems to have reverted to an old version of this chapter, since I have added and moved some things since. Has this been happening to anyone else? I fixed whatever happened, but this is seriously weirding me out. :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was something wrong with the woods around the Villemont estate. The woods--ancient, overgrown, and virtually impenetrable--encroached on the little hamlet and seemed to be crushing it towards the coast, as if threatening any moment to push the little farmsteads and the remnants of the town down into the chilly surf.

Dismas’s first thought was that he had never before traveled through a forest where there were no birdsong, nor signs of animal life at all aside from the faint, distant croaking of frogs. They had not so much as startled a rabbit or a squirrel from the underbrush. His thoughts had run to starving people, desperately picking off anything small enough to kill and put in a pot; or else of some plague that had gone galloping through the area and killed all the creatures.

His second thought was that he didn’t think he’d ever seen this many diseased trees in one place in all his life; yet here, it seemed the only trees that looked healthy were in fact long-dead, and practically turned to stone. Altogether he misliked the woods; even had there not been the ever-present threat of being attacked by brigands, he had a foreboding feeling that there was something else stalking loose, hidden among the blighted trees.

“Better to be back in the miserable, leaking barracks, than out here in this,” the Highwayman grumbled, drawing his greatcoat closer around himself and huddling deeper into the red muffler he wore around his neck. “At least there, we know that it’s merely watered bird piss dripping on us, instead of something worse!”

The others said nothing, though the Leper, at the head of the line, chuckled a little, his shoulders shaking beneath the fall of tattered linen he wore as a head covering.

The party had been gone the better part of the morning, in the dark Weald-wood, where the blighted trees’ limbs grew together overhead in a gnarled, ugly canopy. Some few still bore leaves, if they could indeed be called such; they were misshapen, shriveled, and an unwholesome bile-green color. Many of them seemed to have been overtaken by enormous clusters of foul-looking fungus, huge mushrooms with weird, lumpy caps and gills powdered with poisonous-looking dust.

“Hush!” the Crusader said, and although the Highwayman rolled his eyes, he smirked and fell silent.
He had been whispering, after all.
It was certainly not as if this was his first foray into sneaking around, looking for things to kill for coin, or a scrap of food.

They continued on like this for some time, creeping forward as quietly as they could; after a while the Leper raised a hand, signaling the party to halt.
“Highwayman, if you please, your skills would be of use,” he said, and Dismas moved forward carefully, passing the Occultist, who half-turned to cast a suspicious glance over his shoulder at the path they had just passed down.

“There,” the Leper said, pointing at a plot of ground that had been recently disturbed, and carelessly covered over with tossed leaves and soil.
“A trap,” the Highwayman muttered, “And a cheap one. Let’s see, now…”
He broke a branch off a nearby dead or dying sapling, pitying the suffering little tree for a moment; then he strode carefully back over to them.
“ Might be best to stand back a bit,” he said.
The others backed up three or so paces, the Crusader clearly anxious.
The Highwayman knelt low and carefully turned over some of the leaves, revealing a large iron hoop pressed shallowly into the forest soil. In its center, he knew, there was a pressure plate, attached to a spring-action mechanism that would send row upon row of spikes stabbing upwards into whatever unsuspecting being walked over it.
He turned the stick over so its heavier end was facing outwards, raise it slightly, and then thumped it down in the circle’s center.
The blades snapped upright, bristling from all angles, with a sudden metallic latching noise; the stick shattered into splinters with the force.
Behind him, he could hear the Crusader shifting uncomfortably in his armor; the Occultist was muttering something under his breath.
“There, now. Easy as pie,” the Highwayman said.
“I thank you,” the Leper said, an they exchanged nods as Dismas walked back to the end of the line.
“Do you suppose,” the Occultist asked, “They have gone, and merely left their traps behind?”
“No; for a brigand band like this is most desperate. They are probably off checking their other snares right now. Pity whatever poor sods may have stumbled into their path, for that sort of business is an ugly way to die,” the Highwayman said.
They came to a gate.

~

He was right to be concerned--that time, at least.
It started simply, almost innocuously.
There was a brown wolf in the road, shaggy with what looked like mange; it turned towards them and bared its teeth in a growl, and the Highwayman could see that strips of bloodless, shriveled flesh hung loose from the thing’s legs.
At the sound of its growls, three others emerged from the trees.
The Leper was the first one to strike, making what would have been a devastating swipe at one of the beasts--except that it feinted out of the way, and his sword met only the earth. The wolf lunged and sank its teeth into the Leper’s upraised forearm, and he flung it back like a stuffed toy.
The others lunged for them, and he saw out of the corner of his eye that the Occultist was holding the miniature skull aloft, shrieking something in a language that sounded like broken glass.
The air shifted, like the force of a steam locomotive passing by, sucking at the hem of his coat and his hair, and he saw red-glowing tentacles lash out from nowhere above, striking the evil beasts like a rain of whips.

Then the Crusader lunged forward, his voice filling the air like a bell and his hand upraised. A Script of Light unfurled from his hand, the lines on the paper so bright that the sight of it seared the Highwayman’s eyes like staring at the heart of a flame; the beast that had attacked the Leper yowled once and then fell over dead, its carcass all aflame, while the others cringed back, still snarling.

“We have them! We must press this advantage!” the Crusader shouted.

The Highwayman got two shots off, one going wild and the other striking one of the beasts, which flinched and twitched, but did not bleed; he could feel the hairs on his arms and own the back of his neck standing on end as he realized that would have been a killing shot, had the creature been alive.

“Damn! What infernal devices reanimate these carcasses!” the Occultist shouted.

“Get behind me, magician!” the Highwayman said.

The Crusader and the Leper were making no headway against the beasts, who were proving too nimble for them; he watched as the Crusader raised his sword again, but was not fast enough to avoid the creature that leapt at his neck. His arm came up instead, but its jaws closed tight above his left vambrace, and the creature half-dragged him down for a terrifying instant before he managed to shove it off. The creature’s yellowed fangs ripped shreds of cloth from his garment as it drew back; the Highwayman saw the red running there when the Crusader finally managed to shake the creature off, shreds of his sleeve still in its jaws.

Staggering back, he muttered, “I—I…bleed…”

It was the Leper who thrust him back, swinging his massive sword at the encroaching wolves again; this time the swipe connected, sending one of them rolling and cleaving the other nearly in half. The other two were drawing upon he an the Occultist; he holstered the one pistol and pulled out another, this one loaded with shot rather than a bullet, and fired at the wolves.

None of the shot connected, as both beasts leapt out of the way with an uncanny nimbleness.

Nervous sweat was pricking hard in his armpits and down his back, as he hastily stuffed the first gun back into his coat, backing up towards the Occultist.

“Magician, if you’ve got any more handy tricks, now would be the time…”

But when he glanced over his shoulder at the other man, he saw him wide-eyed and slack-jawed, shaking like a shitting dog.

He could hear, in a distant way, the Crusader begging for a bandage; everything in his being pulled suddenly in that direction.

“Reynauld! Fall back! Magician! Damn it, can you hear me? MAGICIAN!”

He fired another shot clumsily, somehow hitting one of the wolves. The other continued without pausing, its dry black lips peeled back from its yellow fangs, close enough now that he could see its flat, dead eyes.

He stuffed the gun back into his coat, his hand closing around the hilt of his dirk. Suddenly he could hear the Occultist’s breathing, loud and hysterical, rising into screams.

“That woman is mad,” the Occultist said, his eyes flashing. His teeth were chattering, his nerves making him half-wild. “She is mad, to think that these woods can be purified of this evil! By the heavens and the Light, I have communed with the darkness and I know now what is afoot here! The beasts cannot be defeated, an our flesh will rot in their rotting festering bellies!”

He made no attempt to move when the gnasher lunged at him, catching at the hem of his robes. The Highwayman used the opportunity to stab the thing, feeling the knife strike bone where it went in above the creature’s shoulder, and yanking the blade free; it was not a clean slice, but the creature
staggered back at last, whimpering and growling. He was disgusted rather than satisfied to see thick, scabby-looking blood oozing at the wound; the creature staggered and fell, and finally lay still.

He spared only one moment to glance at the Magician, who still stood frozen on the spot, before rushing over to where the Crusader was slumped back against a tree. His sword was clutched weakly in his near-slack grip, and he held the injured arm close to his body. Blood was pouring from the wound, streaking the metal of the vambrace and staining the Crusader’s tunic.

“Reynauld, are you still with me?” he demanded.
“You have only to point me in their direction and I will smite them for great justice,” the Crusader said, but his voice was low and tight.

“Here,” the Highwayman said, slitting a length of cloth from the hem of the Crusader’s tunic for a tourniquet and producing bandage from his pockets. “Do not move your arm.”

But by the time he turned to help the Leper, the other man had dispatched the last wolf, severing its head from its rotting body.

A moment later he was quietly looming near them, offering him a tiny cloth parcel.

“Some herbs,” the Leper said. “To ease the pain and help restore his strength.”

The Highwayman took the parcel carefully. “Thank you,” he said, leaving off any address; he did not feel comfortable calling the man ‘Leper’ to his face, yet he realized with a strange feeling that he did not even know the man’s name yet.

The Leper tilted his head in the direction of the Occultist. “I will tend to him.”

The Highwayman only nodded.

The Occultist had backed up to the gate and stood there with his back pressed to it, clutching the little skull like a lifeline, his eyes still wide and horrified.

The Leper went over to try and speak with him, his voice pitched low and the trees muffling the sound even further.

The Highwayman felt a surge of annoyance as clear and bright as lightning; some soft-handed scholar with the street smarts of a cheese wheel had nearly cost them their lives. --Had nearly cost Reynauld his life! For all the man’s heroism to be wasted because some mumbling conjurer lost his nerve because of some wolves!

As carefully as he could, he removed the vambrace, rolled back the shredded sleeve of the quilted gambeson, revealing the wound.

The Crusader made a bitten-off noise of pain—the Highwayman paused a moment an made an apologetic face at him. “Sorry, my friend, I’ll try to make this quick.”

Hastily he bound the wound up, curling the Crusader’s arm back against his chest.

“How—how bad is it?” the Crusader asked.

“Bad enough that you’ll recover fine,” the Highwayman said, truthfully. “I’ve been bit by dogs before, and come away all right. Bastard didn’t get the chance to tear any flesh away, so that’s good.”

“Never before would I have imagined I’d be reassured by a rogue’s experience with guard mastiffs.”

The man’s chuckles echoed strangely behind the helmet’s face-guard.

The Highwayman snorted a laugh. “You laugh! When we get out of this shite-hole, remind me to show you the scars.”

“I trust they are not anyplace too private?” the Crusader asked.

“I’m not the poor sod from the story where he gets his stones bit off by his lady love’s jealous husband’s dog, if you want to know,” The Highwayman said, and tried not to let himself get too happy when the Crusader laughed at his joke.
The Highwayman had been hurriedly working while they talked, taking a tiny brass bowl out of a hidden pocket in his coat and shaking the small sachet of herbs loose into it. Carefully, he use the flint striker from his flintlock gun to ignite the herbs, shook them a bit to get them to smoulder evenly, and then held them out for the Crusader to take. The other man leaned forward, unlatched something and carefully slid up the helm’s face-plate, leaning forward to breathed the smoke.

“Wish we had rolling papers,” the Highwayman said. “It’d make taking this stuff that much easier.”
“I do not like it well enough to use out of battle,” the Crusader said. “It makes me feel as though my ears are stuck with wool…”

The Highwayman was aware in a loose way of the Leper’s low, carrying voice, talking the Occultist down from his madness, until the two finally rejoined them.

“I find the stuff helps. Calms the nerves, you know. Can’t always stay in the tavern, drinking holes into my guts, can I?” the Highwayman said.
The Crusader flicked strained, amused eyes up at him. “When we get back to town and you rush to get a drink, I shall remind you that you said that.”

~

Walking now at a more cautious pace even than before, they wended the rest of the paths, mercifully coming upon nothing worse more of the rabid, rotting wolves. These the Leper dispatched hastily, with occasional help from the Occultist. Whatever the Leper had told the man, it seemed to have helped, and he had his lid back on right—for the time being. Knowing what he did now, the Highwayman was not sure how far he’d ever trust the Occultist.

The man had taken to muttering under his breath and twitching his hands; the Highwayman could not look at him directly without seeing strange distortions, weird tentacle-like apparitions shifting in the air around him.

He hadn’t felt anything at all for the man before, but felt a sharp, acrid contempt now. The man’s gutlessness might have cost them their lives, and the Highwayman knew first-hand that being eaten alive by hounds was a gruesome way to go.

Even while these thoughts rankled his mind, something else caught his nose. “Hold up!” he hissed, suddenly, “I smell a fire!”

He looked sidelong at the Crusader whose injured side he had practically glued himself to, then began casting about for a safe place to prop the other man up.
The Crusader's hand closed around his arm in a grip that was iron-like, even if it trembled.
“I will fight alongside you or we shall all perish,” he said.
“You sure about that?” he asked, but blandly.
For a long, unbroken moment the black eye-slits in the helm pointed straight at him; then finally, there was a jerky nod.

But the world was merciful, for a change. The campsite had been set up in on overgrown cemetery which had been entirely eaten by the forest. They found the camp clearly abandoned, but recently; the fire still held glowing embers, though the tent looked as though it had been ransacked and then trampled.

“They have gone,” the Leper said, coming up from where he had scouted the perimeter.
“Stupid sods,” the Highwayman said. “Probably waylaid a farm cart from somewhere an’ brought their spoils back here, thinkin’ they’d have a proper feast. My guess is the wolves smelled ‘em and dealt with ‘em.”
The Leper agreed. "Ah, gentlemen," the Occultist said, from near one of the crumbling, overgrown stone crypts, "It appears our mission is at its end."

The brigands had been using the crypt as a storehouse for stolen goods: inside they found several strongboxes containing jewels, stamped deeds, even a few oil paintings. These, once fine, were now so obscured with a mix of dirt and rotten varnish that they all, but for one of them, were almost indistinguishable.

In the one painting they could see, a beautiful woman was sitting in a window overlooking the sea; with upraised wrist and delicate gesture, she held the sheer white curtains back with one hand. The palm of her brown hand was an exquisite seashell pink; she wore a lacy white tignon on her head, with dainty black curls showing at her forehead and nape. Her dress was elaborate and either very foreign or very old, as the Highwayman had never seen anything like it—a rose-colored robe with a low, elaborately embroidered neckline. Around her neck was a string of pearls that, had he had them to sell, would have gone for enough money to make him comfortable for years.

"Who do you suppose that is?" the Highwayman asked, at last.

"One of our patroness’s ancestors, by the look of things. The rocks in the painting seem to be the same ones off the coast." the Leper supplied. "We have what we need. Let us leave these damned woods."

The trek back to the hamlet was uneventful, fortunately.
A chill drizzle had set in, accompanied by sea fog in the low places, making eerie scenes even more ghostly.

As they walked, now and again, they would pass an old, ruined signpost—evidence that, at one point, this place had been a real destination, instead of the accursed backwater it was now.

When they climbed the hill they could see the lights of the town in the distance, and from this far the buildings looked far less dilapidated than they actually were. But with so few columns of smoke rising from the houses’ chimneys, and the complete lack of traffic on the road, gave away the truth. There were not even the sounds of livestock carried on the slack wind to give the illusion of life.

They passed first by the tavern. The barkeep stood in the doorway, wringing a ratty gray rag in his big hands, apparently for want of things to do. His dolorous face followed them as they passed.

By that time the fog had deepened and the sea chill settled in; walking though it was like walking through a constant rain of icy pinpricks. Two hunched old women tottered past, carrying half-empty marketing baskets and wearing enormous, all-enveloping black cloaks. They each carried a lantern, and the Highwayman thought he saw a knitting needle glinting from one of their chatelaines, before realizing with a shock that it was actually a large ice-pick.

In the chapel across the square, the bell began to toll the hour.

"How are you holding up?" he asked the Crusader, who had been marching forward with a kind of grim determination the entire time, silent but for his sometimes labored breathing.

"I am fine. Quit asking." he mumbled, finally.

Finally, finally, they reached the barracks—lights shining through the curtains of upstairs windows like blessings glimmering in the night. The Highwayman relaxed slightly, the tension leaving his shoulders and gut.
The ‘barracks’ was, in fact, a re-purposed hotel—one that had obviously been quite lavish, at one point. When he helped the Crusader inside and the Leper barred the door behind them all, he settled the injured man onto an old settee. The Highwayman paused a moment to cast a glance around.

All the furniture in the great hall—probably the place’s lobby, when it had been a hotel—was similar: carved of dark, heavy wood and upholstered with wine-red velvet, much of which had been gnawn by vermin. There were heavy rugs to match, too, equally eaten-up and worn. The floors were made of black and pale-gray marble tiles arranged in a checkerboard pattern, obviously fine before age and lack of care had dulled their shine.

Early on, they had moved ever piece of usable furniture to the back of the hall, to make a horseshoe shape round the enormous stone hearth. This hearth was magnificent: to either side there rose tall ravens, carved of black stone, each as tall as a man. Above the mantel was a ruinously smoke-stained painting of some landscape—likely the nearby coast.

Up in the front of the hall, there were boarded-up windows that went almost from the floor to the soaring ceiling. These were shrouded with heavy drapes of crimson velvet, rotted from their brass hanging rings in some places. Here an there, as well, rodents had eaten away at the hems, leaving them ratty and ragged. Still, they provided some shielding against the chilly sea wins an drafts that would come whistling into the place, like knives made of ice: the shutters were weather-beaten and the windows cracked where they were not entirely broken-out.

Had they returned at a normal hour, the place would have been crowded with their comrades-in-arms; it was uncommon to find the place so quiet. The fire in the hearth had burned down low, giving off only a low warmth and a dull orange light. In the wake of the chapel bells’ tolling, the entire aspect was stiflingly silent.

“You wait here,” the Highwayman said, “And I’ll go wake the doctor.”

“There is no need,” came the Leper’s voice.

When he looked up, the two of them were approaching from the stairs, the Doctor carrying her black satchel. The rest passed in a blur of exhaustion. The Highwayman woke the next morning with only fragmented memories of whatever he had done or seen next. But—when he looked across the room at the other bed beside his own, he felt at peace. The Crusader slept there, his arm swaddled from shoulder to wrist in bandage. He slept, unbothered, and alive.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who finally got a replacement keyboard for my laptop? :D So now i can go back and add in the missing letters!
There was a humid, boiled-food smell coming from somewhere. Carefully, Dismas rose and pulled on a clean set of clothes; he gave a last, lingering glance at himself in the tarnished mirror hanging on the wall opposite his bed. It was a long, narrow mirror, the last of a set of two; the one opposite Reynauld’s bed had been long broken-out, leaving behind a frame empty except for a single shard of silvery glass in the upper right corner.

His coat held a clinging, faint stink of rot, the fur of the collar giving it off in wafts as he pulled it on, and he found his muffler so damp that putting it on for warmth would be pointless; instead, he stretched it out to dry over the bed’s footboard.

He glanced over at Reynauld, asleep and laid out on his back, looking as stiff as a wooden toy soldier. His bandaged arm lay on his chest, the fingers of the wounded hand just showing above the blanket.

Fresh air was supposed to be good for sick and injured people, but the thought of opening the window and letting in the chill made him pause and ultimately abandon the idea. Finally he simply pulled on his boots and left the room, moving as quietly as he could. Reynauld did not stir a hair.

~

Downstairs in the kitchens, the Plague Doctor, the Vestal, and the Arbalest were talking. Someone had dragged a huge, ancient cauldron out of storage and it was boiling with the lid half-off and several cooking bags floating in it. There were also two three-legged skillets standing among the embers, one of which was full of frying eggs and the other which contained some griddlecakes.

On the scarred kitchen table the pewter dishes were stacked in the center, with the cutlery in a cracked basket and an odd assortment of wooden cups and pewter beakers around it. The fire was moderate so the kitchen was almost oppressively warm, compared to the chilly hallway.

The Arbalest grinned and waved when she saw him; she was seated at the table, an empty plate in front of her. He waved back, smiling a little.

“Well, he cannot go back out in that state, certainly,” the Vestal said. She stood in her simple, rough green habit, a bowl of batter canted up on one hip and a wooden spoon in her hand.

“He could be up and back to rights in an instant, if you would open your book,” the Doctor said.

“I cannot,” the Vestal said, “I told you, the Light is not a plaything or a pet, to be at one’s beck and call whenever one pleases.”

The Doctor made a noise of annoyance. “A poor tool, that only works when IT sees fit!”

The Vestal cried out in offended anger. “What! A tool? You refer to the Holy Light as a thing to be used? How dare you, you--you heretical leech-peddler! You--”

“At least my leechcraft works when I need it, not when it needs me! If your Light cannot even be bothered to aid one of its most diligent servants, then what good--”

“Right, girls, I think that’s enough,” the Arbalest cut in. “Let us not stress ourselves or the poor man to death with all this shouting.”

She had risen and gone to stand beside the Vestal, and put her hand on her arm gently.

“Come on, Sister. Come way, now. Come away…”

The Vestal stuck the spoon back into the batter and roughly thumped the bowl down on the table, rattling the cutlery in the basket. She allowed the Arbalest to pull her away, but threw a murderous
glare back over her shoulder at the Doctor as she followe the other woman from the room.

A moment later the Grave Robber sauntered in from the hallway. She had a paring knife in one hand and a yellow apple in the other, and was peeling the skin off in a single long, curling ribbon.

“What happened with them?” she asked, tipping her head in the direction the Vestal and Arbalest had gone.

“The nun got a bee in her bonnet when I asked her to call on the Light to help the injured Crusader. She refused.”

Dismas was privately wondering where she’d gotten a fresh apple; so far he hadn’t seen so much as a fruit stall or even a gardener’s cart at the market, when there had been one.

“Hm.” the Grave-Robber said, munching the apple’s skin thoughtfully. “Well, what does it matter, if he’s injured and needs a rest? I saw the Lady down in the coach-yard talking to some rather strapping fellows. We’ll have more than enough help, soon enough.”

~

She was right.

Among the new arrivals was a young Crusader by the name of Boleyn. He was not from Reynauld’s old order, but had apparently heard glorified accounts of their exploits and travails, because he went into rapturous praise when he first met Reynauld and noticed the colors of his tunic.

Reynauld’s response to such words was humble and self-effacing; when the younger man begged to hear more tales of his travels, he quietly, but bluntly, diverted the topic.

The others were an Antiquarian, a Bounty Hunter, and a Hound-Master, with massive wolf-hound in tow.

These last two made Dismas feel prickles of uneasiness; he had known he was a wanted man, but he had figured the place was too remote, and the travel conditions too dire, for any but the most dogged or desperate would have sought him there.

He made himself scarce for a few days, holing himself up in a different abandoned house every night—a feat which was not difficult, as the hamlet’s emptiness was even worse than he had first thought. More than half of the houses in town were abandoned, some without even boards to cover the windows or doors. He did not so much break into these improvised hideouts as he strolled in through the back or side door.

When he went back to the hotel, it was only to check up on Reynauld. Loss of blood had weakened the man, and while he was there one day he overheard the Doctor saying something about disease.

~

“Where have you been hiding? The Lady asked after you, the other day. She is seeking to put together another party, to venture out into the Weald and retrieve some grain stolen by the brigands. It was intended for the poor people of this stricken town.” Reynauld sat at the foot of his own bed, which had been severely, perfectly made: Dismas suspected that a coin dropped in the coverlet’s middle would bounce back, from how tightly the bedding was tucked in.

Reynauld had his Versebook propped open in his lap, his uninjured hand resting on the pages. His arm was no longer in a sling, but was still heavily bandaged.

“Had to disappear for a bit. Or haven’t you noticed that two of our new additions are lawmen?” Reynauld sighed and shook his head. “They are not after you, Dismas. The bounty hunter is here for the money, and the gendarme because he heard there were evil deeds done here that needed righting.
You ought to come back; you have made yourself into a fugitive for no reason.”

For a moment Dismas wanted to ask the Crusader how he could possibly be so naive as to believe someone straight-off when they told you their intentions, but instead he shrugged a little.

“Well, can’t be too careful, can I?” then, after a moment of silence, he glanced back at Reynauld’s arm again and then finally asked, “The Doctor said something about--disease.”

Then Reynauld snorted a little laugh. “It’s not catching, if you’re concerned.”

“That’s not what I--”

“Well, can’t be too careful, can I?” then, after a moment of silence, he glanced back at Reynauld’s arm again and then finally asked, “The Doctor said something about--disease.”

Then Reynauld snorted a little laugh. “It’s not catching, if you’re concerned.”

“Unless you are afraid anemia caused by loss of blood be a contagious illness, that is.” Reynauld spoke calmly, but his mouth was quirked, as after a laugh.

Dismas said, “Spread, of course, by touching sharp things to your soft bits?”

“Of course.” Reynauld said. “Wolves are also an excellent means of transmission.”

Well, if there was enough left for the good Doctor’s leeches, I’d say you’re fine, hey?”

Reynauld groaned; they chuckled a little at the stupid joke.

Strange you aren’t worried about not getting out into the fray again sooner,” Dismas said, sitting back a little on his bed. He was starting to consider kicking off his boots and taking off his coat and actually getting comfortable.

Reynauld shrugged slightly. “A sensible man does not try to hone a damaged blade with more use. You must repair it and re-sharpen it.” He looked down at his swaddled hand and clenched his fist, hard enough that the tendons in his wrist jumped under the skin.

Dismas’s eyebrows jumped up in worry, too, and he tensed all over--but Reynauld did not cry out in pain, only gritted his teeth; after a moment he relaxed, and Dismas did as well. He was unsure what he would have even done, had the other man done something to injure himself. Try and restrain him while hollering for the doctor and the nun?

They were silent for a moment; it was quiet everywhere, before someone slammed a door and the dog began barking. Then there were the sounds of several more doors opening and closing, with varying degrees of quietude. Muffled voices followed.

Reynauld slipped the ribbon marker back into his Versebook and shut it between his legs, rolling his eyes heavenward.

“Please, Dismas, I beg of you. Come back and give me someone to talk to, who does not stomp about downstairs demaning silence for the benefit of my recovery!”

Dismas laughed outright, then. “Your new shadow, making a nuisance of himself already?”

Reynauld frowned. “It is not that I find him annoying; merely that he is so…enthused, I cannot help but feel exhausted when he is near.”

“What! You, exhausted by someone else’s unflagging good cheer! That sounds strange…as strange as it is familiar…” Dismas said, and laughed when Reynauld groaned at this.

“I am not that bad,” Reynauld said.

~

To test the waters, Dismas started eating in the barracks-inn again. They all sat around a massive wooden table in the great, drafty dining hall. Though there were two fireplaces, one at either end of the hall, there was only enough firewood for a fire in the fireplace at the hall’s western end. This left the east end sunk in murky shadows; most of them clustered nearer the fire, eating and talking.

He sat beside Reynauld; the Leper sat across from him, beside the young Crusader Boleyn, who was still tossing awestruck glances at Reynauld when he thought the older man wasn’t looking.

The Grave Robber was sitting on a settle beside the fireplace, her booted feet stuck out near the fire
for warmth. The Arbalest and Vestal were standing near the fire, chatting. The Arbalest was holding a piece of bread near the flames with a pair of long tongs, to toast it.

“As we thin the weaklings and peons, stronger monsters will emerge,” the Leper said.
Dismas stuck his spoon back into his stew.
“Beg your pardon?”

The Leper tilted his head at him slowly. “Surely you did not think it would continue like this, with nothing wore than undead wolves and idle packs of desperate brigands?”
Dismas said nothing, but shrugged a little.

The Leper continued, “No. There are evil forces at work here--the sorts of which do not stop after the reanimation of a hanful of mangy starved wolves. The very air seethes with this vile energy.”
Dismas forced a smirk. “You sound like you’ve been spending too much time with that Occultist,” he said.

The Leper shook his head. “One does not need to commune with evil to see these things.”
“I get a bad feeling, too, seeing diseased wolves running amok. But footpads are to be expected everywhere. I dislike the diseased forest, though.”
“The forest rots from within, from beneath. The earth itself is poisoned. This is no mere blight or beetle-borne plague sweeping through.”

Disms leaned forward, deeply curious now, and almost as frightened. “So you really believe all that shite about devils and demons coming up from under the manor? That this town is damned?”
“I do.”
“If that be the case, what is it you intend to do here?” he whispered.
“I intend to slay the demons, to cut them down where they stand, and drive back their evil from this world.”
Dismas wanted to laugh it off--the words. He wanted, almost deperately, to believe that there were no such things and ghosts and demons. Still, the Leper’s otherworldly calm was most chilling of all; the man took a drink from his cup and glanced at the fire, smiling when the Vestal said something to him.
Dismas barely remembered the rest of the meal.

He threw a glance down towards the shadowed end of the table, where the less talkative people were sitting; it was with another prickle of unease that he noticed the Hound-Master looking between he and the Leper with a serious expression on his sunburnt face. He was feeding the dog chunks of chicken from his soup with one hand, his spoon held in the other, and when Dismas met his eyes the man’s facial expression did not change.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Noises in the night. A mission. The fate of some of the Hamlet's unfortunates is revealed. The Leper as Saviour again. Discussions about brigands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He woke in the small hours of the morning to a steady, slow, rhythmic thumping. When he lifted his head from his pillow he found Reynauld already awake, glaring at the wall to his left.

“What is that infernal noise?” he grumbled.

Dismas had to laugh. “You’ve never heard the drumbeat of love? Shame, friend, and I thought monasteries were hotbeds of that sort of clandestine buggery.”

Reynauld sat up, very suddenly.

“What? Don’t tell me you’re going to try and stop them. What if it’s that old soldier and the dog-minder? You’re going to risk taking a mace to the face for another hour of quiet sleep?”

Reynauld was silent, but Dismas could hear him fumbling his clothing on in the dark; the sudden heavy sounds of his boots meeting the floor.

“Reynauld?”

He had a sudden fear that he’d offended the man one too many times, and that this was the final straw. Another moment, he thought, and he’d get a knife in the ribs or the other man would try to throttle him to death. He snatched the candle off the side table and hastily struck a match.

In the flickering yellow light, Reynauld’s face was unreadable, his eyes blank but his mouth pulling strangely.

“Are you all right?”

“I--I have to go--” he said, pulling on his padded jacket. A moment later he was rushing out of the room, with no further explanation.

Dismas flopped back against his single pillow with a sigh.

Reynauld was not back for breakfast; Dismas watched everyone like a hawk, trying to see who it was who had been getting the lay of their life that morning, but everyone had excellent poker faces, and his guesses went nowhere.

The Grave Robber plopped down in the chair next to him and cheerfully said, “You look awfully bright-eyed this morning.”

“Hah!” he said. “You heard that, too? I wish it had been me.”

She looked around, smirking and snickering. “Ahh, well, me too! I’ve no idea who it was. Who do you suspect? Finally, something interesting around here!”

The two of them spent the entirety of the meal leaned shoulder-to-shoulder, muttering between themselves as they speculated and tried to guess who the lucky parties might be.
When Reynauld wasn’t back by midday, Dismas’s nagging worry in the back of his mind had redoubled itself. There was nothing to be done for it, however; the Lady wanted to speak to them, so immediately after the meal they all gathered in the great dining hall again, sitting nearest the end where the fire was usually lit. Today’s fire was obviously hastily-lit: two logs and a bare handful of kindling meant that the room was still chilly.

The Lady, all in immaculate gray and with her damnable hood still up, walked the length of the room a full two times before speaking.

He paid her half his attention, his other focused entirely on the doorway at the other end. Reynauld, strangely, did not show for the meeting until halfway through, when he appeared with a hangdog look about him and lingered just in the vestibule. Dismas found himself staring at the other man; but a highwayman and cardsharp’s ability to watch while also going unnoticed worked very well there, and it was only towards the meeting’s end that he finally caught his name--or, rather, occupation--on the Lady’s voice, and glanced away from Reynauld.

She was saying, “The party I have selected for this task includes Masters Highwayman, Man-at-Arms, and Leper, and Madamoiselle Arbalest. Departure will be at nine o’clock sharp, tomorrow morning. Are there any questions?”

The Grave-Robber had been sitting beside him there, bare-headed for the entirety of the meeting. It felt strange, to see her without her capotain hat. The hat lay on the table, just in front of her, and her hands were folded in her lap. He wondered for a moment, at her strangely prim posture.

This passed quickly; she cupped her hands and a gold ring with an emerald set in it glinted and flashed suddenly between her fingers, as she rolled the ring between her curled fingertips. She flicked a long lock of coppery hair back over her shoulder with the free hand. “You ought to have paid attention. Her Ladyship said some awfully poetic things about the woods you’re about to be tramping through for the next two weeks.”

“I heard that much.” he said.

She stood and gave him a tired smile, before moving away, setting the capotain back on her head with a flourish. “Take care of yourself out there.”

“My thanks,” he said, and meant it.

The inexplicable worry he felt about Reynauld had neither been resolved nor abated. But before he had a chance to make his way over to the other man to ask anything about it, the group was separating, people leaving the room while grumbling and talking quietly amongst themselves.

At least, he told himself, he had not felt the Houndmaster’s eyes on him, or the Bounty-Hunter’s; when he had glanced over at them, they had both seemed wholly engrossed wht the Lady was saying. Now they were all gone; the Lady stood near the fireplace, apparently watching the meager fire gutter out. She was a little thing, up close, he realized--much smaller when she was still and silent, without the force of her voice or her quick, decisive movements. He watched her stretch out her small hands towards the fire’s feeble warmth, the bones of her thin wrists encased the gray leather of her gloves. One of them had been mended at the fingertips.

Dismas hesitated a moment, then realized he had no idea what to even say to her; he was never a master of etiquette, and it did not seem wise to risk saying the wrong thing and offending the woman currently paying for his room and board, even if it was accidental. He turned and quietly left the room.
“Always making things worse than they have to be,” Dismas said, as he wrestled some of the ivy away from the round gate. The leaves had a white fuzz on their undersides that turned to a grayish, mildewy-smelling slime when touched. He was glad of his gloves, gladder still he could wring them clean later with a rag soaked in saddle-soap.

“You disagree with gates?” the Arbalest asked, amused. She did not turn to face him, however; her dark eyes were scanning the trees and undergrowth around them, her massive crossbow held at the ready.

“I disagree with scattering them around in a damned forest,” the Highwayman said. “And I disagree with whatever poncy jumped-up ass decided he needed ‘em out here in the first place. But that’s the nobs for you, hey? Acting like even the woods should be prettied up like a strolling garden.”

“You have no love of the nobility,” the Man-at-Arms said. Dismas chuckled. “Who gives a damn about my feelings towards them? They have no love of me!”

“It’s very likely that these woods were a strolling garden, once,” the Leper said. “Have you noticed the little stone walls, here and there between the trees? In many places they are covered entirely with moss and leaf-mould, but in the thin patches you can see them clearly. And the trees—the older ones are spaced too regularly to have been mere haphazard nature.”

He was standing on the gate’s opposite side, and began using one of their shovels to lever a huge, gnarled tendril of ivy root away from the gate’s hinge. The root-wood cracked and rasped as it snapped loose, shedding splinters of reddish, blistered-looking bark. The sap ran thick as ichor, and was the streaky snot-white color of rancid milk.

Dismas stepped back, grimacing, as the Leper flung the armful of vines away from himself. He breathed a sigh, glanced down at his hands, clenching and unclenching them carefully.

“Thorn get you?”

The Leper hesitate another moment before murmuring, “No, I think not…still, I must take care when I stretch my ligaments, lest I accidentally tear them.”

Dismas thought, at first, that he was joking. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard a man worry aloud he may tear his thews, even from a proper giant like you. D’you often overwork yourself so much that it’s a common fear of yours?”

It was meant as a joke. The Leper was a big fellow, to be sure, nearly a full head taller than Dismas, and taller, even, than Reynauld, if not broader. Dismas expected a laugh and a swear and that be it, to lighten the mood.

Instead, he got a rueful little smirk, beneath the Leper’s mask. “No, perhaps not. And yet most people still have the sensation left to know when they were at risk of such a thing happening.”

Dismas opened his mouth to apologize, but the old Man-at-Arms was already striding up to the gate, struggling to yank the rusted things open.

He decided to drop the topic, clumsy joke and all.

~

“The bastards swarm like rats when the lights go out,” the Man-at-Arms grumbled. He held a gauze pad over a gash in his shoulder and huffed a little, but did not protest when the Arbalest unwrapped and re-wrapped it, much more tidily.

“I thank you,” he said, nodding.

“You are welcome. There’s something strange I noticed,” the Arbalest said, when she was done.
“Have you not noticed how they all wear the same green hoods and jerkins? And the armor, cheap and ill-fitting though it is, all seems to be the same type.”

“Perhaps they broke into the guard-house at the manor and stole the gear from there,” the Man-at-Arms rumbled. “Damned place looks like it has certainly sat empty for long enough.”

“But then why are there so many of them? And so well-armed, too…”

“You are right,” the Leper said. “There is something else afoot here. I cannot say what it is yet, but I have yet to run across any band of brigands, in any of my travels, as well-armed and well-shod as these. They look as though they have been here for some time, but even so, at one point they seem to have been part of some organized force.”

Dismas snorted. “Maybe they are the old guards. I doubt that the Lady’s grand-unkie was payin’ ‘em too well, if his lands look as hell-wrecked as all this.”

They were all silent for some time. The Man-at-Arms glowered down at his shoulder; the Arbalest had moved a ways off, looking behind herself.

“What do you hear?” the old Man-at-Arms asked.

She shook her head. “Not hear. Can you not smell that? It’s like…mushrooms and rotten wood and…the stink under a bandage when the flesh is beginning to slough away…”

Dismas felt cold all over, the stress needling into his mind.

“We ought to move,” the Man-at-Arms said at last.

The Arbalest used the stump of one torch to light the next, and they pushed on.

~

They moved silently through the forest, now and again dodging beneath a tree bough laden down with fungal rot. Once, they came upon a wall of rubble and overgrown bramble that looked like a failed barricade; the vines had pustulent, swollen-looking red veins and wicked thorns. They dismantled it with shovels, taking longer than he would have expected: the vines, though wizened and rotten, were incredibly tough.

He noticed, with a jolt of belated fear, as the Leper suffered a series of scrapes that tore the wrappings on one of his arms; but he did not stop until the Arbalest tapped him and pointed it out. Then he stood back, seeming a little embarrassed, while she sprinkled holy water first on her hands, then on his wounds, before dressing them with some of the gauze.

By the time they had finished, they were all sore, and the urine-colored daylight that remained came slanting through the dense forest canopy at an angle.

They found a set of luggage, all of black leather and with silver buckles glinting even beneth the layers of tarnish of years, or decades; it had obviously once been fine, and belonged to someone of consequence.

“May as well search it,” Dismas said. “The Lady says we may keep whatever we find, as long as we notify her and it is not an heirloom.”

“I’ll not rummage through any dead person’s luggage,” the Man-at-Arms said. “If you want to open it, you do it!”

He did, and found a suit of clothes spotted white with mold, and a moth-eaten black velvet pouch full of citrine gems—strangely without any settings—and another pouch full of gold coin. The others edged a slight ways up the path, except for the Arbalest, who stood near him with the torch.
There was a faint, low groan he heard; straightening up suddenly, he tapped the Arbalest on the shoulder and gestured for her to be silent.
She regarded him with surprised eyes, but nodded in agreement. A moment later he had done the same to the Leper and the old soldier.
They stood still a moment while he listened, before he carefully moved ahead, parting the ivy and leaves covering the gate at the path’s end.

Through the trees he saw four figures moving slowly along the crooked path; one, a woman wearing a ragged skirt and a mask made of the skull-bones of a human face with a crown of nails, and two hulking men, bare-chested and wearing the remnants of blood-colored robes. They wore similar skull masks, all with crowns of rusted nails.

The woman held a leather strap restraining a cringing emaciated man with sunken eyes, who went groaning and muttering as he walked. He wore gray rags an was barefoot and bare-headed. Dismas had never seen inside a madhouse before, but even he had seen enough terrible twopenny plays to know what a straightjacket looked like.

“Through there,” Dismas murmured, his eyes never leaving them. “We can surprise them if we move quickly enough.”

~

The element of surprise was never wasted, Dismas thought, as he knifed one of the brutes in the belly. He feinted back when he clumsily swung back at him. The brute reeled back bleeding, growling and hissing through his teeth.

The Arbalest called out and a moment later a rain of small arrows pelted down around the others. But the woman in the skull mask raised a crude wand and hissed something at Dismas that crashed against his mind and soul like ice; he felt the light flee from around him.

“Don’t listen to her!” the Arbalest shouted. “She means to drive us all mad!”

She was not the only one. The man in the ragged gray straightjacket cringed behind them, sobbing and mumbling. The woman in the skull headdress fell back, then grabbed the man by one of the leather straps and pulled him forward, whispering something into his ear; he staggered forward and nearly fell on his knees, groaning and shouting horribly.

A moment later he fixed them with his wild-eye glare and shouted something at them, his voice hoarse and garbled.

It occurred to Dismas only then why there were no people in the Sanitarium, why there were so few people in the town, and why no one dared go anywhere when the sun was not up.
All down the back of his neck and along his arms, the hairs stood on end; the breath shivered out of him with terror.

They had been taking them.

In the end it was the Leper’s iron will which saved them; his sword came down and cleft the poor madman’s head from his neck, killing the brute who Dismas had knifed with the same stroke.
The Arbalest’s next loosed bolt took the woman in the skull mask in the neck; she fell backwards with a hiss, one hand clawing uselessly at the air.

The Man-at-Arms swung his mace a final time, striking the last brute in the chest and coming away from a bleeding, sucking hole; the brute died gurgling facedown in his own blood.

“What in the name of the Light…” the Man-at-Arms muttered, clearly disgusted.

“What were they doing with that poor addled man?” the Arbalest cried, distressed. “What--why did
you kill him? They were holding him prisoner!"
“He was crazed,” the Leper said bluntly. “Whatever madness they infected his mind with, it clearly
was not the sort that could ever be remedied or corrected.”

“Who the hell were they?” Dismas said at last. “What were they doing out here, wandering in this
place? With him?” He did not want to directly ask what they had been planning to do, or already
done, to the poor bastard; fear still skittered in his ribcage like rats, making his breath come too fast.
He very badly wanted a drink, a clear view, a cool breeze on his face. Suddenly he felt trapped, the
trees closing in on all sides like walls.
He was aware that the Arbalest was weeping.

“We--we should bury him, at least,” she said. “For you can see he was not in his right mind…”
“There is no time,” the Leper said. This time he spoke more gently. “Though your concern for him
and his remains is valorous an kind, I do not think the Light would begrudge you this, if you were to
simply speak a prayer over the remains and leave them. We must hurry. There are worse things that
roam these woods.”

“I am fine,” the old soldier snapped, from where he’d fallen. “Don’t trouble yourselves over me!”
But when he attempted to rise a second time, and slipped again, the Leper leaned down, offering one
hand. When the older man looked at it, then looked away, the Leper stepped back.
The Man at Arms finally struggled to his own feet, huffing and ajusting his armor.

“It is not so contagious as you think,” the Leper said, fter watching him impassively for a long
moment. “But I understand your fear, and respect it.” Then he strode away, silent.
Dismas watched them unhappily, uncertain as to why. He came up and looked into the pit the older
man had nearly fallen into, a moment later.

“Pitfall traps,” Dismas said. “Sloppy ones, too. Told you I ought to walk closer to the front.”
The Man at Arms snorted. “Aye, the better to loot whatever curios we come across, and keep all the
good valuables for yourself!”

“Well, if you’ve a mind to keep blundering into traps, by all means, keep insulting me,” Dismas said.
He did not mention that the older man had steadfastly refused to open the luggage earlier. The
annoyance was hot inside him, a double-edged knife--he was a thief, there was no denying that.
Attempting to tell the truth that he’d not stolen a single treasure since he’d arrived was pointless.
The Arbalest went to offer the old soldier a bandage, but he waved her away, annoyed, and walked
up ahead again.

“What difference does it make, how neatly the trap was made?” the Arbalest asked, after they had
walked on farther down the broken path. “Is one hole full of knives not like any other?”
“You dig pit traps like that--” Dismas jerked his head back in the direction of the trap, “When you’re
tryin’ to get rid of wolves. That one back there was too shallow; a beast could fall in an’ get stuck a
couple times on those wicked blades down there, but still hop back out. Wounded, cornered wolves
ain’t exactly ideal prey for untrained hunters.”
She was quiet, then, but for a small noise of unease; he could not fault her, in a place like that.

~

Come nightfall, they camped off the road, in a clearing that again looked as if it had been part of
some larger garden at some point: a low stone wall ran around the perimeter, and here and there,
paving stones peeked from beneath the moss and leaf mould unerfoot.
The trees had overgrown the area, creating an arbor of almost stifling dark. Where there were patches of sky visible, the stars seemed distant and faint.

Dismas found himself fighting the urge to jump at shadows; he and the Arbalest built the fire, while the Leper and the Man at Arms patrolled the perimeter of the little clearing.

“What d’you suppose was here before?” she asked. Her voice was a low murmur; you did not speak loudly at night in a forest like that, or at any other time, either. Not, of course, unless you wanted to become something’s dinner—or worse.

“Might have been anything,” Dismas said. He thought unhappily about the Leper’s guess that the forests had once had strolling paths; that the entire place was so ruined, and had been so long, that all that remained were a few crumbling walls and half-buried flagstones.

They tucked into their packs and ate their provisions in the solemn silence of the condemned; it was a long while before the first of them spoke.

“There was some sort of pavilion here,” the Leper said. “Look there, you can see there were wooden railings. These woods must have been the pride of the estate, to have been so built-up. It is a shame that we see them now, only as twisted remnants of whatever their former glory was.”

The Arbalest shifted uneasily. “Why would you build a pavilion in a forest?”

“As I said, it is very likely that these were private woods, intended for the pleasure of the estate’s owners and their privileged guests.”

When she still looked at him skeptically, he chuckled and shook his head. “It is not uncommon, in other lands, for the nobility to reserve a section of pristine woods for their exclusive use. I was under the impression that it was common enough here, as well.”

“Aye, so it is,” Dismas said. “More to the ruin and suffering of the common folk. When land was held in common, you could at least go out an’ get a rabbit or a fish for your pot, if you was hungry and so inclined. Now, with all the nobles snappin’ up any bit of land that they lay eyes on and take a likin’ to, folks are hard-pressed to get enough to eat.”

The Man at Arms grunted in assent. “Yes, that is true. But there are other ways to go about getting a decent meal and clothes on your back.”

“By which you mean, marching in some nob’s army, fighting their wars, an’ dyin’ for ‘em, who’s the same people who’s made it so’s you can’t put food in your mouth in the first place.”” Dismas said. “Better that, and honest, than running through their forests and poaching like a starving animal,” the Man at Arms said.

Dismas scoffed derisively. “You’ve got a funny sense of ‘honesty’, mate.”

The Man at Arms had fixed his dark eye on Dismas’s face, and was giving him one of those distinct looks that said that, had they been elbow-to-elbow at a bar, someone would have already thrown a fist. The Highwayman put a hand on the pommel of his dirk, making the movement slow and obvious.

They all froze when they heard the Leper’s sigh, and the following rasp of fabric.

Dismas saw the Arbalest’s hands rise to cover her mouth, her eyes widening with sorrow rather than fear; but the Man at Arms, when he looked over his shoulder and saw that the man sitting behind him had removed the brass mask, leapt up and stumbled away as if stung.

“Are…are you well, Mister Leper?” the Arbalest asked. Dismas could see that the daft woman, though nervous, was actually leaning towards the sick man.

The Leper sighed and licked his chapped, scarred upper lip. What Dismas could see of his face, outside the shadow of the fabric veil he still wore, was seriously scarred: the man’s eyes were entirely hidden in his hood’s shadow, his nose flattened as if it had been broken at least once, and
rubbed raw on its tip; reddish, half-scabbed lesions covered his cheeks.

“By all means, pay me no mind,” he said quietly. “If you two wish to continue arguing, at least I wish to feel the wind upon my face a final time before you bring the fiends down upon us.”

Then, with an almost careless glance at the Man at Arms, who stood at the firelight’ edge with one arm upraised to shield his face, he said, “And are you quite finished?”

The silence stretched so taut it made Dismas’s mind ache. He blurted, “Aww--don’t trouble yourself over him. He hasn’t traveled--probably never seen a man with a face ate up by pox. Ought to’ve worn a raincoat, friend. Still, it ain’t so bad--you’ve still got your nose, hey?”

To his surprised and immense relief, the Leper turned his face back to Dismas. For a moment he looked completely blank--before his lips twitched into a grin and he burst into laughter.

He dropped the mask into his lap and sat and laughed, covering his eyes with one hand, covering his mouth after a moment, and finally spoke. “Yes, I suppose I still have that. You say things that are ridiculous…I thank you, for that. It is rare I find anything to laugh at, these days.”

That tipped the tension over. The Arbalest was smiling, too, behind her hands.

The Man at Arms growled something under his breath, his annoyance clear. He strode back over to the fire and--rather forcefully--sat back down. He looked first at Dismas, with clear distaste, and then at the Leper. Then he spoke, “All right! I will admit it! Yes, I was afraid of you at first! I feared the disease and all it entails--a living death, cursed to live with your very skin and limbs slowly rotting off your body!”

The Highwayman glared at him, his hands clenching into fists.

Then the Man at Arms said, “But I learned. The more I learned, the more the fear grew, and changed. After seeing what valor you fought with, what bravery, and how sterling you character, I was no longer able to fear you, to think of you as a disease-ridden wretch. And yet I still feared. But now, for the first time, I feared I might lose a brother-in-arms--not in battle, but to disease.”

At this, the Leper looked up, seeming to perk up all over.

“I thank you, for that last kindness, at least,” he murmured, before replacing the metal mask.

The Arbalest spoke next. “We are all children of the Light, afflicted or not. Let us not speak of such things; our surroundings are grim enough, without the added talk.”

They finished their meal in silence, broken only by the sound of the far-off water crashing against the coast, and the ceaseless sea-wind rushing about the trees’ withered, gnarled canopies.

~

Later, when it was quiet and the fire had mostly died, the Highwayman decided it was time to end his charade of sleeping.

He rolled over in his bedroll, feigned a yawn and stretch to loosen his knife-arm, and then sat up. The Leper sat nearer the fire, the metal mask off again, and resting face-up on his knee. His side was to the Highwayman, who could not quite see the man’s face because of the angle he sat at, as well as the shroud he wore over his head.

Taking care to rustle his clothes as he rose--for he knew all to well that surprises were not welcomed in places like this--the Highwayman sat up and carefully pushed himself free of his bedroll and worn, coarse blankets.

The Leper half turned to face him, pinching up a fold of the cloth to cover his face as he did.

“Are you well?” he asked.

“Well enough,” the Highwayman shrugged.
“You did not have to let that old strip of rawhide talk to you like that,” the Highwayman said, quietly.
The Leper said nothing, merely poked at an ember that had fallen from a log, nearer the edge of the fire.
“What was I to do?” the Leper’s soft, hoarsely sonorous voice was quiet, too. “Ought I have rushed to defend myself, shouting about my wounded honor, and started a fight with a fellow traveler? And also risked bringing the fiends that roam these woods own on our heads?”

“Nothing so drastic as all that,” the Highwayman said. “I find a good thump in the ribs is sufficient to stifle even the loudest barking dog.”
“Hm,” the Leper said. He was quiet for a long moment, and the Highwayman was uncertain if he had offended him or not, before the Leper spoke again.
“What would you do, if there were one thing you could do to remove some suffering and evil from the world?”

Seeking to lighten the mood, the Highwayman replied glibly, “I’d ask how much coin they were paying to do the task, for it were sure to be something monstrously difficult.”
The Leper chuckled again, one of those quiet not-sounds that set his shoulders shaking.

The Highwayman took this as a positive sign and settled down nearer the fire, on the Leper’s right. He smelled low and grassy, of medicinal herbs; the Highwayman had seen the Plague Doctor hand him a parcel wrapped in gauze before they left, and figured that must have been what it was.

“There is no cure for what I suffer, this much I know. The world can be such an ugly place, and so harsh. I thought…that if in some small way, while I still may, I could remove some of the evil, and make room for the good. While I can still hold my sword, I will wield it against evil. I cannot continue to do that if I end up ripped to shreds by corpse-wolves because I fell to shouting at some cantankerous old soldier to defend my offended honor.”

~

The rest of the mission was unremarkable; they found the stolen grain-sacks hidden in a shanty in the woods, poorly-guarded by a brigand brute and two weasels with muskets they had no idea how to use. They dealt with them, collected the grain, and returned to the hamlet.
He had not been expecting fanfare--and fanfare was not, exactly, what they got. But a small crowd gathered in the square as the Lady bade the Abbott to ring the bells, and she distributed the grain fairly to the line of hungry, ragged-looking people who showed up.

Chapter End Notes

Omg so my Leper, in my game, is my favorite tank. He kills the everloving hell out of EVERYTHING. I love him. The Man at Arms is actually my other favorite tank, but I made him a grouchy old man here because those are the barks my first Man-at-Arms used. I like to think he's crotchety but under all of it, he's a nice guy. He just refuses to retire.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had begun to rain, a chilly downpour that turned the roads into un-navigable washes of mud and which flooded the lower quarters of the town. Dismas had already regretted his decision to go down to the tavern for a proper last-minute tipple before sleeping; now he was regretting his decision and actively miserable about it. He hadn’t gone ten paces before his overcoat was soaked through, the fur matting up and sticking to his cheeks where the wind had lashed it; and though he turned up the collar and jogged faster, his coat and muffler still ended up wringing-wet by the time he made it back to the hotel.

Dark and stormy nights weren’t anywhere near as poetic as they made them seem in the plays. For one thing, though the plays almost always took place in dilapidated old manor houses, there were a conspicuous lack of ceiling leaks or standing puddles on floors; nor were there garbage-clogged gutters overflowing almost up to the doorstep.

“Close that damn door!” someone hollered, as he came back into the common room. He had to duck around a swath of curtain someone had hung up halfway through the hall, in an effort to cut the draft and turn back the damp. It was only half-working.

Most of the company was gathered in the main hall, shivering, damp, miserable, smelling vaguely of wet dog.

“Pissing down sideways out there,” Dismas said conversationally, as he sat down on one of the benches. Reynauld smiled a little. “I told you the tavern would be closed, in a gale like this.”

Being warm again turned Dismas’s ill humor around; he merely shrugged. “Ahh, well. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?”

Dismas shrugged off his sodden coat, glad of his gansey underneath, which felt only damp. He cast around for a moment for someplace to hang the coat, before finding an unoccupied chair. He smoothed the wet fur as flat as he was able with his hands, then threw the coat over the chair’s back carefully.

The fire seemed dwarfed by the huge fireplace, whose enormous flues would occasionally cause it to moan some huge dying thing, and the fire beneath to gutter alarmingly. Reynauld was sitting on the bench nearest the fire, with his elbows on his knees, trying to red his Verse-book in the low, ruddy light; Dismas could see the Vestal sitting beside him, her own Verse-book open, although her posture was better than his. Or perhaps she was merely reciting an not actually reading; he wasn’t close enough to her to be able to tell the difference.

Once his hands were warm enough to move freely, he reached into his vest and pulled out a small, much-patched work bag containing his knitting wires and the pair of socks he’d been working on.
He’d walked the heels clean off his other good pair, but the yarn was so worn it wasn’t worth the trouble to darn them; and though it ha been like pulling teeth, he’d scrounged up some good yarn at the market.

The woman selling it had a dolorous brown face that reminded him of an apple doll; much of her stock had been so old it looked gnawed in places, or the strands felt brittle and dry. He hadn’t been cruel enough to ask her how long it had been since she’d had sheep to shear for new wool, how long she had been peddling the same ancient, moth-eaten stock.

He wasn’t the only one with that idea to make warmer clothes; the Hound-master, who was sitting beside the Man-at-Arms, was making something with some bulky heather-gay yarn. He moved his hands without looking at his work; he was deeply engrossed in whatever the one-eyed soldier was saying. The wolf-hound lay asleep at their feet, her nose to one side of her paws.

Dismas smirked; the Grave-Robber would be pleased--or pleasantly scandalized--to learn who it was who had kept everyone awake.

He realized after a moment that she was not in the room; nor was the Plague Doctor, the Antiquarian, or the Arbalest.

The rude discovery that the roof was full of holes had sent everyone scuttling downstairs--at lest until the rain abated enough that water wasn’t pouring in on their heads like it was coming out of a tap. They would not have gone back upstairs.

That left one other place downstairs that was both warm and offered comfortable seating, and that was the kitchen.

He clapped Reynauld gently on his good shoulder before getting up to go check on them.

~

He heard them before he saw them--someone putting on a silly voice, as if to mimic a man’s rolling baritone--then loud laughter.

When he came around the corner and paused silently in the doorway, they were so wrapped up in what they were doing that no one noticed him, at first.

“‘Behold, the scepter of my manhood, the proof of my unyielding passion for you!’” the Arbalest was saying. She was standing up in a dramatic pose he recognized from any twopenny play as the young fop’s speechifying pose, one bended knee and the other leg extended behind her dramatically. She held a ratty little green book in one hand and a long baguette held in front of her crotch--and she was waggling it at the other women.

Dismas’s mouth fell open in surprise.

The other three women were sitting on the kitchen bench, clutching at each other and helpless with laughter. The Plague Doctor had pulled her hood off and was nearly on the floor, clinging to the Grave-Robber for support. The Antiquarian was pleading for breath between fits of giggles, and wiping her eyes.

The group of them cackled together, rocking with the force of their laughter.

“You do the next page,” the Arbalest said, breathlessly, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. “I do not think my lungs can take another passage!”

The Arbalest took her seat beside the Antiquarian, still shivering with giggles. She broke the end of the baguette off and offered the rest to the others, who each took off a piece.

The Grave-Robber took the book, then, shifting in her seat and flicking her hair back over her shoulders. Her face was scarlet from laughing, her hat abandoned on a side-table.

She cleared her throat for exaggerated effect, then read in a deep voice, “‘My dear, your charms have quite overwhelmed me. I can no longer control my masculine urges!’ And with this, he fell upon her-”
“Oh, I’m sure,” the Plague Doctor cut in, “Because a man can trip and just fall cock-first into the nearest muff!”

They all erupted into screams of laughter again, nearly falling out of their seats.

Dismas hitched up one leg on the doorstep and leaned comfortably in the doorway, the half-finished sock nearly forgotten in his hands. He wondered if the story really was as interesting as all that.

“Ah! Wait, I’ve got to stand for this part--sorry to upstage your very excellent performance, dearie,” the Grave-Robber said. She stood up--and then stuffed her piece of bread into her shirt.

She spoke in a high, simpering voice, “You flatter me too much, kind sir, but I am but a…simple girl,” This part she punctuated with a shimmy that made the bread slide back and forth in her shirt in a very un-breastlike way, “I must disagree, my dear!” cried he. ‘I beg you, share your charms with me, as you do every night with your adoring audiences! For am I not as special to you as to them? You wound me by taking your charms upon the stage an yet hiding hem way in my bed, mademoiselle! For yours is--’”

“Fuck’s sake, could he not have just come out and said he fancied her tits?” the Plague Doctor cut in, and they all burst into peals of laughter again.

The Grave Robber was trying to shush them amid snorts of laughter of her own, when she looked up and happened to see him there, in the doorway. But she only smiled; her eyes were warm and laughing.

Dismas returned the smile, with a little shrug and nod, as if to invite her to continue. She cocked her head as if she were tipping the brim of her hat before launching into another passage.

~

“You might have come in and warmed up by the fire,” the Grave-Robber said. “You didn’t have to stand there in the hallway like a porter waiting for a tip.”

Dismas snorted a little, amused. “I didn’t want to interrupt the performance. Terribly rude, you know.”

“What, that little bit of play-acting?” she laughed, but her scorn was gentle and pretended. “An afficianado of the theater then, are you?”

He shrugged, still smiling “I like a good play, same as anyone else.”

“Which are your favorites? Don’t tell me--something grim and dark, a hero on a black horse who must rescue a particularly winsome heiress from the blackguard her guardians have selected for her to marry? There will of course be at least one duel, a concealed letter, and a skeleton which will be found in a very inopportune place.”

He laughed again, genuinely pleased. “I can see you get out to the plays as much as I do.”

“I’ve been known to slip into a box, now and again,” she said.

It was hours later; the rain had finally quieted, though not completely died away. The others had gone.

In the kitchen hearth, the fire had burnt itself down to crackling orange embers.

“If it please you so much, you could borrow this,” she said. She held up the little green book--inoffensive, with a gilt design of a weeping willow and two figures beneath it on the cover. The gilding was all but rubbed away, and the pages’ edges, which he had once taken to be merely stained an filthy, apparently had been deliberately colored, with big splotches and splashes of color that had fade with age and use.

Dismas schooled his expression into nonchalance, but still felt uncomfortable.

“Ahh. No, thank you; I much prefer to see the action in the flesh.”

She smiled then, with a little ironical tilt of her head. The uncomfortable feeling that Dismas had had
lingered like the after-effects of a bad gut cramp. “At your pleasure,” she said. “If you change your mind, I’ve got this and a few others. You’d not believe the things people just leave behind when they abandon their manor houses.”

They ended up sitting opposite each other in front of the kitchen hearth—he, with a stub of candle stuck in the mouth of an empty wine bottle, and she nearer the fire, leaning forward to read by its low light. Every now and again she would snicker and kick her feet a little in pleasure; Dismas wondered what she was reading that could be so engaging.

“What’s the story about, anyway?”
She looked up, seeming surprised. “Hmm? Oh, it’s a dreadful tale. The writer fancied himself an ‘auteur’, so it’s a story within a story—there’s this actress, see, and the playhouse owner’s son gets it into his head that she ought to lavish her attentions on him—you understand—or else he’ll ruin her career.”
“I hope for her sake she stuck a knife in his ribs,” Dismas said. “Mm, not quite. Arsenic in his wine, if I recall,” she said, idly flipping through the pages. She stopped suddenly, then blinked up at him. “Or did I spoil the ending for you? Oh! I must apologize, wherever are my manners!”

“Ahh, I s’pose I’ll live.”
“No suspense to kill you now, hey?”
He snorted an shook his head. “And what about you? What are you working on?” she asked, putting the book aside. “Pair of socks,” he said, holding up the sock. He’d gotten all the way own the ankle and was fussing with the heel. He handed it to her slowly when she reached for it.

Her eyebrows raised as she carefully felt the sock. “Lovely work,” she said. “Nice and even. My mother used to say I’d never find a husband, haphazard as my stitching was. Never seemed to occur to her that there were men who could make their own socks.”

Dismas laughed. “My mother told me not to be a lazy layabout, and taught me that if I weren’t going to learn to make my own, I’d have to stuff my feet into my shoes bare and suffer the ill effects of it. She hadn’t the time to be endlessly running after me, darning my socks and mending torn trousers.”

He paused a moment, honestly surprised at himself. It had been so long since it h been so easy to talk to anyone; then again, he told himself, there was no danger here. Or, rather, there was plenty of danger—but his fellow residents at the barracks-inn were no part of it. Or, adjusting again when he thought of the Hound-Master and the old Man-at-Arms, the danger they posed was only incidental; they were not actively hostile.

Certainly he could worry that the Grave-Robber was trying some information out of him, but he could see no purpose in such an ulterior motive. What was she going to do with any information he told her about his mother? Run and gossip to Mrs. Bidmore down t the end of the lane?

The Grave Robber laughed a little. “Soundest advice I’ve hear in ages! Your mother sounds like a right formidable dame, I have to say.”

Dismas smiled into his muffler, his chin lowered. The glow of fond pride he felt in his chest was tempered with a grief he could not shed, however. “Thank you. Though she’d likely have thrown up her hands and said she was just glad some of what she said managed to seep in through my thick skull.”
They sat together in quiet for longer, but Dismas found his attention drawn from his knitting almost constantly; like water looking for low ground, he kept glancing over at her.

Either he was terribly unsubtle—which was unlikely—or she was an exceptionally talented reader of people; either way, she glanced up at him again, and then raised an eyebrow to find his eyes still on her.

“And are you sure you don’t want to borrow it?”

He shook his head, and looked away too fast.

She shifted slightly, setting the book down again. He figured she had caught him out, and he was scrambling to think of a sardonic joke that was enough to unbalance the conversation in his favor without really offending her. She spoke before he got the chance, however.

“Haven’t got your letters, have you, dearie?” the Grave-Robber asked.

Dismas knew he should be beyond feeling ashamed of it; he merely shrugged. Most of the small-folk in his town had been illiterate; the only ones who could read, he remembered, were the two elderly sisters who ran the tiny, run-down hospital, and the equally aged old Brother who ran the decrepit chapel, itself not in much better condition. And even then, the Book of Light seemed incredibly boring, a book of manners and rules that only seemed to apply to those who had the luxury of fretting over whether or not the Light would shine favorably on them, instead of worrying what they were going to eat next, or when.

“It really says all that?” he said, jerking his chin at the book the Grave-Robber was holding.

She grinned impishly. “All that and more, my friend. ‘Course, this in’t exactly what you’d call high literature.” She snickered a little. “Truth be told, it in’t even that good of a naughty book. You can tell the gent who wrote it spent more time looking at ‘etchings’ than he did with any experienced lady-friends, or any bed-mates at all, for that matter.”

“Always did prefer hands-on experience, meself,” Dismas said.

“Oh, do you?” she asked. She gave him a scandalized look that was so deliberately false that he could not help the ugly snort of laughter that escaped him; she joined him a moment later.

“How did you learn to read?” he asked, finally.

She sobered up, too quickly, the cheer going out of her like a snuffed light going out of a lamp. He felt sorry, suddenly, for having asked so bluntly.

“I didn’t always have to live like this,” she said. “Once, I was the kind of girl who had the time to sit around reading silly adventures and bawdy books.” Then, with an effort, she sighed and smirked again, the dimmed fire coming back to her eyes. “Well, all that passes. But bad books, they’re here to stay like bad smells, an’t they? Ha! Tell you what, how’d you like to learn?”

“What, me? Get my letters now?” he said, incredulous. He honestly could not remember if he was closer to thirty winters or forty; weren’t people supposed to learn to read before they were ten?

“Thanks, friend, but I think I’m a mite too old for that.”

“Ahh, cat’s piss! Can you learn to tie a new type of knot?”

“Aye,” he said. No highwayman ever prowled the roads who didn’t know how to tie and untie knots, near as well as a sailor did.

“Can you remember directions if someone tells you?”

“Aye, of course!” he said.

“Then you can remember your letters! Come on,” she said, and would brook no further argument.

Chapter End Notes
6.28.18 - I edited Chapter 4, added more material, and made it less...fragmented. Thank you so much for reading!

Also, I don't have a beta-reader and my w,a,d, and s keys are dying on me; I killed them with too much gaming. :( Please excuse the absence of those 4 letters, if you've been wondering about it!
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Rising floodwaters. Dismas (grudgingly) does some community service. Flirting; missed opportunities. A new friendship. Dismas is a fast learner. (He has always had to be.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For three days straight, it stormed; the downpour so severe that, on the second day, the Lady sent them out to help build up embankments to divert the flow from what was left of the fields. The ocean’s waves battered their heads to froth against the granite cliffs, making a constant crashing sound that, combined with the wind, was loud enough to drown almost everything else out. People spoke in shouts, and when they dared venture out of doors, they did so bent almost double against the gale.

Dismas thought it comical, in a sort of ironic way; he’d run all this way to avoid the law and having to do honest work, an here he was a paid mercenary, under contract--and piling up mud and rocks into makeshift embankments at his patroness’s behest.

The workers who came to help them were a sad, motley bunch--broken-down old farmers and scrawny youths, and stout fisher-women with hands like oars and faces eternally set in grim concentration. The work went quickly enough, though it was hard and tedious. Truth be told, Dismas thought the fields an the scraggly orchards and the one miserable-looking vineyard to be barely worth the effort; but it was not for him to say.

He knew the desperation the people lived under; he was too intimate with it to mention his misgivings to anyone. To do so would have been cruel to people who already had almost nothing.

They worked from early in the morning until almost sundown, when the Lady--who had stayed out with them, supervised the entire business and doled out a steady supply of hot tea and roasted sweet potatoes for everyone--sent them down to the tavern afterwards, footsore and weary and aching; almost as soon as the door was closed, the men were casting off sodden, muddy outer garments, each man groaning quietly in relief as each layer shed.

Dismas very studiously avoided looking directly at Reynauld as he shed first the tunic, then his sodden gambeson; mercifully he stopped when he was down to his brown linen undershirt. Initially Dismas been surprised the man had no complicated code of modesty. But then, he realized, there was no way the man could have been any type of soldier n not grown accustomed to other men in some form of undress; he did not imagine that barracks were private places, and field camps even less so.

“We want baths!” the Bounty-hunter bellowed, thumping one fist on the bar.

The barkeep looked at him from beneath craggy overgrown brows like a walrus’s, but his face remained impassive. “That’ll be what the lot of you are wanting, then?”

“Aye!” this was the Man-at-Arms talking. “And make it HOT, if you please, my good man! I want to roast! I’ve got devil-knows-how-many-layers of filth to cook off!”

“Tub’s a mite small for that many,” the tavern-keep said. Damn the man, he had a perfect poker face, as well, and if he thought their request absurd he did not show it.
The Bounty-Hunter barked a laugh; the Man-at-Arms merely gave the tavern-keep a look.
"We want to go separately, of course!"

Dismas found himself smirking, shaking his head. He sat down at the bar instead of waiting with the others; he was still wringing thin, gritty mud from his hands with a kerchief that he figured might be a lost cause.
The Leper had already sat down there, implacable and quiet. He did not seem to mind, or even notice, his mud-splattered, sodden bandages, or the way his mantle clung all down the back of his neck, outlining his sloping, muscular shoulders; clearly, even without the cuirass for emphasis, he was a big fellow, thickly-thewed.

Dismas blinked away the thought. This was what came of going to long between tumbles, he told himself. Perhaps the Lady could be convinced to be generous and pay for something more than just baths...
“I’ve caught on to the Lady’s scheme here. Have you?”
The Leper inclined his head slightly. “If she has one, I have not.”
“She cannot afford to pay us for this task, so she slips a bit of coin to our ever-so-generous tavern-master there, to give us a bit of hot water in a tub and some mulled ale--no doubt watered down--and hopes we don’t go an try to figure how much coin we ought to have been paid, to compare it to how much she paid him.”

The Leper did not laugh, once he’d finished talking; instead, he spoke, after a pause, “If she did not offer at least this reward, would you have stirred from your bed at all? Or would you have simply stayed inside and allowed these peoples’ farmlands to be washed from beneath their feet by the downpour?”
Then Dismas felt abashed, even ashamed for a moment.
It took him a moment to regain himself enough to shrug it off. Then, “You sound like a Crusader yourself, there. I was merely mentionin’ something I’d noticed.”
“You did not answer my question,” the Leper said.

“What was that?” Dismas said, feigning inattentiveness. The man’s mask made his face completely unreadable, and huge as a fellow s he w,s he was spare in motion and gesture, as well; Dismas was having a maddeningly hard time reading him at all. He’d hoped the other man would drop it.
He ha no such luck.
“I asked you what you would have done to aid this stricken town, had the Lady not paid up our evening in this tavern.”
“I don’t know,” he lied.
But he remembered the year the fires ripped through the city he’d once lived in. He remembered the night sky turned orange with the flames.
He’d been too little to do anything, then; he’d been nothing but a scrawny boy in the first year of his apprenticeship. The candlemaker’s shop was near the heart of town, away from the burning hills. Every day it seemed the fires ate up more of the city. People formed lines from the wells to the fires and poured bucket after bucket on the blaze until they exhausted two of the wells, without even putting a damper on the inferno. The desperate faithful fled to the chapel to beg the Light for clemency, or aid--or, at last, to confess their sins. The practical abandoned the lines to rush to their own homes, to hastily pack and flee with anything of value they could carry.

In the end, the fire claimed nearly a fourth of the city, stopping at last at the back walls of the wealthy merchant district--these being built of stone instead of wood or wattle-and-daub. He remembered being equally excited and afraid, back then. Of course there ha been no chance anyone would have called him to do anything of importance; his apprentice tasks at the time ha all amounted to sweeping up shop, plying cord for wicks, and fetching whatever small items the candle-
maker needed from the store-attic.

He didn’t know WHAT he would have done, had he been old enough to be called to help. Would he have joined those lines of people, doomed to fail but still determined to try? Or would he have turned and fled the city, as so many others had? He felt a hand fall on his shoulder, and considered it a testament to his newfound strength of nerves that he did not instantly whip around and knife the hand’s owner. He found himself glad he didn’t; Reynauld was standing there, with a question on his tired face.

His eyes were very pale gray, in the dim light, and his hair the tawny-brown of polished cedar. The two-day stubble on his face was long enough that the blond hairs were picking up little points of light. Dismas could see his lips were slightly chapped. How, he wondered, did a fellow get chapped lips when he was eternally stuffing his head into a metal bucket with a face-guard?

“Dismas? Will you not come? We are drawing straws, to see who gets to go first,” Reynauld said. Dismas could see the Hound-master holding a handful of straws, sitting on a stool and surrounded by the other men, all divested of their coats and muddy to the knees.

The thought of sitting in lukewarm bathwater in which someone else had recently washed his privates was less than enticing, however—especially so many fellows, one after the other. “I think I’ll pass, this time.”

He heard the Bounty-Hunter snort. Someone muttered, “Fine time to develop poncy manners, this.” Someone else said something, the tail end of which was, “…waiting to see whose pants jingle with coin in the pockets when we drop ‘em. If you’ve valuables, you may as well…” No one asked about the Leper; he figured they thought it too contagious to even bother with the courtesy. “D’you want my spot, then?” he asked the Leper.

The other man seemed surprised to have been asked. “You flatter me needlessly. Thank you, but no. I shall wait.”

To Dismas’s surprise, the Man-at-Arms called out, “Master Leper! You need not wait. I’m sure the tavern-keep can find a second tub. And it’s not s though water were in any short supply.” “I thank you again, but I must again decline. Medical reasons, you see,” the Leper replied. There was a bit of grumbling after that, but it sounded polite in tone.

The Reynauld drew the longest straw and with a grin presented it to the tavern-keep. The tavern-keep merely sighed, thumped down the mug he’d been wiping, and then tucked the greasy gingham rag into his apron pocket. With a gesture to follow, he led the Crusader through a doorway into the back.

The others all settled down around the long, battered trestle tables in the place, apparently satisfied that the Leper would stop Dismas from picking their pockets clean.

It was quieter once they had all settled down; quiet conversations started here and there. Dismas noticed again that the Hound-master and the Man-at-Arms were sitting together. The Man-at-Arms must have been telling him some tale of his exploits on the battlefield; his hands cut shapes and forms into the air as he spoke, even as his words were too quiet to be hear from across the way. Dismas couldn’t see the Hound-master’s face, but he was leaned forward on one elbow, and seemed to be listening intently.

Still, Dismas smiled inwardly. He wished he’d made a bet with the Grave-Robber, for he was fairly certain that he’d settled who the two making the beast with two backs had been.

“What about you, then?” Dismas asked the Leper.
“How do you mean?”
“Would you have come rushing to the aid of the needy, if the Lady hadn’t already got you under contract to do s she says?” Dismas pressed. He would be damned if he was going to let anyone imply things about him; he could give it s well s he could take it.

“I have been traveling the world for some time now, looking for worthy causes to lend my sword arm to,” he looked own at said arm, whose muscles bulged beneath sodden bandages. “While I am yet able.”
Dismas grinned a little, ruefully, as his only concession to defeat. “Ever the proper, chivalrous gentleman. D’you ever do anything you enjoy to pass the time, or is your life a never-ending series of charitable deeds?”

The Leper chuckled. “In my youth, I did my fair share of things that would have caught me the pox, had there ever been an outbreak in my country.”
This Dismas heard with a raised eyebrow. “There are lands yet left in the world where the pox ain’t a danger?”
“Yes,” the Leper said.

Dismas noticed the tavern-keep returning from the back, this time without Reynauld in tow. He raised a hand and the man strode over. “I was meanin’ to ask if the Lady happened to purchase any libations to go with the ablutions for the night?”

“Drinks, same as before. I’ve got beer on tap for the night. Unless the gentlemen would prefer I crack a cask of wine?” the tavern-keep’s unflappable calm was rapidly proving to be the highlight of Dismas’s evening, and he was determined to get as much enjoyment s he was able from it.

“No, no, beer will be perfectly satisfactory, my good man,” Dismas said, affecting a more proper accent as he spoke the last words.
The man’s bushy moustache gave the minutest twitch as he nodded and turned away.
Dismas turned back to the Leper, biting his lips, and found the other man already shaking with suppressed laughter.

“I see that mocking the nobility is clearly one of your favorite ways to, as you said, ‘pass the time’,” the Leper said.
Oh, no, Dismas thought, You aren’t getting away THAT easily--
“It is. But I seem to recall you mentioned something about a land where there ain’t no pox, and if you’ll pardon my curiosity--”

“Ah,” the Leper said, chuckling again. He was smiling a little; Dismas wished the mask did not hide his eyes. He spread his hands slowly on the tabletop; Dismas noticed that he’d removed his coarse gloves and replaced them with a softer pair, these appearing to be made of some fine, supple dark leather. He had a moment to wonder how bad the disease had affected the man’s hands, that he always kept them covered.

“Yes, I come from a land in the East. There, the pox and many other disease are simply unknown.” then he glance down at his hands, an Dismas felt a nervous twinge, and wondered if he’d caught him looking; the Leper continued. “Would that were the case for all diseases.”
Dismas, determine to wrest the conversation into more enjoyable waters, said, “Now, see, that’s what I meant. If I were you I’d not waste a minute or single coin on anything other than finer pursuits,” he said.

The tavern-keep returned with two tankards an set them down before them. Clearly he had heard what Dismas ha said about finer pursuits; he made a show of folding the ratty towel over his arm, like a waiter in a fancy restaurant, before striding away.
Dismas smiled, at that, but it was dimmed; the Leper had not laughed yet.

The Highwayman had rapidly learned that, if you had no way to avoid working with a group of people, the best way to smooth things out was to make sure people liked you; barring that, to at least make them think you were funny. That tended to make people think twice before knifing you and leaving you for dead—or, if it did not stop them, at lest it surprised them when they tried you and you returned the favor.

As much to fill the other man’s silence as to cover his own nerves, Dismas pushed one of the tankards towards him an took the other for himself, going for a gulp of the beer and finding its potency and flavor surprisingly intact.

“As I said,” the Leper continued, “I had ample time in my youth to do exactly that.”

Dismas licked foam from his upper lip with a pleased grimace.

“And you?” the Leper said. He touched the tankard only with the tips of his fingers, barely seeming to notice it. “What of your youth?”

Dismas thought of spinning some fanciful web of lies, as much to shield himself as to catch the man’s attention. But then, he did not know how well-learned this man was, and nothing knocked a lie on its ass like telling it to a person who already knew better.

He hesitated.

“Someone from as far-flung as a place where there ain’t no pox would not be interested in my story.”

“You ought to try me. And you did imply, earlier, that you had traveled.” he incline his head minutely, the linen shroud shifting as he did. In the light, and perhaps because they were sitting closer than they had been before, Dismas noticed something very quickly that he ha not seen before. The cuirass’s plating, though rubbed thin, appeared to be genuine gold, over a layer of bronze. The mask, which had suffered none of the wear, had subtle, faint designs etched in it--angular interlocked stars and lines that followed the mask’s contours.

This was no simple leper’s mask, hastily hammered out of a spare piece of sheet metal, meant only to hide its wearer's damaged face, but a work of art that an artisan of great skill had lavished some considerable amount of time on.

“Aye, I’ve traveled. Been all up and down the continent, though mainly along back-roads, if you follow,” Dismas said. He hoped his surreptitious glances at the man’s mask weren’t obvious; but now that he ha noticed those details, other things started falling into place.

The man carried himself like a gentleman, never swore, and somehow even drank his beer neatly enough that he had no foam anywhere on his face. And then there was the sword; magnificent even broken, possibly in half, far too large and heavy to be of any use even to a seasoned crusader. It was easily the size of Reynauld’s great-sword, though the blade of the Leper’s sword was thicker. There were also divots in the pommel and cross-trees, possibly where there had once been gems set. So, then: either a ceremonial blade put to serious use once its owner had need of it, or else some other, even rarer type of sword, which Dismas knew nothing about.

Dismas felt a fool for having taken so long to really assess the fellow; but then, when he’d thought he’d just been some poor sick wretch determined to go down swinging, there hadn't been much to go on.

The Leper put his elbow on the bar and leaned his temple against his fist, smiling lazily.

“I do not. I myself never had the opportunity to use such byways. Before my affliction reached such levels as this, everywhere I went, I did so with an entourage. And often fanfare.”

Dismas decided to take this as teasing and not genuine meanness; he said, “Aww, it can’t have been
all that bad. You make it sound terribly stifling—being treated like a nob, born gagging on a silver spoon.”
This time the Leper DID laugh. “I do not know why you are doing it, but I am glad you are talking with me.”

Then Dismas laughed, and raised his glass a little. “Same to you! Most of the blokes here want nothin’ to do with me. Least you’re civil and keep your distaste for outlaws to yourself.”
“I had wondered why you were not fleeing in fear,” the Leper said.
“No one is rich enough to throw away a friend,” Dismas said.
As he did, an outcry broke out at a nearby table: apparently there had been a game of dominoes going, and someone had just lost. The tavern-keep was hurrying over with another round of tankards.
“We just got here and already they’re in their drink? I thought I moved fast,” Dismas said.
The Leper chuckled, and then said:

“A couple of boozers from Swaffham
Would seek out real ales, and then quaff ‘em
The problem that made
For the victualler’s trade
Was getting the cost of ‘em off ‘em.”

Dismas had to look at him twice.
“What? What did you just--”
The Leper was smiling. “You do not enjoy poetry?”
Dismas laughed and thumped his tankard down. “Now, hold on. THAT was not a poem, that was a limerick, the bawdiest sort of rhyme there is, and I’ll be damned if you know more than one!”
“Then you must curse yourself; I know dozens.”
“You just said you didn’t travel by back ways; how could you have picked up that sort of thing--”
“I did also say I did a number of things…” the Leper trailed off.
“Well, then, damn me and let’s hear another! Go on, then!” Dismas said.
The Leper, still smiling, set his own glass down an spread his hands on the tabletop. He drummed his fingertips a moment before beginning,

“There once was a young student named Jones
Who’d reduce any maiden to moans
By his wonderful knowledge
(Acquired in college)
Of nineteen erogenous zones.”

Dismas laughed aloud, in sincere delighted surprise. Some of the words had gone right over his head, but even HE knew a dirty joke when he heard one, an he thought it was terrific.
“Dozens, I tell you,” the Leper said. His tankard was in front of his face, but Dismas knew he was smiling too.
There was something there, he felt, lurking under the surface—like an fish with flashing golden scales, glimpsed briefly as it slipped through muddy water.

~

There was nothing better for cementing a bond of friendship, Dismas thought, than peeing into the same gutter outside the same tavern.
He was not drunk, having been more engrossed in what the Leper was saying than in getting sloshed, so this was no difficult feat. He WAS tipsy enough that silly things amused him, though—which was how he ended up writing a few of his newly-learned letters on the bricks, the spatters of
urine seeming to seep into the wet bricks almost as soon as he finished the shapes.

It was still raining, but at the very least, the alley between the tavern and the building behind it was narrow enough that it wasn’t coming down straight on their heads.

“It just came to me,” Dismas said, after he’d buttoned his fly, “That I’ve been drinking with you for the better part of the night, an I don’t even know your proper name. I dislike calling you ‘Master Leper’ like the others do. Is there not something else you go by?”

The Leper, who had finished already and who was catching handfuls of rainwater to rinse his hands, looked at him a moment.

Again Dismas felt strange at not being able to see the other man’s eyes, wondering his thoughts but having nothing to gauge them by. The Leper smiled and said, “My name is Claville.”

“Dismas,” he said, and nodded politely. “I’d offer to shake, but…”

The Leper laughed again, a deep belly laugh. “You say the most ridiculous things! Come, let us go back inside. I would like to wash my hands with real soap; I fear I may have caught some other malady, relieving myself in an alley like this.”

“Aww, pshaw! No one ever caught nothin’ from goin’ to the necessary out back of a tavern!” Dismas protested. Then he added, “Nothin’ fatal, I don’t think.”

The Leper laughed again. They walked shoulder-to-shoulder back to the tavern’s door.

~

The later return to the barracks-inn found the place drier than it had been in days; evidently those who had stayed indoors had not merely sat idle, either.

The floor was mopped, and someone had beaten the dirt from the rug, enough that it could now be seen that it had an ivy design in its weft, in a burgundy color that had been almost wholly obscured by dirt and grime. The torn curtains had been mended, as well.

When Dismas ventured into the kitchen he found the Plague Doctor and the Occultist both bent over books at the table, eagerly conversing about blood and tides and humors; the kitchen smelled evilly of burning hair and rotten eggs, and there was a haze of smoke in the air. Three pots he had never seen before simmered in the hearth, and a complicated apparatus made up of bottles, beakers, and funnels, had taken up the entire kitchen table.

He stepped back out of the kitchen, deciding it was not worth it to chance it—and nearly stumbled into the Grave-Robber, who was coming down the hall with a huge burlap sack.

“Steady on!” she cried, and he caught her and helped her steady the load she was carrying.

“Laundry,” she said, with a roll of her eyes. “Our friend Monsieur Bretel says the weather will be clement tomorrow, and the thought of clean sheets was an indulgence I simply could not allow to slip through my fingers.”

Dismas perked up all over. “Would you mind if I joined you?”

~

While their sheets boiled in the massive brass laundry tub in the place’s basement, Dismas made up his mind about something.

“I, ah, wanted to show you something,” he said, feeling sheepish suddenly.

She only smiled. “You know, if it’s a boil or a rash, you really ought to take it straight to the Doctor, dearie.”

“Nothing of the kind!” he said, laughing. He leaned over the laundry table and broke off the brittle edge of one of the pieces of scrubbing soap, and then, carefully, on the wood, wrote a few letters. His progress was halting, but he formed each letter carefully, writing: My Name Is Dismas.
She looked on the whole time, smiling when he was finished. “Well, look at you! Not bad! Not bad at all!” she said, elbowing him in the side playfully. “Soon we’ll have you reading bawdy books by yourself and one-handed, hey?”

It was his turn to laugh, then.

~

That night as he shuffled under the scratchy, warm wool coverlet, he realized that for the first time in a very long time, he felt as if he’d accomplished something. As if he’d done something worthwhile. He dropped into sleep like a stone dropping smoothly into calm, dark water.

~

The hall was shadowed and quiet; Dismas sat in front of the fire burned low, putting the heel on the sock. The yarn, though a bland brownish-gray, was at least sturdy and soft, and moved easily through his fingers.

He heard footsteps in heavy boots, and looked up to see Reynauld, coming down the hall from the dormitory stairs. He was not wearing his heavy armor, only his quilted arming jacket and breeches, an he smiled when he saw Dismas.

“You stayed in, this evening!” he said. He seemed inordinately pleased.

Dismas snorted a little laugh and held up the sock. “They don’t make themselves.”

“No, indeed they do not,” Reynauld said. He strode over to the bench and sat down beside Dismas, his back to the fire.

“I have gotten something for you,” Reynauld continued, after a moment.

“Oh?” Dismas said. “And what is it?”

Reynauld produced from a pocket in his shirt a small red book, gilded along the edges of its pages. The cover was plain, but for an embossed image of a rose. The book was small enough to fit easily into his palm, no longer or wider than his outstretched hand.

“A book,” Dismas said. It looked like a small testament, and he felt slight disappointment; still, he would not show it to Reynauld, not when he was looking so pleased about having found the little thing.

Dismas had not read three words on the page before he slammed the book closed again, his belly tightening with arousal.

“You--it--”

“The Book of Love,” Reynauld said. He was very close, close enough that if Dismas turned his head, “Where did you get this?” he whispered.

“The ruins yield many things, to those who know where to look,” he said. One heavy gloved hand was suddenly on Dismas’s thigh, his fingertips on the inseam of Dismas’s trousers. Heat washed through him again as he exhaled a single, shaking breath.

“She--she told you--”

“That you are working on getting your letters? Yes.” Reynauld said. He did not move his hand, but kneaded softly there, the strength of his grip making Dismas excited as suddenly as he should NOT be.

They were sitting fully-clothed in the downstairs hall, on the long bench. Beside them the fire crackled low; the only other light came from the candle on the table in the corner.

“I thought I could help you,” Reynauld said.

“How is this supposed to…help…me…” Dismas began, but the words faded in his throat;
Reynauld’s hand moved up his thigh, a slow drag of the coarse leather against the heavy cloth of his pants. His mouth was dry a moment, then he had to swallow. His breath was coming too fast.

“You could read it to me,” Reynauld said.

Dismas shook his head once, jerkily. He realized he was clinging to his knitting needles so hard the metal was biting into his fingers, but he couldn’t bring himself to loosen them.

“I…I haven’t the letters yet. I’d butcher it.”

“I’d help you,” Reynauld said. Sometimes he’d leaned closer, close enough that his chin was on Dismas’ shoulder and his mouth beside Dismas’s ear. “Please?” he murmured.

“I…I suppose I could try,” Dismas said, weakly. He set the sock an needles aside, an Reynauld leaned away from him long enough to hand him the little book.

He was so excited that for long moment he simply held it an stared own t it, before Reynauld settled his chin on his shoulder again, squeezing his thigh a little.

“Start with Verse 1, Chapter 3. I think you’ll like that…”

Dismas flipped to the page with shaking, sweaty hands, anxious for a moment that the moisture on his fingertips would ruin the book, before realizing that that was EXACTLY what the gilded edges were supposed to prevent.

When he found the page Reynauld had name, he nearly dropped the book in surprise; painted on the page in exquisite miniature were two men, face-to-face, their arms around one another, and their hands very clearly in one another’s pants. The head of one man’s cock peeked seductively over the waistband of his unbuttoned pants, a delicate pink. Dismas’s mouth started watering. He ha to swallow twice before he could speak.

“This?”

“Yes,” Reynauld said. “Read it to me?”

“Hhh…he whom I exult before the Light above all others, in whose strength and love I find my glory, who brings me such divine pleasures--” he gasped; Reynauld’s hand had moved up and was cupping the growing bulge of his own erection. He shifted minutely, spreading his legs a little, half-worried that Reynauld would remove his hand.

He did not, only kissed Dismas’s ear gently. “Go on. You are doing well.”

“Whose body I sanctify with my own flesh, whose hands are as the hands of the Light, drawing me higher…I…Light, I…bow down, oh…before you in your sacred glory, an with my hands and mouth I worship him as I worship you--” he drew a sharp breath. Reynauld had undone his breech buttons slowly, torturously, one at a time as he had read the sentence. Now he paused, the heat of his warm palm and the pressure of his hand all that shielded one of the most sensitive parts of Dismas’s body from the room’s slight chill.

He paused a moment, stroking Dismas through the thin material of his underwear, while Dismas held onto the book--so close to his face, now, that is was actually blocking his view. He was trying not to breathe too fast.

Then he kissed Dismas’s cheek again before the blessed, cursed, hot hand moved; Dismas made a sound like he’d been punched, his knees splaying wide in a silent plea for more touches. He looked over from the book and saw Reynauld pulling off his gloves, setting them aside; then one of his hands came up into the hair at the nape of Dismas’s neck, and the other resumed the delicious hot pressure on his crotch.

“And the rest?”

“I--please--” he said, and Reynauld looked at him with such clear tenderness before he leaned in to
kiss him that Dismas could have come from that alone, but--
But his hand dipped carefully into his underwear an his fingers closed hot and hard around his cock, squeezing him perfect and tight. Dismas came with a noise like a drowning man sucking in air, so hard his legs jerked and spasmed, and Reynauld held him through it, his arm strong around Dismas’s back.
The candlelight faded, then returned; at some point he had squeezed his eyes shut, and now saw the orange of the firelight through his eyelids as clearly as--

He could feel a warm wetness spreading over his crotch.
His eyes flew open and he twitched in the blankets without sitting up.

It was mid-morning, and the light coming through the window was bright an actually cheerful.
A glance at the bed across the room told him that Reynauld was already up and about--which he was immensely grateful for.

He had sufficient time to wash himself and his underwear, both amused an annoyed at himself. He hadn’t had a wet dream since he’d been a teenager, gawky and ridiculous and completely lost when it came to his own desires. --But the amusement stopped there.

Reynauld was a praying man, and very churchy--not the type to indulge such things. Hell, Dismas told himself, he might even be one of the hellfire-and-brimstone types who believed that men like him deserved to be drowned like warlocks, for fear they’d spread their unique sort of sinfulness to others.

There was no need to bury the desire outright, however, he told himself. The tavern’s pleasantly-furnished upper rooms offered all sorts of company and amusements. He decided he’d find some handsome fellow with a nice backside and a nicer cock to spend the night with, to get the itch out of his system, and be done with it.

In the back of his mind he knew it would not be so simple. Still, he thought, if he told himself enough times, maybe it would stick.
It would not do, after all, to begin pining after a man who was oblivious to his attentions--and whose response might be an ugly one, even if he were made aware of them.

~

“Late again,” the Grave-Robber said, when he came downstairs. “’Least you’re dressed already. Come now, there’s no time to waste! We’re being sent on a mission into the catacombs beneath the manor.”
Dismas didn’t know whether he wanted to bless or damn the woman, but she sounded EXCITED.

Chapter End Notes

Do you know how hard I tried to make Dismas and Claville have a serious conversation? I ended up letting them flirt, because the alternative was Dismas getting very drunk and Claville getting In His Feelings, which is not a thing I wanted there.

Also, Dismas was so busy trying to figure Claville out that he missed flirting completely. That's life, I guess. Hypervigilance is a pain in the ass, always making you notice wrong things.

~
also, limericks found in this chapter are from the Mammoth Book of Limericks, edited by Glynn Rees.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The first venture into the Warrens. The madness starts here. They learn for the first time what the Lady's Ancestor had been doing, all those years.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This time the Lady herself walked with them to the edge of the town.
Each block they passed brought them past more and more abandoned buildings: dilapidated empty houses, shuttered storefronts, silent streets--devoid even of stray cats or dogs--until they passed beyond the low wall delineating the city’s end and the beginning of the suburbs.

This area made Dismas uncomfortable; rolling lawns led to stately half-timbered houses that, while nowhere near as opulent as the ruin that stood on the cliff overlooking the hamlet, were certainly finer than anywhere he’d ever lived. These were the houses of the wealthy landowners who could afford to have other people work their land for them.

In another time, in another place, he’d have been waiting in the bushes along the road to waylay them at night, to relieve them of their valuables.
Though they walked briskly, it was not the walk that made the sweat spring up all under his collar and own his back.

The Lady spoke as she walked. “So far we have made inroads and some progress in removing the brigand threat from the roads. This is good; now, there may be more traffic back to this town. Hopefully this will in turn improve trade,” she added. “But this will mean nothing. If newcomers do arrive, only to see the town in this state, they certainly would not stay to do business with us. I am certain my grand-uncle had some things that may be of use to us in the manor. We are very short of funds.”

“Begging your pardon, Ma’am, but are you saying you mean to sell off family heirlooms to refurbish the town?” the Man-t-Arms asked.

She paused a moment, looking at him with wide, slightly startled eyes. Dismas thought she looked caught-out, surprised that someone perhaps thought her moneymaking scheme a poor one.
“Yes,” she said slowly. “I can think of no better use to put them to; clearly I have no house with which to decorate them.” She looked in the direction of the ruins on the cliff, and her face turned hard for a moment.

“No, I was saying…I am certain there are valuables hidden on the estate grounds. However, I am equally certain that, with the condition the manor itself is in, the brigands have been there. They will have picked the place clean and hidden the valuables elsewhere. There is a network of tunnels beneath the manor, and I suspect that is the place they may have hidden such valuables. As always, any loot besides heirlooms is yours to keep and sell as you see fit; half the money must go to the communal chest, however. And if you see anything else of note, please bring it to me at once.”

They all said their ayes or made noises of agreement.
“What purpose could these curious tunnels possibly serve?” the Plague Doctor asked.
“An infernal one.” the Man-at-Arms said, flatly.
Dismas had learned at the tavern the night before--rather, he had overheard--that the man’s name was actually Bohun; but as they were barely on speaking terms as it was, and he had no desire to invite a shouting match, he declined to call him by name.
“Caves are common enough,” Dismas said.
This was true.

This did not mean the tunnels they were currently walking through actually WERE caves. Indeed, there was evidence that ran contrary to that fact scattered everywhere; the ‘tunnels’ were had ceilings high enough that a tall person could walk through them with their hands held over their heads and not touch the ceiling. The floor, uneven though it was, was paved with flagstones, and here and there, would be the round, yawning mouth of a smaller tunnel splitting off. Instead of bare stone, these archways were reinforced with stone brick, carefully cut and obviously very old.

“These likely an’t natural caves, friends,” the Grave-Robber, Osmond, said. She strode along, her satchel jangling faintly.

It still felt strange to know someone’s name--at the least, whatever name they chose to give you. Being who he was, Dismas was no stranger to assumed names; he did not believe for a second that Osmond was her real name. Nor, however, would he have pressed her about it.

“Well, then, who would dig tunnels like this? What purpose o they serve?” the Doctor continued.

“They’re meant to save manor houses from floods. Nothing quite ruins a lovely seaside seat like rotted timbers and collapsing floors, don’t you know,” she said. “Common enough, indeed, in places where the waters are prone to running high.”

They passed a grate set in a mouth in the wall, the opening big enough for a tall person to have walked through, if they stooped slightly. The bars of the iron grille were corroded into weird shapes, with long tendrils of dessicated water-weed clinging around the stone lip.

“There, you see.” she gestured at the weedy, choked grate. “I am certain these tunnels, while they are quite unsightly, are no passageway to hell.”

Bohun snorted. “That remains to be seen. Now, hush, the lot of you! We cannot take our enemies by surprise if they hear us chattering like a bunch of hens from three hundred yards off!”

The Plague Doctor lit one torch with the other, then carefully set the other aside, dousing it in one of the many foul-smelling puddles scattered around.
Dismas was trying his hardest not to think of what it was that was dripping on them. He liked the coat an was not relishing the thought that he might have to burn it when they finally got out of the damn place.

They walked on, the air growing somehow warmer and more humid. The smell began to rise in earnest, then: first a low, wet reek like an open drain. Bohun paused, grumbled quietly, and then pressed on.
Dismas glanced back an saw Osmond’s face pinched against the smell, but she said nothing. The Doctor, of course, ha her face completely covered; he doubted she’d be able to smell a hair fire, with all that cloth in front of her face. He rather envied her that. His muffler didn’t seem to be doing too much against the stink.

When Dismas turned around to face forward again, it was to squint into the darkness. For surely he did not see tiny, glimmering lights down the tunnel?
He slipped his hand into his coat and drew his dirk from its sheath, rubbing his thumb down the wrapped hilt to calm his nerves. His other hand went to his pistol. It helped, marginally.
The first strange thing they saw was the door. The tunnel had been hastily bricked up to form a wall around it, without any mortar but the slimy, greasy-looking mud that squelched underfoot. The door itself was a clumsily-made thing, crude slabs of wood banged together with mismatched nails, which had been messily trimmed down to fit the doorway. The wet had warped the wood all round the edges. They all clustered close, the Doctor raising the torch higher so they could see. Round the door there was a rubble of stone, cracked bricks, water-deposited slurry piles of mud, and strange white stones poking here and there. Cheap, nasty-smelling tallow candles were clustered together on stacked bricks to either side of the doorway. Some of them, though guttering low, were still lit.

“What in the name of…” this time the Man-at-Arms spoke.

“Someone lives here,” Dismas said. “Let’s hope they ain’t in at the moment.”

Bohun gave him a serious look, then nodded. He was the one who laid a hand on the rotten-looking iron of the handle, and pulled the door open.

In the following corridor they found a chest, much-battered but with the lock intact. This Dismas dispatched speedily, and found a nice sum of coin in it, along with a lump of green gemstone that Osmond informed him was jade. “Very popular, in the distant Eastern lands,” she said. “Someone carried this a great distance.” She handed the loot to the Doctor, who put everything in the supply satchel.

With the opening of the door there came all sorts of sounds--steamy hissing, dripping, an a faint, constant low groan, as of water moving slowly under a rotten wooden bridge. The smell somehow worsened, forcing everyone to stop and retch an catch their breath. The Doctor lit another torch and looked around expectantly.

“Do you suppose the brigands have another hideout down here?” he heard the Doctor whisper to Osmond.

“’Tis very likely. I’d wager they’re all over this entire place like fleas on a stray.”

More silent walking. Dismas could feel the nervous sweat needling his armpits; his palms ache with the way he clutched his dirk an pistol. There was something he could not explain, something worse about walking on in the dripping, stinking darkness, and finding nothing; he found himself anxiously waiting for a fight, hopeful that they would find something. Each hiss of released steam, every time something dripped on him, the way the air did not move--all conspired to create such a terrible tension that his gut was already in knots and his ribcage felt like it was trapped in a vise, and they hadn’t even seen anybody.

He wondered how desperate the brigands would have to be, to set up a camp in a shithole like this. Immediately after, he amended the thought; he’d holed up in his share of abandoned buildings, once even hiding in the privy of an abandoned house overnight to throw off the coppers and their bloodhounds. But this…there was nothing even remotely comparable to this. At this point he envied the poor sods living in shoddy tents in the forest, even with the demon wolves an cultists running around.

Something caught his eye and he flinched, whipping his pistol-arm up and cocking the hammer with a lightning speed.

The old soldier gave him a dirty look over his shoulder; he’d Locke the pistol almost right in the man’s ear.

Dismas held up the pistol and shrugged a little, by way of silent apology. In a moment they passed the ratty, tattered piece of cloth hanging in the mouth of one of the openings, which had been the source of his panic. It had a symbol smeared on it: a sharp half-moon upended like a bowl, broken by curved spikes that reminded him of boars’ tusks.
The corridor turned out to be a dead end, opening into a high, narrow round chamber whose walls were more of the green-slimed gray stone, buttressed at regular intervals; these shafted upwards into a point of uncertain light high above. If he squinted hard against the light, he could see the circle of light above was broken by a grate. So, Osmond was right, and they were walking around in some sort of gigantic sewer.

The others fanned out to check the chamber. Dismas stood where he was, in the narrow shaft of light, just trying to catch his breath. The terrible pressure he felt in his chest was easing slightly, now that he could see there was at least a way out. He tried not to think too hard about the ‘way out’ being three stories straight up, and them without any rope, besides.

When he could finally bring himself to step beyond the circle of dim light, he noticed something near one of the walls the others were not checking.

There was a crude wooden rack, the sort used to tan hides; stretched over it there was a hide, peculiar in dimension and shape as well as color.

In the low, guttering torchlight, Dismas could see that the skinned creature had no hair but on the arms and legs, and its head…

He jerked backwards as if stung, with a curse that died on his lips. He stumbled into someone and had his irk out faster than he could think, though his grip was so tight his hand ached.

It was only Bohun, the Man-at-Arms, regarding him now with an unreadable face.

He heard his own voice as if from another room, saying with unnatural calm, “Don’t touch anything.” Dimly he heard another voice—the Grave-Robber, exclaiming over the stench. The Plague Doctor offered her a bottle of something.

“What the devil has come over you, Highwayman?” Bohun asked. Then, turning his attention back to the skin stretched on the rack, he said, “An What foul nonsense is this?” his face twisted at the smell, an he drew back. “Pig leather? What the devil are they doing with this down here?” Dismas laid his free hand on his arm and willed his fingers not to clench.

“That’s no pig skin. We should—”

“And now what’s this? Is this the source of that ungodly reek? Laws, it’s like a pile of shit in an abattoir!” the Grave Robber’s voice was enough to snap Dismas out of whatever strange spell that had fallen over him; it was like someone had grabbed him by the throat and thrust him back down into his body.

“Osmond, don’t—”

But she was stepping closer, the Doctor at her shoulder with the torch. She was still grimacing at the stench.

When she realize what it was, her hands came up to her throat and mouth, as if to strangle the gasp that threatened to turn into a scream.

The old soldier cracked up worse than either of the women did, when he realized what it was—in the closer torchlight, Dismas edged way from the thing on the rack, while the doctor moved closer, raising the failing torch to see better.

Dismas could see Bohun’s lips quivering, his face ashen and sweaty with horror and recognition. He faintly heard the Doctor say, in tones of agreement, “You are right. This is most definitely not a pig hide.”

Then the older man was bent almost double and retching so hard that the tendons in his neck jumped under his skin. Vomit splattered on the flagstones.

Dismas felt an ugly thin stirring inside himself—and spoke before the fear could form further.
“We’ve got to keep moving.”
He reached into the pack he was carrying and pulled out a canteen, handing it to the man. The old soldier gave him a haggard, pained look, but grunted a wordless thanks as he accepted the canteen.

The door had just closed behind them on the next room when the Doctor asked, in a low voice, “Do you suppose they tore the genitals away before or after they killed them?”
“Holy hell, sawbones! You see a sight such as that, and THAT is the question that comes to your mind?” Bohun snapped.
“You needn’t shout,” the Doctor said, her tones surly. “It was just a question.”
“I AM NOT SHOUTING!” Bohun said. He was right, if only technically; the tunnel was silent, but for the constant sound of dripping and their shaky breath, so his speaking at his normal forceful volume sounded very loud. “And it was a question that did not require asking, least of all while we are STILL in these DAMNED TUNNELS with whoever did THAT!”

What horrors, Dismas wondered, had they not yet seen? For he knew depravity--or rather thought he did--but he did not take the brigand band to be that utterly vicious. He was starting to believe it was the cultists, then, and not the bandits, who had chosen such a place as their abode. It must be--but for what infernal, evil purpose?
Dismas did not think he wanted to know.

Chapter End Notes

I know I’m taking forever to get to any romance. There’s so much atmosphere and story to play with! I hope, if you are still bearing with me, that you are enjoying reading this as much as I am enjoying writing it.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The escape from the Warrens. Disturbing discoveries. Fever dreams and disturbing visions. Dismas has difficulty believing it, but he has friends. The beginning of a recovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He’d hoped it was pigs.
It had sounded like pigs--grunts and snuffling. He’d heard the animals could live off almost anything, in conditions that would have sickened or killed other beasts ten times over; it made sense, in a way, that the brigands, or cultists, would be keeping swine in the tunnels, for food and leather. Certainly they could not trade for any, and what little the townsfolk had left would not have been enough to support a pack that seemed as large or ravenous as they.

He had hoped they would only run up against the brigands again.
He ought to have learned not to hope, in places such as that--for any hope, no matter how modest, was doomed to be crushed.

The creature that had loomed up, suddenly, out of the dark, was tall--taller than the Leper, broad and barrel-chested as a circus strongman. It--he had a boar’s head. He carried in one hand a wicked cleaver; wrapped around the other massive forearm he had a chain, ending in a spiked ball. Dismas dodged a crushing blow from the rusted cleaver it was wielding and when the creature’s chest was open took a swipe at him before falling back. The thing screamed like a stuck hog, its yellowed tusks streaked with blood in the light. The chest wound was getting to it--blood came up with its shrieked breath.

Dismas’s blood was up, but the fight felt wrong--everything, wrong. The urge to vomit was creeping up on him; with every move he could feel the acid-hot slide at the back of his throat.

Osmond swung her pick again, then feinted back out of the bastard’s way as he swung for her with the saw-toothed cleaver he had, missing the strike. The Doctor, meanwhile, had fallen back as far as she could an was pelting them with sachets of brown sackcloth, which exploded into noxious green fumes on impact with he ground. But the poison, whatever it was, had no effect on the swine-men. Bohun, ever the old soldier, was hollering at them not to break ranks--as if such a thing mattered, in a place like that!

Because there was no such thing s mercy in the world, the beast-man was accompanied by two others: a thin, starved-looking creature with arms and legs ending in cruel-looking metal pieces, and wearing a dented, crudely-made caricature of a knight’s burgonet through which its snout, with crooked yellowed tusks protruded--and another, no bigger than a bulldog, with gnarled and misshapen limbs, and flesh stretched and bubbled in strange places over its shrunken, twisted body. This last one cowered behind the others, making noises disturbingly like a human infant. In the light from the torches, the weird shadows made him see shapes like distorted human faces in the wrinkled, filthy skin on the little one.

He got another shot off, point-blank, t the big one--only to have the one with metal limbs swing its
hook-limb at him. Had he not manage to step back, he would have likely ended up castrated and
dismemboweled, in one swoop--the hook caught on his belt, ripped up through his vest, severing one
of the brace-belts for his pistols, and shredding the gansey beneath. The gash felt shockingly cold for
a moment before the pain came--but when he saw the opening in the other’s defense, he went for it
reflexively. The dirk sliced cleanly into the thing’s neck, just beneath the spike collar of the mocking
burgonet. It screamed, blasting its fetid breath in his face.

His sleeve’s cuff caught on one of the spikes and he had the split second to see, in his mind’s eye, the
beast getting the hook into his guts and *ripping*.

He flung it back with a raw cry, and it tripped over the small one. Blood spurted hot and thick as
wax from the side of its neck. It was making a horribly shrill, gurgling scream. He could see a bloody
froth coming through the makeshift burgonet’s grate.

Before he could back up, the little one--bleating and squealing horribly--turned and vomited a jet of
pus-colored bile at him.

Some of it caught him in the face--chunks slid down his cheeks and chin.

He staggered back gasping, his skin crawling, swinging uselessly with his dirk.

Bohun thrust him back and crushed the little wretch’s skull with one strike from his mace.

The one with the hook had backed up and looked as though it were trying to decide whether to run
or fight; Bohun advanced on it.

Osmond, meanwhile, whistled twice to draw the big brute’s attention--and then threw a dagger so
quickly that it seemed to vanish from her fingertips and reappear jutting from the thing’s gut.

More screaming. He wiped his face on his intact sleeve, and went to reach for another pistol. His
hand grazed the torn clothes and came away wet; when he looked down he saw his vest and gansey
hanging open, saw the jagged gash in his belly, saw himself flayed open, flayed like--

The Doctor’s hands were suddenly on him, with a compress that smelled sharp and medicinal.

“Hold, now, and do not move too much--this is hardly an operating theater sanitary enough to work
on a disemboweled man!”

There was more screaming. The torch guttered an almost went out. He could feel the Doctor’s small,
hard, deft hands on him. Whatever she’d soaked the bandages in, they seemed to stop the bleeding.

The rest of the fight was a blur, blood and shit and vomit streaking muddy flagstones.

Dismas stood gasping in stunned horror for longer than he’d ever admit later, until the Doctor burned
a bowl of herbs under his nose and Osmond’s voice came to him, as if from another room.

“You’re all right, dearie, they’re gone.” she was holding her hands out in a placating gesture.

“...no use…seen this before. ‘Tis the shock of battle…”

“Do you know where you are?” the Doctor asked.

He nodded, his head jerking on his neck like a broken toy. “Tunnels beneath the manor. The Lady
ought to call ’em the Warrens. Full of vermin.” His jaw ached suddenly; he realized he was shaking
and his teeth chattering.

He’d never been in a skirmish that had affected him like this before.

The Doctor nodded at him, but still seemed to be studying him, the lenses of her mask inscrutable.

They spoke more, but the conversation washed over him. They might as well have been speaking
some elvish language, for all he understood.

He blinked and struggled to make sense of the sounds; the words seemed to form only after a long
moment of the sounds reaching his ears.

“No, no, no,” the Man-at-Arms was muttering. “I should have known it could not be so simple as
mere thieves…”

“Well, whatever the fuck those things were,” Osmond said, turning to him, “They bleed and die of
poison, same as human brigands, and I am not of a mind to concern myself about them further.”
Her voice was tight and hard.

“Woman, did you not see? Did you not see the swine-folk on their two legs, with hands and weapons! What devilry is at work here, to turn pigs into such twisted mockeries of men?” Bohun said. He was making a gesture in the air as if he wanted to throttle something.

“I saw,” the Grave-Robber said. “And, as I said, they die just the same as humans. They may be demons from the very mouth of hell itself, for all I care! They can be killed.” She hefted her satchel, which jangled slightly. “And, what’s more, they’ve got loot. So do please try to keep your hat on, Commander dear.”

“When I was at university, there was a student in my anatomy class who disappeared after he was caught performing experiments on the…reconstituted corpses of animals. These specimens were obtained from recently purloined zoological exhibits. Apparently he managed to reanimate the corpse. Or, rather, the collection of corpses, for there were multiple animals combine into one creature. His research was compelling, but his methods were crude; I learned that the reanimated creature did not live a day. Such as it was,” the Doctor said.

Bohun gave her a look, his dark eye wide. Dismas wondered if he was terrified or furious. “Do you mean to tell me you suppose someone has been—has been here, beneath this very manor, committing such atrocities against nature?”

“I can think of no other explanations for pigs that walk like humans, and understand tool usage,” the Doctor said.
He growled. “The Lady must be made aware of this.”
This time Osmond cut in again. “I find myself in agreement with both of you. However, there can be no report made back to her Ladyship if we continue standing around, chatting about the damn things!”

Silence. Then the Doctor murmured, “Who, I wonder, can be the one behind these experiments? For they must have been of a very sophisticated type. What sort of laboratory they must have, what formulas and equipment they must use!”

Bohun made an annoyed noise. “Fall in, the lot of you. We’ve got to finish this so that we may return and give the Lady our report. This foul business must be put to an end.”

“You’d better stand back,” the Doctor said, when Dismas stepped up beside her.
“What! And you, take my place? ‘Tis just a cut, ain’t even bleedin’ anymore,” he tried. But his voice came out weak, and instead of sounding jokey, his tone was strained.
“It is not, no,” she said. “And the only way to completely stay the bleeding is if you hang back. Besides, you have a brace of pistols. It is not as if you will be of no help to us if you stand closer to the back, where you may be safer.”

“Doctor, look,” he said. “That thing with a hook for a hand got one good swipe at me and almost gutted me like a—” he was going to say ‘like a pig’, but the words stuck in his throat. He looked away, feeling cold an sick, “Almost slit me from stones to throat, went through three layers of thick cloth an’ slit two good leather belts like they was cheap card-board.”
“I saw,” she said, after a moment. “I will endeavour to be careful.”
Dismas stopped arguing, at that. In the moment, he was more terrified by her bravery than awed by it. Gallantry was meaningless in a place where pigs walked upright and skinned humans for leather. He held his tongue and fell back a pace.
Osmond handed him the torch, and stood before him.

~
They walked on, in the stifling dark. Twice more they surprised groups of the swine-folk, once in a group squatting around a crude altar made of human bones, and once rifling through a canvas rucksack.

After they dispatched the others, the Man-at-Arms snatched the torch from Dismas and jerked his head in the direction of the pack.

“You search it, cut-purse, since you’ve proven yourself good for little else on this mission!”
“Just ‘cos he doesn’t jump whenever you say doesn’t make him useless, sirrah,” Osmond said.
“’You’d do well to remember he fought just the same as the rest of us, back there. Indeed, he was the one who got the knife in first.”

“I will not repeat myself,” the Man-at-Arms growled.

Dismas and Osmond shared a look; the Plague Doctor shifted her feet.

Finally--the muscles in his torso screaming in protest--he bent to search the pack. Its only contents were a crumbled marble disc, hastily wrapped in a soiled, torn shirt, and a handful of crumpled, bloody papers. The paper was heavy, and rattled faintly when he palmed it; carefully he unwrapped it to find that the papers seemed to be pages of a letter, or some-such, wrapped around a small wealth of citrine gems and shards of broken onyx. The pages were bloodstained all along the bottom edge, and the pack itself was tacky with dried blood.

“That blood is not fresh,” the Doctor said. “See, the way it has gone from red to brown, with oxidation! It may have been here for weeks--or months.”

A look passed again between them again.

“There’s writin’ on this,” Dismas said. “Cannot make it out--in this light--”

The Man-at-Arms turned away, grumbling. “I want to hear nothing of it. We march now.”

Osmond’s face was a hard, white mask, her blue eyes a flinty gray in that darkness.

She pocketed the bloody parcels, papers and all.

Dismas struggled back to his feet, helped up by Osmond, who caught his wrist and hauled him upright. He hissed in pain as he felt the edges of the wound shift an slide in weird, sickening ways. She stared at him a long moment before he nodded, still panting against the pain. Finally he nodded again, clapped her on the shoulder in thanks, and took the torch back from her.

He found its feeble light did not do much to dispel the sensation of the walls closing in--of being slowly crushed.

The final time they came upon more of the pig-men, he felt like his heart would explode out of his chest. He was useless for the fight, missed half his shots. The Man-at-Arms turned on him in a fury of frustration and began hollering abuse.

“Cur! You gift them our very lives!”

The Doctor’s sachets, exploding into blinding sparks. The pig-men’s screams as they staggered away from the burning light.

At some point Osmond vanished into the shadows, reappearing only to lunge past him to strike the enemies. She did not step once into the circle of torchlight, after that; he perceived her only as a shadow with coppery hair, darting back and forth.

Human bones and viscera piled like offal in wheelbarrows. Drums made of stretched, torn human faces, eyelids an mouths stitched shut with vicious, stupid clumsiness.

They fought like mad, in the light of the failing torch, in the scrabbling, clinging, shit-reeking darkness.

~

Beds were good, he thought.
Needles were not.
Five days had passed since his world had been reduced to a tiny room at the Sanitarium; to convulsively puking and shitting his guts out; to the elderly Sisters who ran the place coming in and reapplying poultries to the wound, vinegaried towels to his burning forehead, more towels still to his feet.

He had been conscious, the first time he’d needed to be subjected to the indignity of a bed-bath, like a helpless elderly man or sick child. Conscious, yes, and so weak from having the runs, and shaking like a leaf, that he couldn’t have wipe his own ass anyway.

One morning he woke up and two of the Sisters were standing at his bedside. They had turned the sheets back below hi waist and were frowning at something below--something he could not see, over the rumpled bedclothes, though he could feel the cold air on his bare legs and privates.

They did not look please with what they saw.

A ludicrous fear that his stones were rotting off, and they were going to cut them and his cock off altogether, rose in him; he started so hard the metal cot rattled against the floor.

“Don’t--don’t--” he began, pleading.

One of the Sisters leaned over him, putting a hand on his shoulder that was probably meant to be comforting. Dismas flinched as if burned.

“Now, now, you will want to lie still!”

Then, to the other, she said, “It is beginning to suppurate.”

The other woman, who was just out of his range of vision, descended on him with a syringe of something clear.

“This will help you rest. And with the pain,” she said.

He did not even have time to yelp in pain, much less ask what was in it.

His arm stung a moment; and then in another, the world went out of focus. He descended into a blurred blue-gray sleep gone clammy and cold.

~

The fevers had not started immediately.

The day after the fight with the pig-folk, he took his allotted coin down to the tavern, determined to drink enough that he could wash some of the memory way under the foam. The Doctor had stitched him up proper--so he’d thought--right after they’d come up from the Warrells. He’d sipped whiskey from a flask and clenched his teeth in one of his ruined belts; Osmond had hovered nearby, occasionally leaning in to wipe sweat out of his eyes, and once to hand the Doctor another bandage.

He’d thought that should have been the end of it; whatever stuff she’d soaked the bandage in worked wonders to stop bleeding. As it was, he’d barely felt it, after the fight.

The old soldier, damn him, had sulked around the edges of the torchlight, scowling into the darkness and muttering about wasted time.

He was halfway through his third drink when he started to feel seriously ill.

An then, shamefully, before the eyes of every body in there, he’d had to stagger out to the back alley on shaking legs, to puke like a farm-lad fresh off the hay-wagon after his first taste of real booze.

It had not gotten better. But it was two more days before Reynauld had had to half-drag, half-carry him to the Sanitarium. By then, the pain was so severe he could barely walk upright.

The Sisters had taken one look at the gash in his belly before a look passed between the them. One of them, without further preamble or pretense, informed him that she would prepare a cell for him. The other began peppering him with a battery of questions about his body and health, which he had answered impatiently.

He had expected to stay no more than one night.
He had been wrong.

~

When he woke up, his mother was there, standing at the foot of the cot, an apparition in white. She wore her old, faded gray calico bodice over a white dress, and stray strands of her draggled black hair hung loose around her face. Her hands were red and chapped as he remembered, her apron still faintly damp with wet as it was the last day he saw her. Her face was sad, her dark eyes plaintive.

"What have you done to yourself now, my boy?" she whispered.

He tried to call out to her but his voice stuck in his throat; the sweat was both hot and clammy on his brow. She turned went slowly out the door, her footfalls silent. He stared a long time at the ratty hem of her retreating skirts, the yellowed ties of her linen washerwoman's apron. He wanted to call after her, to plead with her to stay with him; but even sick as he was, he was too ashamed.

The tears pricked his eyes and locked up his throat.

Then another woman came in, veiled all in white: so bright that looking at her burned him. He tried to turn away from the searing brightness, but his body failed him; he felt boneless, flattened. But he knew her. There was nothing in the world that could dislodge her from his memory.

"Have you seen my boy?" she murmured.

"Have you seen my boy?" she murmured.

"Have you seen my boy?" she murmured.

Dismas wept and shook and begged. He apologized every way he knew how.

Still she stepped closer to the bed, untying the white mantle she wore over her shoulders, with the stain the color of wine blooming like an inkblot across the chest. She drew a locket up from her bodice, out of its high collar, on a slender cord, and the sight of it made his heart clench like the blister left by a burn. He could not turn away.

"Have you seen my boy?" she murmured. "Have you seen my boy?" and her voice echoed down through the torturous ages.

"I’m sorry," he wept. "I did not mean to. A reflex--"

He saw them there as he had seen them the first time, glimpsed dimly by torchlight, their bodies still warm. One bullet the end of two lives. He had been such a little fellow. His mother had held him like a doll, crosswise across her lap. The back of the child’s head had an egg-sized hole in it, from which his brains and blood ran out, to spill down over his mother’s arm.

Her hands, clutching his sleeve. Her staring eyes, the expression of despair.

To match the hole in his head, there was a hole in her breast, weeping blood the color of summer strawberry preserves and motherhood and sacrifice.

He had watched her exhale her last breath, bringing with it a dribble of her blood from her lips, red as Midwintermas candle wax.

The locket swayed away from his eyes, their portrait in excruciating miniature there.

"Have you seen my boy?" she murmured.

"I’m sorry," he groaned, “Please. I did not mean to. I am sorry…”

~

"Were you truly penitent, the Light would not burn you so,” Reynauld said. His voice was chiding, but gentle.
Dismas blinked twice, hard. He wanted to sit up.
“Do not strain yourself,” Reynauld said. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at Dismas with gentle, affectionate eyes. Dismas pulled the blankets up to his nose in a fit of bashfulness he could neither explain nor dispel. Reynauld made no attempt to pull them away. He merely sat there, Verse-book in his hands, reading quietly. Dismas could feel the warmth of his thigh through the thin hospital blankets, warming his side. That was almost too intimate—wound tight as a watch-spring with memory. His mother had used to sit on the edge of the bed like this, and tell him stories to soothe him to sleep; the proximity filled him with a wet, terrifying thrill of affection.

“What are you reading?” he mumbled. His tongue was thick.
“Shh,” Reynauld said. “Do not strain yourself.”
Dismas managed a weak nod.
Reynauld began reading aloud from the book. His voice was fine and warm, the tones coming to Dismas like amber, like the color of good whiskey. The words themselves, whatever they were, washed over him like a warm tide.
He slept again.

~

The next time he woke up, the Doctor was there. --The Plague Doctor, frowning at a page of notes. It was strange to see her without the mask. Her hair was very black, an cut short around her chin. She had changed her gray and drab-green robes for a clean, trim white jacket with a single row of buttons that ran all the way up to her throat. On her hands she wore white rubber gloves that came up and over the wrist cuffs of the jacket’s sleeves.
“You are conscious?” she asked.

He blinked. He wasn’t sure, until he swallowed and the pain in his raw throat was like he’d eaten broken glass.
“Aye,” he rasped. When he tried to reach for the pewter jug on the nightstand to slake the evil thirst and the pain in his throat, he found his arms too weak to lift. His arms felt as leaden as if he’d been scaling a rope for hours.

She glanced to him twice before making a concerned sound and setting the notes aside and pouring him a cup of water. Before she gave it to him, however, she crushed a white tablet in a tiny mortar on the table and stirred whatever it was into the water.
“An experimental cure,” she said. “That should hasten your recovery from your not-inconsiderable dehydration.”

Dismas took the glass with a shaking hand and put it back in three gulps. The medicine lent the water a weird, cloying sweetness.
“Another,” he said, “Please.” But his arms would not obey him this time, and she had to hold the cup to his lips.

He found the weakness equally frustrated and terrifying, and had to remind himself that she had already saved his life. He figured she would pass no judgement on him, having already seen him so near death’s door.
“The facilities here are passing decent, though I find the Sister’s methods to be old-fashioned at best and misinformed at worst. They tell me the wound was infected.”
Dismas felt queasy; he turned his head away from the cup.

She regarded him with a raised eyebrow as she took it away, then glanced back at the table. When he followed her glance he could see that it was strewn with notes; he wondered how long she’d been there.
He wondered how long he’d been unconscious, with her in the same room. Such dullness of senses signaled death for outlaws; whether caused by infirmity or old age, they meant the same thing. The sickness had weakened him.

“How long have I been here? How long ‘til I’m cured?” he managed. Damn, but his voice sounded like sandpaper on cheap wood!

“You have been here seven days, today. They never should have let the laceration reach that stage. They tell me the pus was the ‘appropriate’ sort, however,” she muttered. “You are fortunate.”

Dismas shifted slightly in bed, then grimaced. His belly below his navel knifed sharp with pain that spread and burned. He gasped suddenly and fell back a moment, before steeling himself. With an effort, he flung the sheets back, dreading and fearing what he would see.

“You wish to inspect the wound?” the Doctor said. “An intelligent decision. One should be informed of one’s own physical status. You are not squeamish, I hope.”

He paused with two handfuls of the hospital gown’s hem in his hands, hesitating. He’d heard gruesome stories about oozing wounds that never closed; people who died slow, agonizing deaths of fevers or sweats while their sores ran with pus. He knew it could take weeks, and that once the fevers took hold of you, there was no saving you.

He felt lightheaded.

Still, the fear of not knowing won out over the fear of whatever he might see, and same as he always did, he forced himself to look.

His entire middle was thoroughly covered with bandages. These were a few pinkish stains, but no lurid festering gray pus oozing from beneath the gauze. He relaxed slightly.

They had, mercifully, given him some drawers, though they were the ridiculous short-legged kind that tied at either hip and could be untied and pulled off easily.

He heard the Doctor splashing something over her hands and smelled a sharp, chemical smell; when he looked over, she’d uncorked one of her bottles and was pouring its contents over her fingers, catching the excess in a dented brass basin.

She helped him roll onto his side and unrolled the bandages swaddling his belly with quick, careful hands.

The stitches bristled up from his skin in points that prickled like needles when he reached for them; she caught his hand and pulled it away.

“You must not touch it! The wound has not yet granulated. You may introduce more infectious materials into it, if you touch it!”

He let his hands fall to his sides, still staring at it, the little points where the stiff ‘threads’ held his flesh together.

“Silver wire. To cut the infection,” she explained. “Silver being one of the principal metals with powers to act on infectious particles. I have written several articles on its efficacy! I must thank you. I feel quite privileged to have gotten to prove my theory effective in the field. And to think,” she said, “They had packed the incision with lint!”

He could feel the nerves creeping up on him like a physical thing, so to stave them off, he muttered, “To think, my guts held in by a few twists of wire…”

“It was hardly so deep. Truly, you were fortunate; any deeper and your bowels may have been perforated. That would have been another issue altogether, requiring a much more thorough procedure than I was in any way able to perform down there.”

Dismas didn’t know why, but the detached way she was speaking of the wound, and the complicated words she was using, made him feel better. When he told her so, she only raised her eyebrows at him; he laughed until the pain in his abdomen made him stop.
They talked, for a bit. She informed him that Osmond had given the bloodstained letters to the Lady. They’d sold the gems and with it some of them had bought better gear.

“She asked after you, as did Master Leper. He was not allowed in, on grounds of contagion, though I tried to explain to them that his condition is quite stable. It is just as well.” she shook her head. “The Crusader, your friend, has gone to pray for you every day this past week.”

Reynauld!
Suddenly the memory--or fever dream?--of his coming to visit him was fresh as a kiss. He felt his face heat.
She gave him a studying look, and then said, “Your face is flushed. Is the fever, perhaps, returning? I have something that may--”
“No, no,” he said, weakly. “I--I feel a bit exhausted, is all.”

She seemed satisfied by that answer. He watched her gather her papers, her movements quick and energetic, efficient as a bird gathering twigs.
“Doctor,” he said. “I should like to thank you for saving my life--but I should like to thank you, to your given name.”
“Doctor Guideville,” he said.
She gave him a crooked little smile. “Yes, yes. Put down your head and rest; I’ve a distinct feeling you will be thanking me many more times. I will return later to check your condition.”
This time when he slept, mercifully, it was the vast, blank, black sleep of the drunk or medicated.

Chapter End Notes

Is anyone reading this?
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

A return from the Sanitarium. Dismas’s friends bring him gifts gotten in his absence. An anxious conversation, overheard.

Chapter Notes

Lol so there's kind of a plot. I guess. I hope you are having as much fun reading this as I am writing it! I hope it's not boring. :(

Dismas had the feeling that, though he was back out of the Sanitarium, the strangeness was far from over. For one, it was still gloomy as ever outside, the sun gleaming like a pale lamp through the ever-present sea haze that hung over the town. He wondered now if that was part of some curse, or if it was the time of year or what.

The first place he went was the kitchen, intent on getting food that didn’t look like it had already been chewed.

He ran into Osmond in the hallway.

“You’re back! So you’re on the mend, then?”

He shrugged. “I s’pose they simply had to throw me out. I think I must’ve been too distractin’. Dashin’ rogue such as meself, all alone in a building full of old women doctors…”

The joke didn’t feel labored; he felt like he was coming back to his old self.

She grinned and burst into laughter. “Ahh yes, I’m sure they were drawin’ lots to see who got to take your pants off next.”

“You joke! I’ll have you know, that’s a popular party game in three cities!”

“Only three?” she said, with an arched eyebrow.

“Well, a fellow likes to take off his fair share of pants too, you know. Got to save some places for different types of divertisement. You follow,” he said, preening a little, and she guffawed again.

They went to the kitchen together, still snickering at the stupid joke.

The Arbalest and the Vestal were at the table, the Arbalest plucking a pigeon and the Vestal peeling shallots. There was a smell of pepper and rosemary in the air.

The Lady herself was in the kitchen when he came in, but doing something so unexpected that for a moment he just stared.

She was wearing a yellowed shirtwaist that must have once been beautiful, and gray skirts, under a pinafore that was several sizes too large for her. Her hair was wrapped up under a gray and white striped tignon very like the one the woman in the portrait was wearing, but much plainer.

She stood at the table, viciously rolling out a pie crust.

Without her gloves he could see she had hands like a clerk’s—blunt, short nails, ink stains mottling the outside edge of her palms.
The details fit together strangely in his mind, but he had a nagging feeling that the Lady was one of those sorts of impoverished nobles you heard about offhandedly--living in drafty, dark, rundown manors which they no longer had the income to heat, cool, or keep staffed. Normally this thought would have tickled him to no end--serves them right, he'd think, for having a house so big you NEED twenty people just to keep the place clean and lit--and for a moment he felt bad. The little Lady didn't seem like that type at all; she was a bit stiff, sure, but she hadn't acted too proper to eat with them, made no demands on their time outside of work, and even then, she didn't breathe down their necks or expect them to ask how high when she said jump.

There were exceptions to every rule, however, and he figured she was just that: her uncle and his actions--shady as they were, the complete sum of them was not even yet uncovered--was proof of exactly the kinds of nobles he knew well, and hated. From what he could hear, she hated him, too.

"He left them to their deaths! All this suffering--on a whim of his! He--he made them dig, and then--they must have dug too deep, and awakened some subterranean CREATURES that slept beneath the manor. How could he have been so dead-hearted and cruel? To have just--abandoned them down there, with whatever horrors he found! Was he ever the man i knew?"
The Vestal looked uncomfortable; the Arbalest's face was carefully blank.

"Holy Light! I--my cousins and I used to play in the old ruins--for you know the ruin upon the cliff is truly ancient, and was ruined even when the manor was newly built--and to think, at any time we could have fallen down there, into one of those pits!" she paused her abuse of the pie crust to roughly scrub away the tear tracks own her cheeks with the back of one wrist. The motion left a line of flour on one cheek.

She was silent for a long moment; Dismas sidled into the kitchen and sat on a stool near the fire and tried to avoid notice. Osmond went quietly to the pantry and slipped inside.

"There are sea caves, as well. Some of them large enough to sail a boat into when the tide is low.” she said quietly. “He used to tell us stories of the freebooters who would hide out there, generations ago. He said there were tales of a trove of unimaginable treasure, lost down there during a storm; a certain pirate captain and his crew tried to hide there and drowned when the seas rose too high.” She looked away.

“He also used to tell us to take care, when we were playing in the old ruins. There are places there where the floor has fallen through to expose vast underground spaces. Once, we stumbled upon a grate set into the paving stones, almost grown over with ivy. When I dropped a stone through its bars, it was several seconds before I heard the splash. I could smell water when I put my face close to it.

“There were other places, still, where parts of the old, original edifice still stood; these were much better preserved, and there, the gates were utterly impassable. What were we children to do, armed only with sticks and rocks? Every window was barred, every gate chained. Once I accidentally became separated from my cousins and found an area where there was no ivy obscuring the iron gate. I saw a large, wide courtyard bordered on all sides by the wings of the building. The windows were all intact and I could even see there were still drapes hanging in them. I imagined I saw a lady, with powdered hair in a high pompadour, standing in one window. She held a white fan before her pale face. She beckoned to me, and I turned and ran away. When I found them, I told my cousins I’d seen a ghost. But when we tried to go back, I could not find the way.” she reached for a round biscuit cutter, shaking her head.

“It is just as well.” she made a bitter little laugh. “Knowing what I know now, she’s probably a ghost, and real!”
Seeking perhaps to change the subject, the Arbalest gently interjected, “So, you have cousins, then? You are not the sole heir? It may be—good, helpful, for you to call in some family to help with the burden of managing this place.”

The Lady shook her head. She looked away, her face sad and almost vacant. “I am the last one. There were only four of us. Two died when, during an idiotic race through city streets, my cousin lost control of his phaeton and it overturned. They were both crushed to death. Another was fond of high-bred horses, which proved his demise, as one evening when he was returning home from his offices, his mount threw him. He broke his neck. The horse threw a shoe and ran himself lame, and had to be destroyed.” she shrugged. “The last was a second-cousin, my grandfather and grand-uncle’s older cousin, and she was nearly seventy when I was a girl. She had no children, I am told. My uncle had no children of his own, either—none, at least, which are legitimate or known to the family. I am given to understand he was on friendly terms with some countess at some point, but I was able to learn nothing about the affair—not even the mysterious lady’s name.”

The Arbalest looked contrite, and was clearly wishing she had not mentioned the Lady’s family at all. The Vestal murmured, “Perhaps you should speak to someone? The Abbot is a very kindly man, and very wise…” “I don’t want to SPEAK to anyone! I want this to be done! I want ALL of this to be done!” the Lady said, her voice rising. Now Dismas had to discreetly roll his eyes; it was not, after all, as if she were the one who’d gone down there and nearly died.

Osmond had come back out of the pantry and seen him make the face. She must also have heard the conversation, because she leaned against the pantry doorjamb and crossed her feet. “So, then, what is it you’d like us to do?” she asked.

The Lady slapped the rolling pin down into her palm, hard enough that it made a slapping sound. She did not flinch, but he heard the creak as she twisted her palm around the wood. “I want you to go down there and see if there is any treasure. And if you see ANYTHING that looks like my grand-uncle called it forth from the pit, KILL IT.”

There was a beat of uncomfortable silence in the kitchen. Then the Lady added, “And if, while on missions from now on, you should happen to find any papers—no matter how trivial in nature they seem—you must bring them to me immediately. It seems there is a great deal I do not know, and I dislike the idea of continuing on in such ignorance.”

Laws, to see that woman with a weapon in her hand, Dismas thought.

“What was she on about, anyway?” Dismas asked Osmond, when they left the kitchen later. “She read the papers you found. Grim news indeed. Looks like his late Lordship hired people to go into the tunnels—the Warrens, you called ‘em—and dig. Light only knows what he expected them to find—but what they DID find was their deaths.”

The thought of the tunnels closing around them made a clammy chill run through Dismas’s body. Seeing his discomfort, the Grave Robber laid a gentle hand on his arm. “Don’t let your mind tarry to long upon ugly thoughts, dearie. Better out than in.”

She handed him a cigarillo tin that rustled and clanked when he moved it. He looked up at her questioningly, but she only shrugged a little an flicked her hair back off her shoulders.
When he went to put it away, she snorted a laugh. “Open it! Laws, is this what you always do with gifts?”

He was going to tell her that he wasn’t accustomed to getting gifts--had, in fact, only gotten name-day gifts from his mother and aunts when he was a small child and could count the number of them on his hands--but he decided against it.
He misliked being so much in his own thoughts.
Instead of ‘tarrying’, he carefully opened the tin and found it contained two wood-and-graphite pencils, a small razor, and a small clerk’s ledger pad.

He felt the joy spread through his chest like a physical thing; when he looked back up at her he could not contain his smile. He wanted to hug her.
Knowing better than to ask where she’d gotten the things from, he settled on, “How did you know?”
“You’ve been pinching charcoal from the fireplace for ages, dearie. Don’t worry--no one else notices, else if they do, they likely suspect you use it to start other fires when you sleep in other places. I wanted to get it to you while you were still in hospital, but those doctors were guarding you more fiercely than lionesses guard their cubs.”

Something occurred to him. “So no one went to visit me?”
“Oh, don’t take it that way. We tried! Master Leper, your friend the Crusader, and myself. Doctor Guivedille was of course allowed; but before everyone else they kept the door barred.”
His mood sunk a bit, to hear that; Reynauld had not come to him after all.
“Where IS Reynauld, anyway?” he asked. He had not seen him when he’d come back in.
She shrugged. “Last time I saw him, he was off at the Chapel, helping the Abbot with something. The roof is so full of holes, they may as well have services outdoors. Rather sad, in’t it. He’s been over there every day for the past week.”
His face fell a moment, but he looked back down at the small tin an the smile came back onto his face, only slightly dimmed.

“Thanks for this,” he said. “Truly.”
She wrinkled her nose, scoffing a laugh. “Aaahhh, pshaw! I told you, I’d have you reading bawdy books for yourself in no time, didn’t I?”

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Dismas was not a praying man.
He thought the whole thing with the Light and the Books was a bunch of twaddle, useful for the nobs and the rich Church to keep the starving poor ‘blessed and meek’ and content to wait until death to reap any of the rewards the rich deprived them of in life.
But he was of a mind that life was too short to hang all your hopes on the idea that some entity would, after your death, reward you for your suffering. Even now, having seen the nun call down holy lightning, he refused to believe that any just or loving god would ordain the world so. Any heaven presided over by such a ruler, he’d decided, ws a place he did not want to go to.

Having no appreciation for hypocrisy meant he could only sit so long in any holy place before the annoyance started to get to him. So it was with some difficulty that he sat through the last fifteen minutes of a dolorous mass, waiting in the vestibule and staring at the backs of the congregation’s heads.
It ws not hard to find Reynauld. He was wearing his russet-colored quilted gambeson, sitting in the front row on the far right. The light coming through the stained-glass window mottled him in shades of yellow, throwing a halo behind his head.

Dismas dipped back into the shadows as he heard the scraping of feet on the floor, shuffling shoes,
the rustle of fabric that announced everyone standing to leave.

When the Crusader stepped into the vestibule, Dismas casually moved to walk next to him, until they were walking almost in lock-step. He put his hands in his pockets and bit the inside of his cheeks, amused; Reynauld did not realize, as they walked all the way down the steps and were nearing the cemetery wall before he blinked and swung his eyes up at Dismas.

Who laughed, supremely amused.

“Gettin’ a bit slow, mate. If I’d’ve been after your wallet, I could have taken it off you an’ been gone before you so much as looked at me!”

“Dismas! You’re out of the Sanitarium!” he said. His smile made crows’ feet crinkle around his eyes. Again he had two-day stubble, and as Dismas mirrored his smile he found himself wishing he could touch the man’s cheek, feel the roughness under his fingertips, in his palm.

“Aye,” he said. “I thank you for dragging me down there in the first place.”

Reynauld chuckled, but shook his head. “T’was nothing, my friend. How was it? I made an attempt to go and see you, but the Sisters and the doctors who work in the Sanitarium were very firm in their refusals.”

“Nah, it weren’t nothing. I spent three days sweatin’ through the sheets an’ about pukin’ my guts out. Doctor Guideville came and took a look at me and had to fix up the dressing they’d put on it. Whatever SHE did, it got me back on my feet in two days.”

“I am pleased that you are well; the Light has answered my prayers for your safe recovery.”

Reynauld said.

Dismas felt like he was standing in a shaft of sunlight on a cold day. He was very glad his muffler covered the lower half of his face, because he could not stop smiling.

He looked around at the day with new eyes; but then, when he looked back at Reynauld, he began to notice things about the man. His hands, without his heavy gloves, were chafed; his knuckles were red and looked banged-up. When the smile left his face, Dismas could see there were dark half-circles under his eyes.

Reynauld looked exhausted.

“How’ve you been? What’ve you been getting up to?” Dismas asked. He wanted to ask if Reynauld had been getting any sleep, but decided against it; he didn’t want to sound like a mother hen.

“The Abbot needs strong arms for repairs on the chapel, and it was my happy duty to accept the work,” Reynauld said.

“Thought your arm would still be acting up,” Dismas said, jerking his chin at the limb in question. Reynauld shook his head.

“A testament to the excellence of our good physician’s skill. Occasionally the healed flesh itches, but besides that I am entirely recovered.”

They walked together in companionable silence, for a time. Then Dismas, not wanting the time to end, said, “Say, what are you doing later? Got any spare coin to buy a drop of drink for a poor vagrant?”

“A strange day indeed, when vagrants carrying pistols and knives beg politely. Even if you looked remotely like a vagrant in need of aid, I should use the coin to buy you food or clothing, not strong drink,” Reynauld said dryly.

Dismas scoffed, then laughed. “Very well, then. Why do we not go the tavern together, and this vagrant will buy himself his own drink?”

Reynauld was still smiling, but now a bit sadly. He shook his head. “I am afraid I cannot. I was merely going back to the barracks-inn to change my boots for my workboots, and then I return to the chapel. You are, of course, welcome to come help.”

Dismas shrugged one shoulder, both glad he had an excuse and saddened that it meant, even had he wanted to, he could not. “Sorry, mate, I’ve still got stitches in. The Doctor has me patched up so’s I
can be up and about, but I dare not risk much else.”
Reynauld nodded, understanding.
They walked the rest of the way to the inn in a kind of peaceful quiet that Disms felt settle like warmth into his bones.

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He sat on the bed staring across the room for a long time, after Reynauld left to return to the chapel. There was always something to do—but after cleaning his guns, mending loose stitching in one of his gloves, and fussing with the sock he was STILL working on, he eventually set the work aside and merely stared down at the bed.

Naps were a strange thing; he had not really ever had the luxury of indulging in them before. When he was a young boy, there was always work that needed doing; when he was a young man, either he was afoot to get money or afoot to flee whoever he’d gotten it from. When he WASN’T in a constant state of rushing about, he’d liked to spend his money on more practical, or at least active pursuits: oil for his belts and guns, more shot, or else a good meal. He wasn’t the type to take his money and spend it on room an board at a lavish inn or brothel, what with partners for casual fucks being easily found for free in large cities. (There was also less likelihood of the authorities kicking in the door while you were still making the beast with two backs, as private homes were much harder to find than businesses.)

So now, it was with a strange mix of trepidation and eagerness that he sat on the edge of his bed and considered his prospects.
Everyone else was occupied in other ways; the Arbalest was down in the town square holding an archery demonstration for anyone who would watch and listen. (This was predominantly teenage girls. Dismas had never seen a more fearsome bunch, when given weapons. With more training, they would make a proper bunch of Furies.)

Osmond had gone off with her pick brazenly swinging against her hip, to take what she called her ‘constitutional’ around town. He had not the least bit of doubt she’d take a lot more than that.
The Antiquarian an Occultist were both holed up in one of the store-rooms which they, along with the Doctor, seemed determine to turn into a library.
The Bounty-Hunter had gone off to places unknown, but that wasn’t terribly uncommon. Dismas would swear the man only appeared at mealtimes.
Even the dog-minder had taken his hound--and his cranky old soldier--out for a walk. The place was quiet.

He laid down and fell into a syrupy-warm sleep, lulled by the sunlight and full of half-glimpsed dreams of another man’s broad, muscled chest and sloping shoulders.

Half-awake, he drowsily stroked himself for a little bit, luxuriating in the knowledge he would not be disturbed. Here, at least, in the little room he shared, he felt safe enough to take his time.
He thought obliquely about Reynauld, his hair wet with the rain, and the way he would smell up close after a bath, with good soap. The lull of the sunlight proved too much, though, and he got only as far as imagining the other man’s lips on his before he slid off into sleep again.

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A knock at the door woke him later.
He lay blinking up at the cracks in the ceiling plaster for a long moment, before finally rolling over and standing up. Hastily stuffing his boots on and not bothering with a belt, or to tuck his shirt back in, he shuffled to the door.
“Who is it?”
“It is Claville.”
He frowned a little, thoughtfully, and then unlocked the door, pulling it open.
The Leper was looming quietly in the doorway, a shaft of late-afternoon sunlight falling crosswise over his shoulders.
“Well, hello,” Dismas said, grinning. “To what do I owe this unexpected visit?”

The Leper smiled back, a little, and then held up a small fabric pouch. “I have something for you. This will help with any pain you have. I meant to bring it to you while you were in hospital, but the doctors there were…less than fond of the idea of allowing a leper into a place of medicine.” He shrugged. “Understandably.”
Dismas accepted the gift with raised eyebrows. “Ahh, mate! Thanks!”

The little pouch was simple black cotton, with a cord drawstring holding it shut. Dismas unlooped the drawstring and loosened it, and a skunky, grassy smell wafted up to his nose; he grinned again and looked back up at the Leper.
“This smells like potent stuff! How did you manage to lay hands on this?”
“All manner of things can be had, if one knows the right people,” he said. He inclined his head a little, by way of shrugging. Dismas laughed.
“I seem to recall you mention rolling papers; alas I can be of no help, in that regard, as I usually use a pipe.”
“No, no, this is perfect! I thank you,” Dismas said.

The Leper looked as if he were about to say something else, but there was a hasty step coming down the stairs, and then the Lady was rushing past them, down the hallway, fussing with the buttons of her cuffs. She mumbled a polite, “Excuse me,” in passing, but gave the Leper an expectant look.
“I apologize for cutting this short,” he said. “The Lady has asked me to accompany her to the library. It is…not in the safest neighborhood of this town.”
“Ahh,” Dismas said. He wanted to offer to go—thieves knowing thieves the best, and all—but he knew it was a poor idea, with his stitches still barely healed. In the end he wished the Leper good evening and a safe trip, and the other man left.

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Poking around in the inn’s upper floors yielded all manner of interesting discoveries. On the uppermost floor—the third—there were large, derelict suites full of rotten, vermin-eaten furnishings and fineries. These were no doubt intended for the wealthier guests the town must have once had. One of these, the one occupying the southwest corner, had a locked door. When he tried the knob, he smelled a waft of rose-scented air come from beneath the door, and guessed it was likely the Lady’s room.

There were disused servant’s rooms; an entire lounge, complete with a pianoforte in ruinously poor condition and a bar, still somehow stocked with wines and liquor. An investigatory sniff into one of the bottles of wine told him the stuff had long since turned vinegary.

Against the lounge’s far wall, the blood-wine-colored drapes hung half-rotten off their rings; a shaft of sunlight glowed pale and gray between them. When he went over to investigate he found a pair of glass doors, which after a struggle opened into a balcony over the courtyard. Ivy had all but swallowed the balcony; here, against the cold stone wall, where there was no sun, the branches were withered and dead. But at least this ivy was not diseased, like what he had seen in the forest. The ivy was humped over something, something clustered beneath it.

Carefully, he began peeling it back, mindful to watch for snakes or rats. Spiders and tiny lizards scuttled away for their lives; at the end of a few moments, he had uncovered a set of wrought-iron
furniture, covered with blistered white paint into which it had bled trails of rust.
There was a courtyard below, but the ivy shielded the recessed balcony entirely; he had been down
in the courtyard and thought the swath of ivy covered nothing but the wall.
Discovery of this new, secret place made him feel both an almost childish glee, and his old thief’s
sense of safety: not a proper hideout, of course, but a place to go where he would not be seen if he
did not want to be.

No sooner than he’s made himself comfortable at the rusty little table, though, than he heard a door
open somewhere below. There was a sudden low clamor of noise: it was the hall door, and someone
was stepping out into the courtyard.

The speakers were already in the middle of their conversation.

“I tell you, I know what I saw!” that was the old soldier’s voice. “By hell, I may have only one good
eye, but I am not so old that I need to begin to doubt its accuracy!”
Dismas knelt and crept closer to the stone balustrade, carefully separating the ivy to see down below.
The Hound-master was nodding, making a placating gesture. “I see, I see. But…you must
understand, these things are a bit…difficult to wrap the mind around. The living dead? Swine
walking as men walk, wielding weapons? It is--”
“Could ‘ave been a trick of the light,” the Bounty Hunter muttered.

“Are you implying my nerves are so weak that I would conjure a vision as lurid as that?” the Man-at-
Arms asked. His voice was low and thunderous.
The Bounty-Hunter shook his head, “I said what I said. Take what meaning you may.”
The Arbalest cut in. “I believe him. You have not yet been on a mission an seen what lies out there.
Cultists, undead wolves--believe you me, the brigands are the LEAST of the threats!”
The Hound-master looked uneasy.
The Bounty Hunter snorted.

“Now, Mademoiselle Arbalest, you yourself mentioned these cultists. Did you not say, earlier, that
they go about wearing masks made of human skulls an nails?”
“Aye, I did say that.”
“And did you not also say these cultists had been abducting inmates from the Sanitarium?”
“Yes! They had some poor starved wretch in a straightjacket and chains! What are you getting at?”
she asked at last. Her voice was almost frantic.

“Is it not possible, then, that these…pig-men, swine-folk, what have you, are actually merely the
cultists, wearing the heads of boars or pigs as masks?” the Hound-master asked. He spoke in very
gentle tones, which nevertheless inflame the Arbalest’s growing frustration, anyway.
“No, that is NOT what I meant!” she said. “You cannot understand; you have not seen anything
yet!”
The Man-at-Arms nodded and said, “Those were no masks!When last I checked, masks could not
vomit or bleed, or have tongues or tusks!”

The Bounty-Hunter muttered, “So, what? You expect us to just fucking cower here, scared of a
bunch of wandering lunatics?”
“What was that?” the Man-at-Arms barked.
The Hound-master laid a hand on his arm gently, but whatever he was saying was lost in the force of
the soldier’s voice as he spoke next.

“Now, you will listen here, you arrogant, foul-mouthed cur! I will be damned before I allow the likes
of YOU to call me a liar! Go, then, into the woods! Or on the next mission! But when you see the
horrors that lurk out there, you will WISH I was naught but a cowardly, crazed old fool!”
“No one accused you of being a liar,” the Hound-master said. “It may be there ARE strange happenings going on.”
“I believe you,” the Arbalest said again. “There are THINGS out there--and they are REAL, and they are EVIL.”

Dismas did not catch the rest of what was said--there was a scraping of chairs n the thump of hobnailed boots on the courtyard paving stones. He heard booming footfalls on the stairs, a door slamming.
He wondered if he ought to have gone back in an spoken up for the old soldier. As well as he remembered the fellow calling him a cur and worse, he also knew that without him, they likely would have died down there, in that sewer turned slaughterhouse.

Unsure what to do, he remained on the balcony. The roach he’d been smoking was burnt down to a smoldering butt that would certainly burn his fingers after two or three more drags; he decided he would go in after that.

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The downstairs corridor was dark.
There was a sharp, pine-smoke smell of a recently snuffed candle wick; someone must have opened a window too fast and accidentally blown out the hall lights.
He froze at the top of the stairs, regarding the little rectangle of grayish light that fell from the well-lit stairwell, with its many windows, onto the floor at the end of the hall.

The windows there were boarded up, allowing in only irregular slats of thin light, too pale to see anything by properly; and even those ended abruptly at the end of the hallway.
The darkness was warm, and the air full of a wet, boiled smell like the back of a kitchen.
In his mind he heard the steamy hissing, the dripping.
His skin prickled up into goose-flesh, and in two breaths he felt he was trapped down in the tunnels with the pigs again.
He stood at the foot of the stairs, and a sick feeling came into his guts unbidden.

A faint rattle from down the darkened hall had him reaching for the small knife he always kept on him. He had better manners and sense than to draw it inside, but having his hand on its hilt made him feel better, for reasons he couldn’t specify.
He did not want to step down out of the little slice of light left by the windows.

He did not want to think about WHY he did not want to step down.
 Abruptly he felt ridiculous and ashamed. Here he was, a grown man, afraid of the dark…
Without giving himself another moment to think about it, he forced himself to take the first jerking step down and into the darkened hallway.

Now compelled forward by the force of fear and pretended bravery, he walked down the hallway as fast s he was able--faster than he should have, for his hand and right foot struck something.
For a moment he grappled silently with whoever it was, the fear knifing sharp in his chest. He was too close to pull his knife, and he was no good at hand-to-hand fighting--
“What the--what the devil has come over you?” the accented voice meant it was the Hound-master.
He held onto two handfuls of the man’s coat, both of their breaths heaving, until his eyes finally adjusted to the dark and he could see the other man’s face dimly.

The Hound-master was staring at him, more bewildered than anything else; the man was holding fast to his muffler, and without the burst of panic-energy to fuel him, Dismas could feel it was actually cutting into his neck.
“What do you think--” the Hound-master began.
“Y’shouldn’t be sneakin’ around in the dark!” he muttered, thrusting the fellow away from him. The Hound-master gave Dismas a dirty look. “YOU should watch where you’re going.”

He watched as the other man continued down the dim hallway, his heartbeat gradually slowing. Never before had he been glad that he hadn’t had his guns on him; he might have accidentally murdered a comrade in arms for bumping into him and startling him.
It was embarrassing, how brittle his nerves had become. He needed a drink.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

A misunderstanding. Dismas tries to warn a friend.

Two more days passed, in which nothing much was done or said. The Lady sent another party out to the Weald, this time to sweep the roads of the undead wolves plaguing the place. He heard rather than watched as the Hound-Master, the Bounty-Hunter, the Vestal, and the Leper Claville set out, early in the morning.

Dismas barely saw Reynauld at all, and counted himself fortunate; looking too long at the man now would fill him with a kind of desperate, burning longing that he could neither ignore or dispel.

The second day, Plague Doctor looked over his injuries, proclaimed the stitches ready to be removed, and then in an instance that he was certain would give him nightmares for the rest of his life, had him lie still on a bed while she went at the silver wire stitches with a pair of pliers.

He could feel the flesh pulling slightly with her every delicate, minute touch; he made the mistake of glancing down once and saw his newly-knitted flesh dimpled around the little pieces of wire, the wire bristling from his skin like the many legs of some metal insect protruding from his belly. He swallowed once and had to look up at the ceiling and will himself to think on other things; the nervous sweat started on his forehead and in his armpits almost immediately.

Her voice was like a tangible thing, and he clung to it. She asked, “Have you noticed any lingering tenderness or swelling?” He shook his head. “Itches like hell, though,” he said. “Like bein’ gnawn by ants.” She chuckled. “Yes, that is typical for the healing process for this sort of wound.” Her fingers were careful as she prodded the wound’s edges. He had the idea that she was being so careful, as much because she did not want to undo her work, as she wanted to avoid hurting him.

He remembered she mentioned that she’d been “testing” her idea with the silver wires on him, and suddenly wondered how many of her subjects had been alive at the time of her studying them. He’d heard how some city doctors obtained their ‘specimens’ for study—the paid body-snatchers lurking around cemeteries, and the people who would lurk outside charity hospitals, waiting for the corpses of those too poor to be buried.

The fact that he’d very nearly been one of those poor sods came to him, unbidden and unwanted; what strange luck, that she was stitching up his living flesh, instead of carving his dead body up to study what killed him!

She made a final noise of satisfaction and swabbed the area with a bit of gauze, onto which she had poured a liberal mount of some evil-smelling liquid from one of her many vials. “You are healing quite well. In perhaps another week, you will be fit to venture on missions again.”

He wrinkled his nose. “So, now the joy of smelling like turpentine and cat’s piss on top of being gnawn by ants?” “Bite your tongue!” she said, but she grinned when she saw he was joking. “This is a solution of my own creation, designed to destroy infectious particles on skin. You may thank me.”

There was a beat of silence. She stared down at him expectantly before he sat up, slowly rolling his
shirt down over his belly. He’d decided he did not want to look at the wound until he absolutely had to.

“Thank you?” he said, when the awkward silence was too heavy to bear any longer.

She sighed and shook her head, and went to re-pack her doctor’s satchel. He clapped her on the shoulder as they both stood, an she gave him a questioning look.

“I mean it,” he said.

~

He hid in his little balcony-arbor and discreetly eavesdropped on several conversations, learning the little dramas and petty squabbles people got up to. He also once overheard two people sneaking out to have an amorous encounter there; but they must have been leaned against the wall directly below the balcony, for he could not see whoever it was.

Out of boredom he took to whittling things out of bits of laundry soap—never again thinking he’d need such a useless skill as that one he’d gained in prison, yet here he was. By the third day, he had quite a menagerie made—three little cats, a stubby-legged pony, and two sheep. It was fortunate for him that the barracks-inn had such a surplus of the stuff left over from its days as an inn, or else they probably might have missed the stuff.

One morning he came down to find an exceptionally nice breakfast laid, consisting of oatmeal, fried eggs, pancakes, and the lightest scones he’d ever tasted. Everything was laid out in the center of the big table in the dining hall, in a tableau that would have been too good to be believed if not for the delicious aromas wafting from it.

There was a once-fine porcelain soup tureen, cracked and carefully repaired with plaster, which was full of thick oatmeal, mercifully more oats than water. An oval dish held several stacks of golden pancakes, and a basket, lined with a brown and white gingham kitchen towel, held a small mountain of scones, delicately browned and highly-risen, still exhaling their steam into the air. A last large dish held fried eggs, carefully layered so that the yolks had not burst. And finally, the miracle of miracles, there was a humble brown earthenware crock, with a wooden spoon’s handle stuck in it—the universal symbol of a jar of honey.

Dismas’s mouth started watering even as his stomach gave a hard little clench in hunger; he raised his eyes at the Arbalest, who shrugged.

“The Lady came down into the kitchen at first light and barred the door behind her. She will allow no one else in,” she explained.

Dismas found that passing strange, but made no comment.

Osmond came to the table and sat beside him, one plate balanced on one arm. He put one of the little soap cats beside her plate without a word, when she set the plate down; this was the one he was proudest of, a little butter-yellow creature with one paw curled over its forehead, washing its face. She put her hand over it and carefully turned it over, a smile spreading across her face.

“You know, I sometimes carve little things myself,” she said. The little soap cat was wrapped delicately in an embroidered handkerchief before disappearing into one of her sundry pockets; a moment later, with a flourish, she presented him with a little wooden angel statue, no bigger than his thumb.

He whistled, impressed. “You’re a dab hand at this!”
She shrugged, smiling. “Yes, well, the local playhouse being shut, there being absolutely NO shopping destinations to speak of, and the literary pickings bein’ of a slim sort, a lady has quite a bit of time on her hands.”

“Indeed she does,” he said. He turned the angel statue over in his hands, fascinated by the level of detail—every fold of cloth, the feathers of the wings, all were added with a delicate, sure touch. Carefully he handed it back; this was wrapped in another handkerchief, this one of blue an white gingham, and secrete away again.

He thought of the soap cat and felt faintly ridiculous; he knew it was nothing to the gifts she had given him, and wondered at her generosity. He’d get her something better later, he decided.

~

Late afternoon on another day, he sneaked back to the lounge, bored and without enough coin to do anything about it.

Lately, with his fledgling literacy, he’d begun to amuse himself by looking over the names written on the bottles, seeing what he could read and what he could not. The letters—the shapes and forms that had before been meaningless symbols to him, seemed to snap into their places, and the meanings of some of them came down on him like a small thunderclap. He could READ. He was READING.

A cider bottle whose label had a man pushing a barrel up a hill was from Barrowhill Farm—self-explanatory enough. Another that featured a drawing of four black horses racing ahead of a wagon laden with a massive cask of wine was from Four-in-Hand Winery.

He couldn’t stop smiling. He wondered what Osmond would say, if he could tell her—and how SHOULD he tell her? A surprise, maybe, or a joke.

The only thing that would have improved his mood more would have been if any of the wine had still been fit to drink. Perhaps a little mission of his own was in order, to see if something of value might not be scavenged from one of the many abandoned mansions on the edge of town, and sold. He was smirking thoughtfully at the letters on the label of one of the bottles of undrinkable wine when he heard the downstairs courtyard doors open.

One of the voices was a familiar one, the Houndmaster’s heavy accent. “Come, now, don’t be like that,” he was saying, in cajoling tones. “You are so cruel to me!” Then, the Bounty Hunter’s voice, amused. “And you love it.”

This made Dismas quietly set the bottle down, and creep closer to the balcony’s edge. They must have returned earlier, he figured.

They were standing tucked into the corner farthest from the courtyard door, in the shade of a withered potted tree, close enough to kiss. The Hound-Master had his hands on the Bounty-Hunter’s chest; the Bounty-Hunter kept one hand on the Hound-master’s arm and the other on the Houndmaster’s hip, his thumb hooked loosely in the other man’s belt.

The Hound-master was trying to get his hands under the Bounty-Hunter’s cowl, and failing; the other man would let him get so close before jerking away, laughing.

Finally the Hound-master dropped his hands and half-turned way with a sigh. “Ah! Et voila, like that, you do not care for me anymore.”

The Bounty-Hunter stood still a moment; the Hound-Master slowly by degrees, slipped his fingers up and under the edges of the cowl. The Bounty-Hunter gently caught one of his wrists, an the Hound-master gave him a playful sly look—before the Hound-master flinched all over, stifling a yell and a laugh. He tried to jerk his hand back, but the Bounty-Hunter held him fast.
“You brute! The last dog who bit me--”

In the resulting scuffle, the Hound-master got the Bounty-Hunter’s cowl and helm off, and returned the bite in kind on the other man’s ear. They stood locked together a long moment, panting, before the Bounty Hunter chucked quietly. The Hound-Master joined him. The Bounty-Hunter kissed the bitten finger. “There. D’you forgive me?”

“Yes, yes. I could never stay angry at such a face. Something about a tall, burly man in a mask…” the Hound-Master said. He leaned back enough to cradle the Bounty-Hunter’s face in his hands. “Dangerous, you know.”

They kissed then, long and wet. The Bounty-Hunter went from stroking the Hound-Master’s back to carding his fingers through his hair.

Dismas knew he was seeing something he shouldn’t, but was transfixed. He’d been so convinced it was the Hound-master and the Man-at-Arms that it never occurred to him it could be otherwise. In the back of his mind he congratulated himself on NOT having made that bet with the Grave-Robber, because this would surely have meant he’d owe her the money back.

“How’d you know you’d find a handsome face behind the mask?” the Bounty Hunter asked, teasing, once they broke apart.

“Well,” the Hound-Master said, looking down at the other man’s cowl and helmet, now held in his hand. He pretended to consider for a moment, then, “If this dented piece be any clue, a man cannot judge the face beneath the mask based upon the mask itself.”

The Bounty-Hunter turned his head away, snorting a low laugh, and bent to kiss--for this time there was no laugh and flinch--the Hound-Master’s ear. “I LIKE that helm.”

They separated enough to sit side-by-side on one of the stone benches against the wall. They lolled together comfortably, the Hound-master propping his feet on the rim of the tree urn an the Bounty-Hunter resting his head atop the Hound-Master’s, his arm thrown over the Hound-Master’s shoulders.

Unmasked, the Bounty-Hunter was olive-skinned, with close-cropped black hair, and a broad, square face. A raw week-old stubble beard covered his cheeks and chin. Dismas could see he had a scar that ran down beside his nose an made a crease like a black line and dimpling his upper lip.

Then the Bounty-Hunter said, “Or d’you think I ought to stick gems all over it, or coat it in beaten gold, like that stuck-up Leper?”

The Hound-Master sighed, but he was smiling. “I shudder to think of how impractical all that would be. And he is not arrogant. At lest, not without grounds to be so.”

The Bounty-Hunter made a derisive noise.

“It’s true! I know you are not ignorant of the lives and histories of many of our fellows here.”

“Aye, I know as well as you that he is no mere wandering leper.”

It was the Houndmaster’s turn to snort. “He is much more than that, even! A man hears rumors, when he is on the road long enough. But I had not thought they were true…”

“’Tis the times. All manner of upheavals. Good coin to be had, though, if it be worth the trouble,” the Bounty Hunter said.

The Hound Master said, “Still, must have been foul business indeed, to rive someone like that to take to the road as a sell-sword.”

“Ain’t as though he’s completely destitute. A man who can afford to keep gilded armor ain’t a man who’s that hard-up for cash.”

“Him! Hurting for money? Whoever said such a thing?” The Hound-Master seemed amused by the very thought. Then, still sounding amuse an slightly teasing, he said, “So, then, you do not know who he is.”
“Some nob who was stricken with leprosy and decided to go off on a last jaunt around, playing knight before his arms rotted off.” the Bounty Hunter grunted. This got a chuckle from the Hound-master.

“Nothing so simple,” he said. “Though I admit, at first, I was unsure if the crest was real. Look closely, if you can, at the cuirass, when next you get the chance; over the heart there is a crest etched, belonging to the royal family of one of the northeastern lands.”

Dismas felt a knife of nervousness jab sharp and cold into his belly. He knew they were all a bunch of mercenaries, there to o the job and collect the pay—but he wondered, if tempted, how quickly would they turn on a comrade-in-arms?

The Hound-master was talking. “Who else?”

“Who else what?” the Bounty Hunter sounded tired, but his voice was tinge with humor, even affection.

“I want to be amused. I should like to keep my powers of deduction sharp, for my methods quite fail me in the face of the mystery of this place. And I would prefer to think on less mind-boggling mysteries, besides.” Disma realized they were going to be there awhile, and the Bounty Hunter’s words about the Leper echoed in his head like a bell.

He crept out of his perch, and quitted his hideout in search of Claville.

He found him in the upstairs common room—the disused one, as there was not sufficient wood even for all the downstairs fireplaces, so the upstairs hearth never saw a fire, and remained drafty and cold. The man was sitting at a table beside a window, with a small leather-bound book in front of himself. He was engrossed in writing something down. Instead of a feather quill, he was using one of those new metal-nibbed pens, and it made a faint, spidery, metallic whispering across the pages.

“Be my guest,” he said. Dismas sat opposite him, settling his weight down carefully. He’d learned the hard way not to trust all the chairs in the place.

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Dismas paused to knock twice on the doorjamb as a polite, if pointless, formality. “Evenin’,” he said, because he figured it would not do to warn a man that people were conspiring against him without some preamble.

The other man turned to him and inclined his head. “Dismas! Good evening to you, as well.”

He acted no differently. A prince, Dismas thought! Not even some petty gentleman who might have allowed his sneering at the nobles as an amusing personality quirk, but a real member of royalty.

Dismas strode over to the table, fussied a moment with the cuffs of his coat, and then, feeling absurd, asked, “Mind if I sit here?”

The Leper seemed amused, at least.

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To ease things a bit, he pulled out a lump of soap and made a few desultory passes over it with his whittling knife. The Leper resumed his writing.
The spidery whispering finally drew his attention from his pretense if carving; he found himself watching the other man stealthily, the way he leaned his weight against his fist, his elbow braced on the table. Today he wore an ash-gray shirt of beaten linen, rolled back to expose his forearms. There was a tiny margin of flesh visible between the tops of his bandages and the sleeves’ rolled-up cuffs: Dismas could see he was fair-skinned, the flesh faintly mottled by the scars of healed lesions.

When he could wait no longer, and there had been quiet throughout the rest of the place for some time, Dismas murmured, “Don’t take alarm at this, friend, but you may be a marked man.” The Leper paused his writing, seeming only a bit surprised. Or, Dismas thought, perhaps that was the work of the mask, rendering his face near-completely inscrutable.

“Is that so? And who has made me so?” Dismas leaned forward a little, pitching his voice low. Anyone who came in suddenly would just see them talking; he made certain of that.

“That copper and the Bounty Hunter were talking about your armor. Gold-plated, they said. They made it sound as though they wanted to relieve you of it, if you take my meaning,” Dismas said. Claville looked at him fully, then, seeming to readjust to the words Dismas had spoke. Then his shoulders shuddered a little in the silent chuckle he did, and Dismas was confused.

“Come now, you may be a proper giant, but even you ought to know better than to scoff at a knife pointed at your back,” Dismas said.

“I should scoff at no such thing,” the Leper said. Then he added, “I thank you for your concern, but it is not necessary. Heriet is a friend of mine.” Dismas started to ask who the hell Heriet was when he herd a step approaching down the hall and the man himself came into the room.

He paused in the doorway to frown at Dismas, before asking the Leper, “Good evening, Master Claville. Is this…fellow bothering you?”

“Good evening, Master Heriet. I thank your for your solicitousness, but Master Dismas is never a bother to me. We were merely talking,” Claville said. The Hound-Master looked dubious; Dismas shifted slightly in the seat and tried to look less ill-favored.

“...I see,” the Hound-Master said slowly. He gave Claville a perfunctory smile and respectful nod, but when his eyes flicked back to Dismas, there was a hardness there that Dismas did not like.

A moment later, after he’d gone, Dismas looked back at him with a raise eyebrow and a crooked grin.

“Oh, so I’m ‘Master Dismas’ now? Doin’ away with the stiff formality of titles, I see. I s’pose I should be pleased you don’t find me a COMPLETE nuisance.” Dismas said.

“Nuisance? No,” Claville chuckled. “In fact I must say I am pleased; I never thought I would have a friend like you.”

“You know,” Dismas said, remembering the parcel of herbs the man had given him, “Speakin’ of friendship…” His voice dropped again into low, conspiratorial tones; the Leper glanced once more at the door before leaning closer to hear Dismas better, a slow smile spreading across his lips.

Bless disused inns, Dismas thought, and bless their disused lounges.

The two of them slouched in ruined armchairs at either side of a table, smoking the excellent herb Claville had given him, and passing a bottle of wine back (pilfered from the kitchen) and forth. He’d found two elaborately-embossed copper mugs in a cabinet and wiped them clean. Dismas had scrounged some rolling papers and Claville was contentedly nibbling the end of his pipe.
Dismas had his feet up on the table and was taking slow, lazy drags on the cigarette he’d made. Occasionally Claville would blow a smoke ring; finally Dismas giggled a little and said, “Bet you were a popular fellow, with party tricks like that.”

Claville snorted and laughed, the first ungainly sound Dismas had ever heard him make. “Very popular, indeed.”

“Is that so,” Dismas said. “If you share herbs like THIS with all your friends, no one would raise a hand against you. ’Course you’re popular…this is better’n’Yuletide…Thanks again, by the way.”

Claville hummed a little, and slumped lowered in his seat. He had one foot propped on a spare chair on the other leg bent, and was waggling his bent knee slightly, absently.

“Purely medicinal uses, of course.” He snickered, and gently rubbed his lip, just under the mask. “We have better, where I am from,” he said. “More potent. They compress it into little cakes, like caravan tea…”

“More potent than this?” Dismas asked. His scalp was tingling, pleasantly, as if someone had just gently scratched it with their fingernails and left it hackedle in their wake. His whole body felt like he was under a layer of down comforters, lighter than air and yet very gently pressing him flat.

Finally it occurred to him that now he could continue teasing out that thread of conversation they’d had in the tavern, all those weeks ago; he smiled faintly.

“You never did finish telling me about where you were from,” Dismas said.

His hand drifted from the arm of the armchair to his chest, where he scratched himself idly. He’d had to do a slapdash job patching his vest back together, but his gansey couldn’t be saved; the doctors had returned his bloodstained clothes and he hadn’t even been able to save the yarn.

Claville sighed and shifted in his chair again, before making an annoyed noise. “Would I offend or cause you anxiety,” he asked, “If I were to take my mask off?” Dismas shrugged a little.

“D’you know, I been thinking about that,” Dismas said. “Ain’t much sense, bein’ scared of disease when a pig-man could gut me like a fish or flay me alive.”

Claville snorted a little. “I suppose that is true. And when you phrase it like that…” he said.

But he reached up--slowly, Dismas thought, so at any time he could say he changed his mind--and unfastened the mask.

There was the moment of hesitation before he lowered it, and then that was that.

Claville looked him in the eye but after a moment, as if to steel himself. Dismas did not flinch. Where before he had only seen the man’s face by torchlight, the candlelight brought things into a clearer relief.

Claville’s skin was slightly ruddy across his chin--nearly pale elsewhere, probably from the mask, and beside the angry red of the raised lesions on his cheeks. His eyes were a pale water-gray, set deep in his face. His nose was pointed and slightly hooked, and rubbed raw at the tip, the skin a blotchy, uncomfortable-looking pink. The left edge of his upper lip had what looked like two large blisters on it, their skin abraded and raw, as well. The disease had taken his eyebrows from him, leaving behind a blotchy, red raised swath of skin on the left, and a long narrow scab above the left. It looked recently-healed. His face was long an rectangular, his cheekbones high. His forehead disappeared under the folds of the white mantle he wore like a shroud.

Dismas took a slow drag on the cigarette he was smoking, then pushed the bottle of wine towards him.

“Don’t want to pester you, but I’ve got one question, if you don’t mind.”

Claville blinked twice, then inclined his head slightly. “What is it?”

“Does it…does it hurt?” he gestured vaguely at his own chin.

Then Claville gave him a slow smirk, but his eyes were sad.
“That is perhaps the worst part,” he said, his voice quiet. “For the disease’s perverse mercy is that as it further overtakes its sufferers, it announces its spread with the complete LOSS of pain. And every other sensation.”

Dismas frowned a little, feeling terrible for the other man. Then, hoping it was the right thing to say, to break the horrible sombre air that threatened to invade the room, he said, “The whole left side of your face looks like a prizefighter’s ear. You could always say you fought a hundred men to the death barehanded and that’s what happened to your face, if it makes you feel better.”

Claville’s sudden grin and laugh dispelled the tension in the air like a fan wafting away a bad smell; Dismas smiled a little, relaxing.

“How on earth do you come up with the things you say?” the other man asked him.

“Quick wits an’ a complete an’ utter lack of shame or modesty of any sort. Glad you like it; usually have to keep it to myself.”

“A pity. The world is richer for sharper wits,” Claville said. His head lolled back against his seat’s backrest; he stared up at the ceiling, mostly sunk in shadows.

Dismas followed his example, after a moment.

“Thanks for this again, mate,” Dismas said. He didn’t want to seem like he was grovelling, but he also didn’t want the other man to think him a churl not worth sharing with in the future.

“You are quite welcome, my friend,” Claville replied. “I find that stress upon the nerves can have an ill effect on the body overall. And here more than anywhere, things that strain the mind are everywhere.”

Dismas nodded, taking a drink.

“Rotten business,” he agreed.

They smoked awhile in a comfortable silence made hazy by the mix of grass and wine.

This continued, time seeming to stretch out like an accordion expanding—until a door banged open and the candle guttered. Dismas startled in his seat, his hand twitching toward the knife he always kept on him. At the last second he caught himself. He shot a tense, anxious glance at Claville, who still sat placidly, his hands folded over his stomach.

“We are all of us afflicted, in this place.”

Dismas snorted and smirked a little. “Well, since we’re just comin’ right out with it, aye. Don’t think I’ve ever been in a place that gave me the creeps as bad as some of the places ‘round here—an’ I been some pretty rough places.”

“Have you?” Claville murmured. “Hopefully none so cursed.”

Dismas shifted in his chair. “Beginnin’ to believe you were right, about all that.”

Claville snorted. A little spurt of smoke left his nose. “Being right too often is my other worst affliction.”

Dismas laughed. “Don’t be TOO humble about it, now. Ain’t there a line in the Verse-book about pride goin’ before a fall, an’ all that?”

“The humble fall as well as the proud. Innocence is no protection…” he trailed off, taking another drag on his pipe. “All you need do, in order to see the truth of this, is to look around at this place.”

Dismas leaned forward again, bracing his elbows on the tabletop. His neck felt like it was made of jelly, and he needed up dropping his chin into his palm.

“What DO you think happened here, anyway? Dead wolves don’t rise on their own,” he said. The irony of the joke was wasted and bloodless, though, because it rang too true. The grass loosened his tongue; he had a morbid streak that widened and revealed itself, when he was like this.

Claville did not seem to mind. Exhaling a cloud of smoke up at the already blackened ceiling, he said, “I have many theories…”
When he was silent for a beat too long afterwards, Dismas prodded, “Aye? Care to share ‘em?” Claville coughed a few times, and paused to delicately wipe his nose with a handkerchief. He glanced at Dismas and smiled a little sadly. “I apologize. That was…not courteous of me. I am afraid the herb makes my mind wander.”

He took a drink of wine before he spoke next. “You ask about my theories? My closest-held is that there is a dire, evil curse upon the place, some mark so foul that it has cause the Light to all but abandon these environs. The Lady has discovered…unsavory details about her late grand-uncle…”

It wasn’t any number of bastard children, Dismas thought; she’d said so herself—but then, even if it was, who in their right mind would try to return to such a place an try to claim legitimacy an the family name? Obviously they were ruined. He tried to think what other nonsense the nobs troubled themselves over, and considered blights upon a person’s reputation. They seemed churchy; maybe he’d preferred gentlemen to ladies. Then again, as they WERE churchy, maybe the affront was actually a serious one, for once. Had he been caught forcing himself on a stable-boy or chamber-maid?

Claville, meanwhile, had exhaled another slow stream of smoke. His eyes were on Dismas, but they were like a doll’s—glass-blue and empty. “He seemed,” the other man continued, “to have become much obsessed with the evil arts. Some of the books and papers we have recovered from the ruined manor can attest to that.”

Dismas frowned. “You mean you think HE did all this? Himself?”

Claville shook his head. “Not all of it. But according to his notes, he became enamored with the idea of reanimating the dead, though to what ultimate end I have not formed a guess. Mere human science failed him, or bored him, I suppose, because evidently he began to dabble next in necromancy. I suspect that if ever we find his study or personal library, more of the truth will be laid bare.”

Dismas took a gulp of his wine to conceal his grimace. “REAL necromancy?” he asked. “REALLY bringin’ the dead back up out of the grave, back to life?”

Claville’s face did…something. His eyes went from looking through Dismas, to suddenly looking AT Dismas, with a kind of focus that nearly made him want to squirm. “Is there another kind?”

Then Dismas snorted and tried to play it off as a joke. “Well, friend, maybe you ain’t been long in the cities, but there’s all sorts of unbelievable shows. I once saw a talkin’ horse, a man who had a mummified mermaid in a box, an’ a woman could levitate herself clean off the floor, chair an’ all. Another woman made dry chicken bones dance a tune across the floor.”

Claville looked away, then, and sniffed dismissively. “Parlor tricks and petty blasphemies.”

“My point is, almost anythin’ can be faked.” Dismas hesitated. “I wish I could say that was true, of all of this. But not a one of ‘em made a dead wolf get back up and bite. Not a huckster in the land, nor even some of the real magicians, ever brought anythin’ back to life.”

Claville regarded him levelly. “If you wish to call such a grotesque perversion ‘life’. I myself refuse; the reanimated dead have not the Light of life within them anymore. They re but puppets, marionettes forced to dance along on a string by a sinister puppeteer we have not yet seen.”

Dismas wanted to laugh, incredulous. He wanted to point out that what he had just said had rhymed, but knew it would be ridiculous to do so. Besides, the other man nearly always spoke with an almost poetic cadence, anyway. But he couldn’t just let it go.
“D’you do that on purpose?” he asked.
Claville looked puzzled.
“The…that. Talkin’ like you’re makin’ a speech.”
“I apologize; I do not mean to sound arrogant. Old habits die hard.”
“Oh? And how often do you make speeches of that sort, to be in the habit of usin’ that sort of
language?”

Claville hesitated a long moment. Then, “One does not address three hundred men by saying hello
and then telling an off-color joke.”
Dismas didn’t even hesitate. “You sound as though you’ve got a lot of experience. But then, have
you ever tried?”
Claville laughed til he coughed again, and then had to sit clearing his throat and almost choking on
giggles until he could both breathe and speak clearly afterwards. “It would have been unseemly.”
Dismas rubbed his chin, humming. “‘Unseemly’, he murmured.
“Yes, unseemly, indeed, to send my men off to fight and possibly die, with my final words being
something crass.”

Dismas shrugged. “Least they would have gone down laughin’. Anything to distract from the noose
‘round your neck or the knife in your ribs, as they say.”
Claville snorted then, in a very un-princely way.
Dismas marveled again at the knowledge that the man was a prince. Again he had the feeling of
glimpsing something golden glimmering in the mud; a key, maybe, or else a compass.

But then, he told himself, he’d seen this even before he had known wht the other man ws, when he’d
thought he ws just an average fellow with a good sword arm, a strong back, and bad luck.

Claville’s voice came to him a moment later, quiet and absent and thoughtful.
“Do you ever feel as though everything hangs upon a precipice--like that moment of anticipation and
anxiety before you board a vessel for a long voyage; as though you are in someplace but for a
fleeting moment, and all that you experience there is ephemeral?”
Dismas blinked a few times, letting the words marinate. Then he replied, “That weird half-hopeful,
half-anxious sense of leavin’ a place, not knowin’ when you’ll be back? Aye, I know the feeling.
I’ve lived on the rod more years than I can count, mate.”

He heard a rustle of cloth and when he looked own, Claville was leaning on one arm, his chin on his
knuckles. He was staring at Dismas, very intently.
“Tell me about that.”
Dismas shifted under the intensity of that gaze.
“You want the whole tale, or a summary of all the acts?” he asked.
Claville chuckled again, coughed a few times, and took a gulp of wine. “There is no hurry. Or there
is an immense amount of hurry, depending upon which end you choose to look from. Either way--
raise the curtain, if you will.”

Dismas smirked a little, pleased the other man had tossed his turn of phrase back to him.
“Well. To start, my mother was a washerwoman. We lived in this little town in the middle of
nowhere, on the road on the way to--well. The names ain’t important. The big city was this port city.
My father went to town, meanin’ to hire himself out as a stevedore, as there was barely any money to
be gotten from work our small village. The landlord had bought up near all the local farms; most
everyone was under the man’s thumb in one way or another. My father’s departure was meant to be
a way for us to get our means in order.” Dismas paused. This was the easy part, so far in the past the
hurt was like a scar. “Would have been a good plan, but that he died before a year was up. A ship
landed in port carryin’ typhus, and he helped to unload it.”

Claville made a sympathetic noise; Dismas shrugged, shifting in his chair a little. “So then, two years later, my mother begs this chandler from the big city to take me in. Washin’ for the landlord was barely keepin’ food on the table, let lone sticks in the fireplace. I went and for eight years was apprenticed; the man wasn’t a slave-driver, but he WAS a miser. I looked for other ways to make money, fell in with the rough sort of other lads…

“It ain’t like you probably expect. My father was no impoverished nobleman, my mother no fair dame. I didn’t take to the roads to avenge my family’s ruined honor, nor yet to steal from the rich to give to the poor.” he hesitated, then, because the words were all true, and now stuck in his throat. “I’m a thief. Nd if you want cold, hard honesty, the marks I pick are the rich not because I’ve got some fancy moral code, but because their wallets are the fattest.”

Claville said nothing, but he frowned minutely. Dismas snatched his cup and the bottle of wine, pouring a mug full and taking half of it down in two big gulps. He wished it were whiskey; t least then the burn would have been a good distraction, or even a match for the self-loathing crawling up his throat.

“I apologize,” Claville said at last. “Perhaps I was too forward to ask so bluntly.”

Then Dismas felt like an ass. He shook his head, scowling t the cup in his hand. In the dark the wine was the color of heart’s-blood.

He swallowed hard and put it down on a side table, just outside the candles’ circle of light.

“If you will allow me to smooth things over, I will tell you the answer to the question everyone wants to ask.”

“And what is that?”

Claville took a drag on his pipe and let the thick foggy smoke filter from his nostrils like water. When he opened his mouth, it was to snap the smoke back in, like a dragon. He exhaled again, and his smirk was sardonic.

“Do you not wish to ask me how I became so afflicted?”

“D’you want me to pretend to have better manners than are expected of me, and politely refuse?”

Claville snorted, still amused. “No. I do not.”

Dismas paused a long moment. Then finally he nodded and abruptly went from trying not to stare to outright watching the man, waiting on his every word.

Claville took a deep breath before he began to speak.

“T was five-and-ten, and like all youths took my vitality and energy utterly for granted. Once I was going through my sword training exercises with my cousins and friends, and we began to fool around. Thinking to imitate a complicated parry our instructor had just shown us, I turned my back on my cousin s he had his hand raised to strike. I overestimated my skill and my own parry went awry; his thrust connected. It was but a glancing strike, inflicted with a dulled practice blade, but still it tore through my practice gambeson. I heard rather than felt it, and thought nothing of it until we ran inside and my mother saw me and screamed.”

Dismas was staring t him, rapt, nodding. Claville’s smile was sardonic. “I had a gash in my side as long as my hand, which as I moved had bled through my shirt and the gambeson, as well. When I told the court physicians I had felt no pain, an examination was performed; there was a lesion that had spread across that side, which was entirely devoid of sensation. Because of the wound, I spent two weeks abed, lying upon my stomach, allowed to do nothing more strenuous than reach for a piece of bread or fruit, or turn a book’s pages.”

Dismas hesitated, chewing on his words. Then, “So you really did not feel a thing?”

Claville shook his head. “Not a thing. Although if we must speak of feelings, I think being
disallowed from walking and strenuous activity worked wonders for my studies. Out of utter boredom I read more classics in that time than books I had ever paid attention to, prior.”

Dismas saw an opening in the conversation and was glad to take it. “Classics, hey? Bound in calf skin with gilt spines and your own labels in all of them, I’m sure.”

Claville chuckled a little. “Yes, actually. The palace had a special commission with a certain bindery, and any volume that came in that was not up to standards could be re-bound to match those others in the library.”

“You had your own LIBRARY!” Dismas said, grinning.

Claville shook his head, smiling a little. “It was not MY library. It was the palace’s library, which I was able to use while I lived there.”

Dismas snorted a laugh and rolled his eyes; Claville made another soundless chuckle.

“What a struggle YOU must’ve had.. D’you know, I think there were maybe six books in all, in the village I grew up in. And those were the Book of Light and the hymnals in the chapel.”

“I never would have suspected that a man who can turn a phrase as well as yourself would not have been well-read,” Claville said.

“Aye, well, we cannot all be so fortunate as to be born with a palace library at our disposal, and certainly not with the accompanying army of tutors an whatnot.”

Claville laughed again, shaking his head. “No, I suppose not. Though I would begrudge no one the pleasure of a good book.”

“Sounds as if you DID live in the lap of luxury. What was it drove you to leave it all, anyway?”

Then Claville hesitated, his eyes going unfocused. “I meant to be a good ruler. To be--a fair an just man. The disease spread slowly, at first; the physicians were hopeful. My father was yet alive, and under his guidance I studied statecraft. At nine-and-ten I was a general of my father’s army, commanding forces in a war, whose bloody victory now shame me in equal measure as the pleasure it once gave me. But when at five-and-twenty my illness worsened an I began to suffer lesions that would open at random, more and more of my time was simply devoted to seeing one physician after another. One of them, a brilliant woman, told me the pressures placed upon me by the crown were exacerbating my condition, and if I wanted to live to see forty years, I had better slow my pace. And yet I could not bear the thought of slowly sinking into decline, knowing that my slow death behind the doors of the palace would cause my family immense pain, an would only foment infighting amongst the nobility, and possibly lead to the ruin of our realm. I stepped down, leaving the crown to the ministers to do with as they saw fit, in their wisdom.”

Dismas made a soft noise; Claville gave him a shrewd, amused look.

“Before you begin to pity me too thoroughly, I must tell you I did, in fact, take advantage of all the delights afforded by my princely station.”

Dismas snorted and laughed. “‘Let me guess. Stuff like dinin’ on peacock served in all its skin and feathers?’”

Claville made a face and sat back, snickering. He said dryly, “You joke! I once had to sit in at a state dinner where a bird was served, in such a manner. I suspect it is the removal of the skin prior to cooking, but imagine, if you will, turkey, defying the chef’s efforts by tasting only vaguely of spices, and dry as a mouthful of sawdust, despite the efforts of the sauciers to prepare some exotic concoction to serve up with the meat. Of course, as the guests of honor, my father an I were served the ‘choicest’ pieces of white meat, which I assure you were the precise color and texture of newly-hewn wood. I nearly blunted a good knife in an attempt to cut my piece into edible morsels.”

Dismas couldn’t stop laughing once he started; but the time Claville was talking about the sauce he was howling, pounding one fist on his knee.

“Let me guess--if you’d refused, it would have caused a war, or some-such, so you had no choice but to eat the tough mess?”
Claville gave him another slanting, knowing smile. “You seem to enjoy guessing about me as much as you enjoy me telling you about myself. How many stories about me have you invented, I wonder?”

Dismas felt caught out for a moment, before shrugging a little, mirroring his smile. “Well, it ain’t every day a common crook like meself gets to share wine and weed with an actual prince. Do please pardon me if I mean to get the most out of it, Your Royalness.” and Dismas affected doffing a cap and holding it over his heart.

Claville laughed until he coughed, nearly dropping his pipe. When he could speak again, he said, “You are, by far, the least offensive outlaw I have ever met.”

Then Dismas's face fell. “You oughtn't say that. You don’t know what I did.”
“I know that you must be penitent for it, else you would not be here, in this place, doing your best to purge evil from the world.”
“Now you're guessin’ about me, then?”

Claville shook his head. “No. But I know an irredeemable person when I lay eyes upon them. I once knew a man, a general in my father’s army, who had an entire town put to death to prove himself a capable leader.” He looked at Dismas. “Did you ever demand three hundred people’s heads on pikes, as a testament to your supreme tactical prowess? Did you ever order your men to murder women and children, to prove yourself an unyielding man?”

Dismas shook his head, but the vision of the woman carrying her slain child--not as she was, but as she came to him in his fever-dream--swam behind his eyes, blurred as if seen through a rained-on window, and then with a clarity so sharp her outline seemed almost to glow.
“I killed enough.” his voice was rough.

Damn him, the grass did not usually hit him like this; he missed the easy lassitude with which they had conducted the earlier part of the conversation. For a time they were silent together, passing the wine back and forth, smoking.

Claville was the one who spoke first.
“Mist must apologize. I did not mean for the conversation to take on such a tone--”

And then Dismas had the novelty of politely refuting something. “No, no, mate, it’s me, I shouldn’t--” he held up his cup in explanation. “Ain’t in my drink yet, but I don’t usually mix the two.” He did not add that he did not usually have the coin on hand to afford both at once. He felt bad enough as it was.
“Let me only say, then, you are a better man than you think you are.” Claville said.

Dismas hesitated. Then he said, “I hope to become one.”
I hope to become whoever it is YOU think I am, he thought. I hope to become worthy of such expectations, from someone like you.

~

The next day he felt more alive than he had in months; better rested, desiring to do more than merely rise and sidle into the day.
The day felt like it was demanding activity.

He dressed, took some scones from the breakfast table and went without thinking to the chapel, where Reynauld and the brothers were still working at the repairs.
In the slanting early morning light, the brothers, clad in linen, looked like statues come to life. They had changed their simple habits for rough work clothes, and there was a constant noise of hammers and saws, as they went about their business.
He caught sight of Reynauld, helping a stout older brother to carry a large timber. He’d rolled his sleeves up and exposed his tanned, muscular forearms, and there was sawdust caught in the dark blonde hairs on the backs of his wrists.

“Thought you lot would be done, by now,” he said, when he caught Reynauld’s eye. Reynauld grinned at him, then. They set the timber down before Reynauld strode over to him, clapping sawdust off his gloves.

“The repairs are ongoing; the Brother Abbott says there was more severe underlying damage to the structure. We are quite fortunate the roof at the westernmost end of the nave has not fallen in altogether. He means to reconstruct the vestibule entirely, and to rebuild the roof over that part of the nave.”

Dismas nodded, frowning up at the ceiling, where indeed the timbers were streaked with wet; in more than one place he could see the wood was mottled black with rot.

Dismas whistled, equally impressed an incredulous. “May as well knock the whole place down, bad as some of it looks.”

Reynauld shook his head. “The building is almost two centuries old. Knocking it down would be a grave disservice to all the Brothers and Sisters who built it and served here over the years.”

Dismas made a thoughtful noise, then produced the scones from a pocket. He’d wrapped them in a clean kerchief, so they exhaled plumes of pale steam into the cold air.

“In case you haven’t eaten,” he said. Reynauld thanked him and excused himself from the other workers. They ducked into an out-of-the-way arcade and ate the scones together, Reynauld blowing on his to cool them. Dismas watched him, smiling and pleased and feelingly secretly glad.

He couldn’t do any of the more taxing work--heavy lifting still being out of the question--but he fetched nails, shifted wheelbarrows full of scrap, and very politely did NOT nick any of the tarnished sterling candlesticks he saw, in a broken-down armoire just off the hall.

When the Brothers broke at midday, he and Reynauld went around the small market, talking of nothing. Dismas bought a paper cone of fish and chips from a handsome fisherwoman for a price that, anywhere else, he would have thought obscene.

“You should not waste money,” Reynauld cautioned. “We have food enough back at the barracks.” “Ahh, live a little, friend,” he said. He broke off a piece, fried golden and exhaling steam.

Reynauld looked at it dubiously a moment, but took it from his hand. He took an investigatory bite, chewed a moment, then his eyebrows climbed his forehead.

“This is delicious!”

“Never had fish fried this way?” Dismas asked. Reynauld shook his head and devoured the rest with such haste and hunger that Dismas immediately turned and bought another, forgetting the price in an instant in the face of such enthusiasm.

Reynauld scoffed in exasperation, but accepted the fish when Dismas handed it to him. They walked together back to the inn, the noon sunlight warm upon their shoulders.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The past, like the body of the drowned, always comes back to surface. Dismas has fears. Disturbing happenings in the ruins. Dismas wonders who his friends are, and what he must do to keep them.

The blood begins to flow.

Another day passed before the Lady sent another group out on a mission. This time Dismas wasted no time; as soon s he saw the party on leave the inn, he sneaked out amid the bustle, slipping quickly and quietly off down a disused side-street. He carried a knapsack slung over one shoulder, and walked with purpose. No one looked at him twice.

He walked for awhile, passing no one. Finally he crossed a bridge over a canal whose waters constantly lapped its sides, and found himself in a different part of the town. Where he could see the horizon over the rooftops, he could see the ruined manor on the hilltop more closely. This would have been the ‘uptown’ district, had the wretched hamlet still been a town of any size or importance; imposing town homes rose to either side, half-timbered or built heavily of the local dark gray stone. Here and there alleys opened between them; many were set back from the street, with courtyards before them and carriage-houses s their first floors.

He kept expecting to see stray cats or at the very lest some brazen rodents, and continued to be unsettle when there were none. Not so much as a pigeon stirred anywhere; he thought back to the pigeons the Arbalest had been plucking the other day for the pies, and realized it was probably purchased from someone’s jealously-guarded dovecote, and likely at a ridiculous cost.

The whole place was still as a picture. He had not yet explored this place; when the Hound Master and Bounty Hunter had arrived, he’d gone and hidden in a district of a more middling quality, thinking that it would be easier to hide out in a place where he did not stick out so conspicuously.

This was before he realized that no one seemed to care about these areas. He had seen neither private guards nor city coppers since he had arrived in the place. Perhaps there was no money in the coffers to pay anyone. More likely, he figured, the place was beyond crime, the homes having been picked clean already.

He chose a likely-looking house with a gate still locked. once he’d gotten that open and slipped into the courtyard. There was the coach-house, to the right, its doors ajar. When he glanced inside he saw the leather of the tack and harnesses hanging on the walls looked gnawn.

The house itself was untouched. He entered the kitchen first; the entire place had a faint, powdery smell. Upstairs in the lady’s boudoir he found dresses still hanging in the wardrobe, but of a cut and style many years out of date. He opened a round green damask hatbox and found a Gainsborough hat, an elaborate confection of hunter-green satin, with a wisp of pale gray mesh veil and a cluster of faded pink silk roses around
the brim. The faded smell of lavender and rosemary reached up and seemed to run ghostly fingers over his face as the lid came off the box. This looked promising; he bundled this into the knapsack, box an all. The box was lined with sage-green an white stripes and was rather charming.

In another hallway he found paintings stacked against the wall, removed from their frames. Sheets had been hastily tossed over them. Tall flat crates stood against the wall at the end of the hallway. He paused a moment to shuffle through a stack of them, finding the usual nonsense the nearly-rich liked to have paintings of: a yacht flying under full mast at sea; a spotted tabby serenely regarding a canary thrashing against the bars of a golden cage; a pair of miniature collies frisking after a butterfly; a young lady with olive skin and black hair done up in ringlets, wearing a blue and green riding habit and holding the reins of a chestnut-colored pony; a ruddy-faced young man with blond hair, seated at a desk, holding a sextant in one hand and regarding a model ship with an expression of deep though so contrived that Dismas actually snorted in disbelief.

He found another portrait, presumably of the young lady, but now grown; she was sitting on a tuffet at the base of a willow tree, cradling a sleeping infant. The young man, now grown s well, stood looking on fondly, his arm raised s if to brush aside the limbs of the willow tree that formed a bower around them. At her feet the two collies lay, looking up at them in adoration. The image of the woman and her babe made his guts twist up a moment.

He was again struck with how dated their clothing was; he could recall that the particular cut of the man’s coat had been very much in style a decade past.

He wondered how long they’d been gone, what had driven them to flee. Still, he ended this reverie with the thought that they would not be returning, if they had not already. The painting of the cat and the canary went into the knapsack, along with the hatbox.

The gentleman’s room yielded a pair of fine linen shirts, only slightly yellowed, and nothing he didn’t know how to fix. There were others, clearly wool and silk, which the worms had been at; these he took as well, reasoning he would at least be able to patch them some way.

They had had the sense to take their silver, unfortunately for him, and the rest of the house proved unremarkable.

He had forced himself to ignore the prickles of dread that started down his back and hackled the hairs on the back f his neck, when he tried a door and it swung open to reveal a nursery. A skin-covered rocking horse stood in the middle of the floor, its mane and tail dropping out from the attentions of the various vermin over the years.

Dismas left in a hurry after seeing that.

~

His return to the barracks-inn went without notice. Again there was a faint lingering chemical stink in the air; this time he followed it back to the laundry kitchen, where he found the Occultist boiling chicken bones in one of the laundry cauldrons. His experimentation equipment, along with several books and sheave upon sheaves of densely-lettered papers, were spread all over the laundry room worktables.

The man rounded on him when he heard the doorjamb creak; Dismas’s nerves were not relieve to see the man holding a cleaver, still streaked and tacky with blood. “Do not enter! You will disrupt the protective wards I have set upon the place!” he said. His voice was hoarse, as if he had been inhaling smoke for a long while. Dismas held up his hands in a placating gesture an backed away. He could see that one of the symbols, apparently drawn in blood, ha been right beneath the toe of his left boot.
The man turned back to his pot of bones and was muttering something. “That may well be it. I misunderstood. Too long I have been studying, only studying...this is work that calls not for study, but for blood...”

That sealed it for Dismas. He turned and hurried away.

~

He went to the chapel, intent on speaking with Reynauld. They were finished repairing the ceiling, and were now applying plaster. For this task Reynauld had stripped off to his thin white undershirt, which clung to his back and shoulders with sweat. The scars on his arm had healed into little white crescents and dashes, as besides that he looked very well.

He was one of those thickly-built men who would be inclined to run to heaviness, without constant work; the training had done him good without robbing him of some of the softness. In the damp shirt he looked delectable in a way Dismas felt a little ashamed for thinking about while in a church. This was before he remembered where the church was, and thought that any god that could fault a man for enjoying a nice view, while also being apparently unable or unwilling to deal with the evils literally right outside the town, was not a god whose rules he wanted to respect anyway.

Dismas sat a moment on one of the benches just inside the vestibule, meaning only to wait until they all broke for lunch. He was surprised, then, when someone came in from another door and there was a sudden pleasant racket.

Then the old Abbot himself came hurrying from where he was supervising two brothers mixing the plaster, rushing across the hall to greet someone who was standing in the shadowy arcade. There was cluster of brothers grouped around him, eagerly talking, which only separate slightly when the Abbot himself came hurrying over.

“My Lord Prince, we are honored to have you visit us again!”
“That is very kind of you,” he heard, an recognized Claville’s low, slightly hoarse voice. “But such addresses are not necessary, Brother Abbot. Please, call me Master Claville.”

Dismas perked up.

“Oh, yes, of course, your--Master Claville. But to what do we owe this honor?”
“I have been much occupied lately, but I thought I should come lend a hand with the repairs here.”

Dismas saw him look around, slowly an almost theatrically, before continuing, “An now I see I must apologize for not coming sooner, as I see much of the work is finished already.”

The old Abbot was laughing, gesturing roundly at the church around them. “No such thing, sir, no such thing! We should be delighted to have your help, in any capacity you see fit.”

Claville chuckle an tilted his head an Dismas could practically see the man’s smile, though his side was to Dismas an his mantle hid his face.

“Please, Brother Abbot. Point me in the direction of some meaningful work.”

He watched the old man usher Claville towards a knot of men, standing in apparent awe of him.

Dismas crept out of the chapel unseen, after that. He felt a strange knot of emotions under his ribs--disappointment, and something else.

He had made it all the way back to the other side of town before he realized the other feeling had been loneliness.

That night he broke into another town-mansion and slept in a rich couple’s bed, under their reproachful gaze. He rubbed one out there, too, feeling particularly spiteful--for who was so enamored of the smell of their own shit that they’d hang a portrait of themselves in their own bedroom?
It was an ugly, overcast day when he returned again to the inn. He was a bit surprised to find it a market day; then again, time seemed hardly to matter, in that place—all the days running together in one drab mud-gray flood. He realized uncomfortably that he could not recall the last time he saw a blue sky, or a summery cloud. For that matter, he could not recall precisely what month or even what season it was; perhaps autumn had sneaked upon him.

The market was slightly less piteous than it usually was—a testament to the good their work dealing with the bandits in the Weald had done. He had another thought that he had been one of those sorts, once; that in another time, in another place, they would have been glad to see him swinging from some gallows, and would have called his execution an act of repairing the area.

Soberly he had to acknowledge that this was true. Nor could he do anything with the shame and embarrassment of these thoughts; he moved like a sleepwalker through the thin crowds, staring at the various stalls and stands but hardly seeing them. The thoughts moved through his mind like water—first torrent, then dying to a stream, whose noise was there but quieted. He bought nothing, turning his steps instead towards the inn.

When he arrived, he was still in a low mood, and wanted to see no one. He entered the through a disused back servants’ entrance, and had barely enough time to stash the goods he’d gotten when someone knocked on the door.

“I’m here. What d’you want?”

Then Reynauld pushed the door open, and strode in, looking thoroughly annoyed at him. “Where have you been?!” he asked. “The Lady has assembled a team, of which you are a member. She was concerned to see you were not in attendance at the meeting. I have heard you are often not in attendance of the meetings. You ought to take more care.”

Dismas was so surprised by the the unexpected rude tone of his speech that he just straightened up slowly. Words crowded in his throat, but all were overlaid by a real, strange hurt—that these were Reynauld’s first words to him, after so long. The hurt won out over everything else, but in his throat transformed to defensiveness: he parried Reynauld’s annoyed tone with indignation.

“Where have I been? Where have you been? I think I’ve seen you ‘round here maybe four times in as many weeks!”

Reynauld made an exasperated face. “That is hardly the same. I have been over at the Abbey, providing sorely-needed assistance with the repairs.”

Dismas scoffed. “There can hardly be things left to fix in that old rat-trap. You act as though you’ve been avoiding this place!”

“Watch your tongue! The Abbey is a place of worship, not a hole for vermin! And you act as though you’ve been avoiding work! Do you not realize that if you continue to just wander off like this, she will think you have broken contract, and will send you off?!” Watching Reynauld’s annoyance boil over into anger, Dismas felt a sense of rising hopelessness and panic. This was not how he wanted the conversation to go; but like a failing dam or a train wreck, he could see it coming but could do nothing to stop it.

“And I ain’t some snot-nosed kid who needs remindin’ to be respectful to the Light an’ all that, nor when to show up for work,” Dismas snapped. “So you don’t need to go tellin’ me my business!”

“If you understood your duties, it would not be like drawing teeth to get you to perform them,” Reynauld said.
“How would you even know? You’re hardly ever here!” Dismas said. He went to turn around, almost tripped over the box he’d packed, an savagely kicked it away from himself in frustration. “What the fuck is your problem?”

He wanted to come out and ask if Reynauld have been avoiding him. The question rose in him like a bubble coming to surface through tar; he could feel it in the back of his mouth like a physical thing. “My problem,” Reynauld said, biting the word off as if it tasted foul, “Is that, as we are friends, everyone also expects me to act as your keeper. Something which you make into a sore, difficult task with your…habits.”

“My habits?” Dismas said, loud and disbelieving. “What the hell--”

“The skulking about, the disappearances, the--you make the others uncomfortable!”

Dismas was taken aback by that. “I? I make the others uncomfortable?” he said, incredulous. “What, a fellow cannot mind his own damn business without everyone else thinking he’s after their purses or looking to stick a knife in ’em? And anyway, what others? ‘Cause, mate, if someone’s got a problem--”

“There is no time for this! I cannot continue to play both jailer and cellmate to you, Dismas! Your party departs in less than an hour. I was sent to tell you and I have been all about the town just trying to find you. The Lady instructed me to tell you to prepare yourself. That is all.” He turned to leave.

But Dismas was faster than he was, an got between him an the doorway, one hand raised between them. By then his own anger was almost white-hot, a twisted, snapping thing, coiling inside his chest like a viper.

“Now, you wait a minute! I’ll thank you, from now on, to send any ‘complainers’ to me directly, the better to soothe their ‘discomfort’, since you find your position as my unofficial parole officer to be such a burden.”

“You are being ridiculous and dramatic about this,” Reynauld said, “Wasting time when you ought to be packing.”

“Did I not just say I wasn’t some brat, who needs tellin’ what do do? Nor yet some convict, waiting for orders from the warden? Or can you not understand that? You cannot be both friend and jailer, mate.”

Reynauld stepped closer to him, then--close enough that Dismas could see the darker flecks in his eyes. Then, in a low voice, Reynauld said, “I find myself often wishing I was the one, rather than the other.”

Then he stepped around him, leaving Dismas cold an rocking on his feet.

When the man had gone several paces own the hall, Dismas shouted after him, “And what the fuck does that mean?”

He’d sounded much braver than he felt. He slammed the door hard enough to rattle the windows, and sat down forcefully on his bed, grabbing fistfuls of his muffler and mashing it against his face to stifle his frustrated yell.

He had not much to pack; his hands worked without his mind’s needing to be present.

What had Reynauld meant about the others being uncomfortable? Looking back, he began to question every interaction he’d had with the others. Had there been some signs he missed, some hint they wished he’d leave them be?

But then why the Grave Robber’s easy, laughing camaraderie? Why the Leper’s gracious good humor, his courtesy? Why the Arbalest’s friendly greetings? There was no way, he told himself, that they were being so kind to him out of mere courtesy, nor even due to comradeship.

Which left everyone else out of the entire band. The dog-minder may have said something, or perhaps the bounty hunter. But that raise the question of what they could possibly have said, to
unsettle Reynauld so much that he would come and speak to Dismas in such a way. It came to him as suddenly as a cold knife in the ribs.

Maybe the Hound-master had finally pinned down his identity, and had told Reynauld who he was and what he had done. The man had been giving him shrewd, studying looks often enough. Maybe he had told everyone what Dismas had done. The thought made his guts ache as if he was sick.

Would they still look on him with friendly eyes, knowing what he’d done? Who would sit down at the same table as a child-killer? Who would want to raise drinks with a person like that? The other path yawned back open, like a sucking cave.

There were other bandits, he knew. There was the whole band in the Weald. And if the people in the inn found him to be too unsavory to work with…well, then, he’d had to go to ground before. Leaving the little shithole of a hamlet would not even be difficult.

He knew where the Keeper had the horses stabled, and even though it had been years since he’d been in the saddle, he knew where he could go. Then he thought of the box, full of loot--of gifts for his friends, which he had had fewer real ones in his life than he could count on one hand.

He felt cold all over, and sick.

When the Abbey bell struck the hour he flinched like he’d been burned. He slung his pack over his shoulder and hastily left the room, shame and anxiety and discomfort roiling in his chest and guts.

He could meet the eyes of no one in the party, when they gathered at the bottom of the steps and set out from the town.

~

Something was wrong. Dismas had not thought himself the nervous type--but his time in those damned warrens had changed that. Now, the sound of a contained echo or footsteps on flagstones had him reaching for his dirk, his breath coming in shivering gasps. Somehow even here in the ruins, which were broken up everywhere with large windows, he felt invisible walls of pressure around him on every side. It was as if he was being slowly crushed flat between panes of unseen glass.

He knew full well how bizarre that sounded, and so had resolved to keep the thought to himself. And yet it was growing harder to do so with every moment.

Thus far they had encountered only a handful of brigands, desperate for loot, in the halls of the ruined manor; but his heart pounded and his stomach lurched, whenever they left one of the ruined rooms and ventured back into the dim, shadowed corridors.

The Lady’s choice of team members was not helping his nerves, either. While the Arbalest was doing her usual splendid job of guarding the rear, he disliked having the Bounty Hunter walking behind him, and he liked that the Occultist had been chosen as their party healer least of all.

He had still not forgotten the man’s earlier fit, nor the fact that mere hours before, he had seen the man splattered with blood and muttering about bones and sacrifices. The Lady had pointed out that they were certain to find hidden money, as the brigands had the run of the place. There were also, she assured them, some valuable antiques in the structure--if only they could locate them and carry them safely back out.

“Hold up a moment,” the Arbalest said. The Occultist made an irritated noise, but the Bounty Hunter stopped beside her. She was standing near a window, looking out at the treetops of the forest outside.
“What floor are we on?” she asked. She unfolded the map—hastily-drawn and likely to be useless after this mission, as they never seemed able to find the same point of entry into the place twice. “Ground level,” the Bounty Hunter muttered. Then, when he turned to look out the window beside her, he made a disbelieving noise. “We have gone up no stairs,” she said, “And yet it is s if we are on the second floor already…” “Not possible,” the Bounty Hunter said. “We ‘aven’t even found a staircase.”

“It is ensorcelled,” the Occultist intoned. “Some eldritch force has broken the structure and reassembled it, following a plan that cannot be fathomed by mere human minds.” he paused. “Though we may grope about in our ignorance an try.”

They all exchanged uncomfortable glances, but the Bounty Hunter picked up a piece of rubble and hefted it. “We’ll see whether it’s the building or us that’s ensorcelled.”

He tossed the rock out the window lightly, and they all listened for a long moment before they heard it clatter down amongst the rocks below. Then he, too, drew back from the window. “Hmph. Perhaps best to keep away from the walls.”

~

At any other time, in any other place, Dismas would have thought it to be some kind of parlor trick, or some sort of stupid prank. But there, fleshless faces looming bone-white in the replenished torchlight, he saw four skeletons congregated around an ornately-carved stone sarcophagus. There was a burly one, dressed in the faded, worm-eaten colors of some forgotten regiment, and grievously dented breastplate. They turned first. Dismas could see the jaw hung crooked from the skull, the pieces held together by strips of dessicated flesh like rawhide.

There were others, as well, in the same ragged uniform, an the last, a cowering parody of some court lackey, in rotten-looking black furs. There was no light, in those eyeless sockets. Dismas did not hesitate to think before firing a grapeshot blast at ll of them. The skeletons scrambled a moment, surprised, before the burly one moved closer, swinging a massive battle-axe.

The Arbalest got another volley off, downing one of the smaller skeletons, but the courtier ducked behind the sarcophagus. “The little weasel!” Dismas shouted, “Get the little weaselly nob before he goes for help!”

He snatched his other pistol and fired a shot, but it went awry an the slug only lodged uselessly in the sarcophagus lid. The Occultist elbowed past him, holding the skull aloft, and Dismas watched its empty eye-sockets flash the blood-red of the inside of an eyelid—an all the skeletons flinched.

This time when the Bounty Hunter flung his hook at the cringing bone courtier, the metal lodged in the front of the rotting fur coat. He threw his weight backwards, bodily hauling the skeletal courtier forward. The Arbalest got another volley off, downing one of the smaller skeletons, but the big soldier swung around an with a great heave caught Dismas in the chest with his shield. The force knocked him backwards, into the Arbalest, whose next shaft was wasted on the flagstones, and shattered.

Now closer to the front, the Occultist screamed something in a language that sounded like breaking
bones—again there was the blood-colored light, a shift in the air as sudden s a window opened onto a windy day--

The red tentacles lashed down from nowhere above, visible only in the light cast by the skull’s eyes as distortions in the air. They struck the undead soldiers, making noise like bullwhips. But the Occultist was too close; a second later the skeletal courtier raised a corroded golden chalice in a mocking toast—an then threw the liquid in the Occultist’s face.

Dismas, though breathless, moved quick as a reflex—his next shot went clear through the weaselly little bastard’s naked skull, exploding dust and bone shards out the back. The body, went over like the sack of bones it was, collapsing in a heap in the rotting fur coat.
The Occultist staggered and nearly fell, clutching at his eyes and screaming.
The burly skeleton raised his axe-arm again and Dismas saw an opening and took it. Dismas felt cold all over, clammy with sweat, but he lunged past him like a duelist and managed to stick the big fellow with his dirk.

There was the horrifying sensation of stabbing a leather bundle wrapped around some kindling—his dirk went in just beneath the armpit, a stab that would have left a living man bleeding out in minutes. If there was flesh yet left on those bones, it was drier than leather.

The Occultist was still howling in pain when Dismas feinted back. He could see the bone soldier’s arm now hung loose; some of its few remaining thews had been severed by his strike.
He felt mingled panic and a strange sadness as the poor bastard looked down at his arm, seeming to only just realize what had happened.

Out of the corner of his eye Dismas saw the Arbalest, who was kneeling beside the Occultist. The man ha crouched low with his face still in his hands. The little skull’s eye-lights glowed evilly, the candle’s flame a rising, shuddering taper, the red of a salt flame.

He realized she would have no time to both tend to the man, and loose another bolt; the Bounty Hunter was still locked in a fight with the smaller soldier, whose dessicated status belied their nimbleness.
There was nothing for it. Abruptly his fear and revulsion turned into a kind of mean-spirited obstinacy.
He hadn’t even gotten to read Osmond’s bawdy book. He hadn’t gotten to try any of the more potent herb that Claville had mentioned.
He decided he would eat his own tongue before he allowed some creatures who looked like cheap set-dressing in a two-penny play to kill him.

“Damn, missed your eyes!” he said, too loudly.
The big soldier’s he swung up to look at him, empty eye-sockets and bare skull somehow baleful.
“That’s right—YOU! I’ve been places and seen stupid. What was it killed you, anyway? ‘Cause if you fought the way you fight now, it was nobody’s fault but your own!”

That got the fellow moving—striding towards Dismas with a horrible rasping and clicking.
Dismas dodged his next clumsy swing, and was quick enough with his knife that he used the skeleton’s own momentum against him, thrusting his dirk back into the same weakened spot.
The skeleton stumbled back, its axe-arm hanging useless. Dismas had about an eye-blink’s time to feel an ugly satisfaction well in his chest, before he heard the Occultist shouting again.

He took a step back and the Arbalest was suddenly there, her hand on his shoulder. She said something lost in the rumble of air as the red tentacles reappeared—this time from below. Dismas watched in horror as the disembodied limbs grabbed the undead soldier in their grip and crushed him like a handful of twigs. Dismas heard bones cracking, the horrible groaning of the metal plate.
armor as it warped and bent. He watched the soldier die again—if truly he had lived again—still trying in vain to lift his axe, to continue to fight.

Even after the tentacles vanished, dropping the the crushed remains, Dismas stared—staggered by what unholy, vicious will could make the dead walk again—and what cruelty.

The Occultist stumbled over to the crushed remains and began rifling through them, an the Arbalest tried to pull him away. “What are you doing?” she cried. “To defeat one’s enemy, one must know one’s enemy,” he muttered.

She stepped away and lit another torch, and in its improved light, Dismas could see that she had bandaged half the man’s face; the marks around the bandages’ edges were seething with blisters. When she tried again to pull him away from his task, he turned an shoved her back, swearing in a foreign language.

Dismas stepped in, at that. “That’s enough of that, friend,” he said. “I need only a few shards of bone,” the Occultist said, “You must not stand in the way of my studies! Do you not see, without my arcane knowledge, we are all doomed!”

This time the Arbalest stepped back, but the expression on her face was equally dubious and fearful. Dismas turned to her, nodding once. “You all right?” She nodded, an then the Bounty Hunter finally returned, coiling his hook-chain back up and stuffing it into a pouch at his hip.

While his face was covered, there was no mistaking the way his hands shook.

Dismas rather wanted to ask him if he still thought all of this was ‘a trick of the light’, but knew better than to expose himself as an eavesdropper, and better still not to salt a fresh wound or add insult to injury.

The Bounty Hunter looked back at the Occultist, who was still kneeling on the floor and picking bone shards from the ruined armor, n then at the Arbalest, who looked as if her hair would stand on end with fright at any moment. The Bounty Hunter paused a moment, his big chest working like a bellows as he caught his breath. Then he asked, “It’s done, then?”

Dismas shrugged. The Occultist, from where he knelt, muttered, “The force that reanimated these bones is not yet done. I must have more, for my studies…” he lifted the skull from its maille cowl, and Dismas watched, horrified, s he forced the jaws apart. His ears burned and the skin crawled all up his back and down his arms as he could hear the sounds of the man prying teeth from the skull.

“We’ve got to move,” the Arbalest said, “Now.”

But they had not even left the corridor when they came upon another table laden with glass phials and beakers. When they were close enough, Dismas could see there were cobwebs spanning everything, and a layer of dust thick upon the glass. Scattered papers and decayed books were strewn about it, as well, some of the yellowed pages having slipped to the floor.

“An alchemist’s workbench, I’d wager,” the Arbalest said.

He id not want to get too close, for fear he’d actually be able to read something disturbing; already he felt invisible forces seeming to push him back, the hallway’s stifling darkness making his breath short an his and clammy. He passed the table in a hurry, glad of the Arbalest’s urgent pace.
He paused a moment in the dim light to stare at a ruined tapestry barely clinging in shreds to the wall; ahead, the others had stopped. He heard a cry of dismay and hurried to them.

A section of ceiling had fallen through, leaving a wall of rubble higher than a man was tall blocking the corridor. The Arbalest had already dug a shovel from the supply pack and was starting forward when Dismas saw a glimmer of white in the rubble and lunged to stop her.

But the skeletons caught in the fallen stone, poor wretches though they were, appeared to be mere skeletons, and did not move when they shifted the jumble of stones, broken timbers, and crushed bricks.

Dismas kept a wary eye on them, just the same.

~

They had just cleared a path through the rubble when Dismas sniffed once, smelling something sharp and foul.

He was already reaching for his pistols when the Arbalest asked, “Where is Monsieur Occultist?” Then Dismas whipped around, taking the torch from her and striding with a sense of panicked urgency back to the hall’s other end.

The Occultist was bent over the alchemist’s table, rubbing his moustache an muttering to himself; he was using the feeble, wrong-colored light from the candle atop the skull to read by.

Dismas saw, to his horror, that the man had lit the burners beneath one of the beakers, and was reaching to pour something from one of the phials when the Arbalest cried out.

“What are you doing! Monsieur Bretel!”

“Be still, woman! If I can finish this experiment, I may be--”

“You may be able to draw their attention to us! You must stop! You cannot--”

“You understand nothing! This! This is the true necromancy! By my very bones, I have researched and studied for years, decades, I who have spoken with the dark! But he found a way to harness it, to recreate life!”

“You think this is--those things back there weren’t alive! Those pig-men down in the sewers shouldn’t be alive! And if you don’t stop hollering and get away from that table, we are all going to end up dead!” Dismas hissed.

When the man made no move to step away, Dismas started forward, intent on pulling the man away, by force if necessary.

“You fools! You understand nothing! You will die oblivious even to your own ignorance! You--”

The Bounty Hunter, who had been standing by with clenched fists, made up his mind about something. He strode forward and with a colossal heave overturned the entire table.

Glass shattered on the floor in an eruption of cataclysmic noise; the old table cracked nearly in half. Moments later there came a hissing sound s whatever liquid had been in the beakers and bottles underwent some kind of foul reaction. A haze of greenish smoke began to rise from the mess.

They all staggered back; the Arbalest was coughing, her eyes streaming.

Dismas’s nose itched and burned, but he held the Occultist fast while the man swore and thrashed in his grip.

“No! No! Do you have any idea what you have done? That research was invaluable! You idiots!”

“Better a live idiot than a dead learned man,” Dismas muttered. He thrust the man away from himself.

The daft man actually started towards the ruined alchemist’s table, and was held at bay only by the noxious fumes rapidly filling the corridor.

“We should go,” the Arbalest whispered.
They walked on, after the Arbalest rinsed her eyes with some of their water. The noise of it splattering on the flagged floors made Dismas flinch and start; he watched their surroundings just outside the torchlight with his best pistol drawn, and his finger on the trigger.

“You all right?” Dismas asked her.

She wiped her face with one end of her bandanna, blinking and squinting around. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, I think I’ll be all right.”

“You’d better be. Nobody else can bulls-eye those bastards like you,” Dismas said.

She smiled and snorted a little, then accepted the torch back from him. “Shut your trap and get back to the front of the line. I can see just fine.”

The next few corridors were empty. Once more they came upon a fall of rubble, this one where a wall ha fallen in. They broke their second shovel trying to move it, gave up, and climbed carefully over the remaining rubble.

The next hallway had doors opening to either side off it; Dismas’s nerves were instantly up, staring around at everything and watching every doorway and shadow. To the left, the wall was line with bookshelves. The Occultist hurried over to these, holding the skull for light, but apparently found nothing of worth or note, because he made a scoffing noise and returned to the group.

Dismas could see the man’s lips moving silently. But now he held the skull in the crook of one arm and was cradling a tiny box in his hands, turning its crank between forefinger and thumb.

Dismas wasn’t sure if he found it more disturbing that the music box made no sound, or that the other man was clearly hearing **SOMETHING**.

He wanted very badly to turn and ask one of the others if they had just **SEEN** what they had seen. But the Arbalest kept surreptitiously rubbing one eye, and the Bounty Hunter kept nervously changing his grip on his axe, as if he were trying to will his arm to stop quaking as he held it.

Dismas was left to suffer silently, then.

At least, had he and Reynauld not had that spat--and over what?--he might have looked forward to speaking to him once the mission was over. Perhaps Claville or Osmond would be free, afterwards, and willing to sit an share a bottle of wine. He very much desired a drop of liquid courage, as well as the excuse for a loosened tongue.

That is, if Reynauld had not found out what he had done. If anyone else had not found out what he had done.

It occurred to him that he could try to finesse some information out of the Bounty Hunter, to try and figure out what, an how much, the Hound Master knew about him. But that would be limited to whatever the Hound Master had told the Bounty Hunter, an then whatever the Bounty Hunter was willing to tell him. An from what Dismas could see, that man had a jaw like a steel trap, and a tongue that did not wag.

Then it occurred to him to wonder if he **WANTED** to know if they’d found out the truth about him.
His nerves were shot to shit as it was; he recalled the missed shot that had let the skeleton courtier nearly escape.
Perhaps, he thought, he'd better wait until they survive, to worry what the others thought, an whether or not he could still count them as friends, or if he should start sleeping outside the barracks permanently, or risk having to worry about being strangled or stabbed as he slept.

These were the thoughts plaguing him as he followed the Bounty Hunter down the hallway, waiting an dreading to see what they would run across next.

They tried all the doors and found them stuck fast, though one made an alarming groaning noise, and he felt the frame shift around the wood with his hand still on the knob. He yanked it fully shut hastily and all but jumped back from it.

When the Arbalest gave him a look, he just pointed, too unnerved to speak; she raised the torch and they could see a huge crack in the wall, running up to the ceiling; one of the stone arches supporting the ceiling was cracked and shifted to a dangerous degree.

They all rushed away, glancing backwards in fear.
They had not reached the end of the long corridor, however, when there was a terrifying rumbling, followed by a groan of failing timbers; there was a sudden gust of cold, stale air, fast enough that the torch guttered out. And then the cavernous, booming noises that part of the hall finished caving in.

Everyone ducked and covered, an coughed and choked in dusty darkness for a long moment, before the Arbalest got another torch lit.
“The books! The books!” the Occultist said, mournfully.
Dismas could see, as the dust began to settle, that the ceiling HAD fallen in, opening up a view of the vault of the upper floors. Colder air wafted down now, in chilly fingers smelling of rain and rotten wood. The shelves that lined the walls in that part of the hall had been destroyed, and all the many books scattered everywhere.
When he started back, the Arbalest caught his arm. “No, Monsieur Bretel! The ceiling is unstable! More of it may still collapse!”

He moved as if scarcely hearing her, though, drifting towards the ruined shelves in the walls.
While the man knelt and rifle through the books that could be salvaged, he tossed most of them aside. One book, bound in plum-colored leather, slid to a stop beside Dismas’s foot; when he nudged it around to look at it better, he saw the cover said ‘Mythologies of Ages’. The picture on the cover was a gilded picture of a winged horse.

Dismas knelt and picked it up, brushing away the dust, an for a moment was distracted by the book’s beauty.

It was heavy in his hands, and in the flickering torchlight the pages were an ivory yellow. The fore and hind pages were covered marbled gray and white paper, which felt rough as new linen beneath his fingertips. The words were packed too densely for him to read much, and before he could begin to get annoyed at his small level of skill, he snapped it shut. Carefully he slipped it into one of his coat’s inner pockets, wishing again that he had the extra layer of his gansey to stash things in.

There were a final few stones that came clattering quietly down, then followed by deathly silence. The Bounty Hunter, who had been scouting the fall of rubble, said in a low voice, “Looks like it’s stopped.”

Dismas snorted. “Well, we won’t be goin’ back the way we came, that’s for sure!”
The Bounty Hunter shook his head.
“I think we ought to make camp in the next empty room.” The Arbalest said. “We should try to regroup and figure out where we are.”
The next room happened to be a sitting room, of sorts, but so massive that Dismas realized his mother’s entire house could have fit inside that one room, alone. Its only outlet was the door they entered through, an when he risked a glance out the window, he was relieved to find the trees at a normal height, and the ground at a normal distance.

They used the dying rays of orange sunlight to set up their camp. Each of them sat and ate their tinned meat and hardtack biscuits, Dismas taking to his with a kind of stolid, internalized misery made tolerable by the knowledge that when he was out of the place, there were better things to be had. Hell, he told himself, if he played his cards right, there was LOOT to be had.

The only complaints came from the Occultist, who muttered that such things in his homeland would not even be fit for dogs.

This earned an amused glance that traveled between Dismas and the Arbalist--a career soldier--an the Bounty Hunter, a man who by Dismas’s guess was well-accustomed to sleeping on the road. He shrugged minutely, but expressively. Dismas bit the inside his lip to fight down his grin.

The two logs they had brought made but a meager fire. Still, Dismas was glad of its warmth; once true night fell, the sea chill sank its teeth into his bones like needles.

The fresh-healed scar over his abdomen ached and itched faintly, and s he sat cross-legged by the fire, he drew one of his arms back through the sleeve of his coat, to rub the wound furtively.

If the others noticed, they said nothing; the Arbalist sat tightening the string of her crossbow, the map spread on the ground between she and the Bounty Hunter.

These maps were crudely-drawn, based partially on the Lady’s childhood memories and on the now-unreliable architectural floor plan of the house, which she had apparently gotten from the archives at the library.

Dismas listened to them with half an ear. Part of him was exhausted, an the other part was remembering how anxiously and unhappily he had begun this particular mission.

He did not think Reynauld to be either indiscreet or vindictive; but he DID know the man was a Crusader, and so would likely be driven by his sense of morality to do or say something about what he’d learned.

So it came down to Dismas worrying at the thoughts like a dog at a bit of rope, wondering who knew what, and who ha told Reynauld.

If perhaps there was some way to mitigate his friend’s new-found hatred of him.

If there was some way he could prove how penitent he truly was.

Full of an acidic unhappiness, Dismas sat and tried to calm himself by busying his mind elsewhere. He cleaned his pistols, whistling quietly against the noises in the dark.

But he could not so much as blink without seeing Reynauld’s face there, in the dark, his scorn so clearly evident. What could he have done? There must, he reasoned, be something he could say, something to fix this.

But he was not even sure what the accusations WERE, he tried to remind himself. Nor, for that matter, who the complainants were.

A drink, he thought…some wine, to ease him through tipsy silliness and into the sloshing, melted dreams of the drunk.

He was so desperate he would even have welcomed the next-day headache afterwards.

Every sound the building made--every wooden creak and groan, the treacherously soft sound of plaster or mortar crumbling down somewhere, the faint whisper of the surf beating its head against the cliff, all conspired to keep him in twitch fits. In his mind’s-eye he could see the ceiling over them giving way, the stonework coming down on them in massive chunks. Whatever was left of them
would be so crushed and mangled it wouldn’t even be enough for a funeral. There among the fallen timbers an crumbled stone would be shreds of red cloth--his muffler--and glints of battered armor--

He came back to himself with a start, realized he’d been holding his breath. His hand were clenched around two handfuls of his polishing rag, hard enough that the material was biting into his palms and his gloves were cutting into his hands.

Slowly he took a deep breath, and slowly he made his hands relax. His fingertips felt strangely cold and faraway; when he took another, deeper breath, he felt his face go numb, as well. Fearing at first that this was the effect of some magic or poison acting upon him, he started and almost dropped his pistol. But after a few deep breaths, the strange sensation faded. Now embarrassed, he glanced over at the others.

The Bounty Hunter w sitting to his right, half-facing him. The others man was propped against the supply pack, leg crossed an hands stuffed in his armpits against the chill.

The Arbalest and the Occultist had decided to bed down for the night, and were reduced to the shapeless huddles of bedding by the darkness--though he could see the Occultist’s bedding shifting in a way that implied the man was snot actually asleep.

Dismas wouldn't have faulted the man normally--everyone needed a way settle down before sleeping--but he had the uncomfortable hunch that it w the little red music box the man was playing with, and not himself.

He wondered whether it was the skull or the music box that let him call own whatever tentacled being from wherever they were, and if brittle nerves were the outcome of that. These thoughts were interrupted by the Bounty Hunter’s shifting where he sat, and grunting thoughtfully.

“Fine piece, that,” he said. He spoke quietly, but his low voice carried anyway.

Dismas had been finishing up with his best pistol, and now sat with it in his lap, a square of greasy chamois underneath it.

“I thank you,” Dismas sad--an then, to dispel the pointed silence that followed, “Won it at cards.”

That was true, but it felt like an entire lifetime ago--fresh off a big job, pockets fat with coin, he ha gone to a casino, where he struck it even richer after some petty young nob bit off more than he could chew at the card table.

Dismas knew he could have sol the gun and lived like a lord for months, but had always hesitated. He’d liked the bit of flash it had given him, back when the coat was new and he could afford boots with gold buckles. He’d quite looked the part of the dashing gentleman rogue--and had known it.

Now the gun looked merely out of place--his overall shabbiness made it LOOK stolen.

“You’ve an eye for firearms, then?” he asked the other man.

The Bounty Hunter shrugged. “Useful enough for show. Bit hard to take in a mark who’s been shot, though. Usually they die. Bad for business.”

Dismas snorted a laugh, and went back to polishing.

If the man was trying to intimidate him, it wouldn’t work; he’d seen the man fight an knew he was quicker to the draw than the other fellow. He could have his dirk between his ribs or a bullet between his eyes before the man could grab one of his grenades or reach for the hook-an-chain.

He was surprise when the other man continued, “Maybe you ought to get silver bullets made. Those work ‘gainst supernatural horrors, don’t they?”

Diss ha heard ab ou that--wooden slugs of white birch for werewolves, silver bullets for vampires. Mind, he’d never before encountered such horrors personally, an so had no point of reference. But if the Occultist’s magic had still taken a bit to knock them back, he doubted that pretty bullets stood a much better chance.
Aloud, he merely hummed thoughtfully. Then, “Expensive ways to put down some magician’s playthings.”
The Bounty Hunter chuckled and was quiet after that.
Dismas lingered over his guns, considered honing his blade, and eventually decided against it.

The mere thought of sleep made his skin itch and prickle. If the building didn’t come down on them, the brigands or the cultists would, and he did not relish the idea of being shot or shanked while still tangled up in bedding.

He holstered his guns and slipped the pistol brace back on, then stood and stretched for theatrical effect.

The Bounty Hunter regarded him with something close to suspicion as a person cold manage with a covered face; Dismas forced a grin and said, “Ease up, mate. Just goin’ on my evenin’ constitutional.”

The Bounty Hunter snorted in disbelief.

Dismas continued, shrugging, “Well, they can’t sneak up on us if I see ‘em comin’ first, hey? If it’s loot you’re worried about, i got to tell you, mate, you’ve got more esteem for my skill as a thief than *I* do. I wouldn’t touch a thing in this place ‘less I had backup with me!”

Then the Bounty Hunter shrugged, and Dismas all but heard him say that it was HIS funeral, an if he chose to walk to it early, then so be it.

He walked away, stuffing his hands into his pockets. Once he was out of the circle of firelight, the cold seemed to intensify; he stood shuddering in silence a long moment before reaching out and touching the wall, groping his way through the chilly darkness where now the sea chill bore also a sea smell.

He laid a tripwire behind himself, strung with tiny bells, and then slipped out into the hall.

The moonlight through the broken windows opened onto an eerie view below, of the steep hill falling away down to the town. From that distance, and across the tiny bay, the town was visible as no more than a low scatter of buildings, smaller than matchboxes. Their lights twinkled and glittered with a good deal more cheer than one felt when actually IN the town.

In the sky the waxing moon was like a blind eye, wrapped in a shroud of thin, ragged black clouds: an autumn moon, tinged faintly yellow.

He pulled his coat closer around himself.

But he id not make it back out into the great hall which all the others branched off from; he went as far as the door when he heard an tread of feet over the ruined tiles, and a grinding noise, like stones moving in a leather bag.

His breath ran cold a minute; he froze in the shadows and watched through the crack between two doors as another troupe of skeletons passed. He realized with another stab of fear that, absurdly, they still seemed to be walking in formation, the same as the one they’d encountered earlier: the armored burly one out front, followed by two with clubs. But with this group there was a last one, a sad half-crushed-looking wretch with twisted legs and a fusilier’s helmet hanging lopsided off its naked skull. When they crossed through a pillar of moonlight he saw they carried an old, battered crossbow in dessicated arms.

Once he was sure they’d passed, he fled back to the campsite, careful not to upset the tripwire.

The Bounty Hunter was one his feet in an instant when he reappeared in the firelight, but he held one finger to his lips and stepped closer to the man.

“Skeletons, group of four. They passed in the hall outside, but I do not think they noticed the door.”

The Bounty Hunter looked back the way he’d come, then down at the sleeping others.

Dismas realize what he was thinking, and said, “Runnin’s a bad idea. We’re cornered in here, but we
don’t know where to run–the map ain’t that great even when you can SEE it. I say we ought to stay. The rat who keeps his head in the hole don’t get it bit off by the cat.”
“Aye, and a frog will sit in a pot of water ‘til it boils and cook alive! We’ve got to move,” the Bounty Hunter said. “We’re cornered. D’you think we can take them now?”
Dismas held up a placating hand. “I’ve set up alarms. We’ll have warning, at least. Time enough to get a torch lit and weapons ready. Though I dislike the idea of tryin’ to fight in the dead of night.”
The Bounty Hunter was silent, considering. Then he nodded. They sat back down around the campfire, weapons drawn, an waited.

Sleeplessness made the weird numbness in his face and fingers return and worsen, the next day. It was only with a conscious effort that he forced it down; still for a long while after the sun was up, he felt as if he were watching his own body as if it were a marionette, manipulated by someone else. His hands at the ends of his arms seemed foreign things, and his voice, when he spoke, sounded like it came from someone else’s mouth.

He wished for a drink. A drink, a smoke, and a bed, in that order. He felt like he could lie down for a year.

But the next day saw fortune smile upon them, at least. They found a hall of antiques--several paintings, mainly portraits of pretty women wearing jewelry so elaborate it made Dismas’s fingers itch just to look at them; two marble busts, both of some nob in an ugly powdered wig, decades out of style; a statuette of a man about to be crushed to death by tentacles reaching up from the stone base, which was itself carved to resemble a turbulent sea.

What WAS the obsession with tentacles, anyway? Dismas had been in coast cities long enough to have seen octopuses and squid both--and tasted, because after all, you only live once. He could not imagine where people got the lurid stories about beasts as big as boats, capable of sinking ships by reaching up and tangling their tentacles in the rigging an capsizing them, for he’d never seen a creature any larger than a child’s kick-ball. He was beginning to suspect it was some sailor’s joke, a prank played on the ‘land-lubbers’, like furred cod or mermaids.

“What do you not find it strange,” the Arbalest was saying, “That this place appears to be mostly unscathed? When the rest of the edifice appears to be in such terrible shape, to find this one area still intact…” she looked around.

Indeed, aside from cracks in the tiles on the floor and a few in the walls, the place was mostly untouched. Almost perfectly so. It looks like the collection room in a manor house long abandoned, but not one that has been rocked by some accursed magical energy.

The moment the words left her mouth, Dismas’s hackles went up.

“D’you suspect a trap?” he said. He finished wrapping the statuette in a shred of torn curtain, and stuff it into the bag, uncaring of the clattering noise something made as he yanked the drawstring closed.

She shook her head, but her fingers were tense on she shoulder-strap of the crossbow. “I do not know…”

The Bounty Hunter came striding back from the hall’s other end, dusty up to his elbows.

“Cannot go on that way,” he said. “Hall’s gone.”

Dismas gave the Arbalest a significant look. She looked uneasily around, and then said, “Something does not seem right.”

The Bounty Hunter paused and then, with an almost theatrical air, turned to look at their surroundings.

“Care to pick somethin’ specific?”
“Why is this area so pristine? When it is clear the brigands have been most other places, why is it only here that we find such rare valuables, an in such good condition?” she said.
The Bounty Hunter made a low, thoughtful grumble.
“The Occultist,” he said at last. “Let’s ask him.”

He had no answers, however; he was still irritated that they had disrupted his attempt to finish the “experiments” he’d found on the table.

It was only when they went back out into the main hall and Dismas realized the direction the skeletons were walking in that it began to make sense.
They were patrolling the place.

*

The ruined building’s structure made no sense. They ascended flights of stairs into rooms that were clearly basement rooms--coming once into a vast, echoing wine cellar whose casks were split and ruptured with age. The wine smell, if ever there was one, was long gone. Dismas smelled dust, decomposing wood, rat shit, damp stone.

While the others cast around, he surreptitiously searched among the racks upon racks of bottles on the walls. The racks which had at some point held wine-bottles were all empty, and here and there shards of glass glinted up from the floor.

In one corner of the room they found a smear of ashes on the floor, and the butts of some cigarettes. The Bounty Hunter knelt to draw two fingers through the ashes. When Dismas flicked a glance between the ashes and the man’s face, he shook his head.

“No tellin’ when they were here last. Must’ve been the brigands; can’t see why the, er. Others would have use for a campfire.”

Dismas wanted to point out that skeletons also had no use for clothing, or weapons, or a desire to stand and fight again, yet there they were. And the motivations of the cultists remained inscrutable. He found he did not actually wish to know.

When they ascended staircases out of basements they found themselves on the second floor rather than the first; the Occultist had begun carrying around a small notebook, an was muttering and scribbling notes in it at every turn.

Dismas had resolved to tell the fellow to put the damn thing away before he drove them all mad from sheer strangeness alone; they were at a hallway’s end, an he turned his head to speak.
The Arbalest’s eyes went wide, and Dismas whipped back around. His pistol was cocked before he could think about it.

The cultists seemed to have been waiting for them.
There were two women and two brutes; one of the women had already raised her scepter. In the dim daylight he realized with no small amount of horror that it was made from a human thigh-bone, the narrow end carved down.
She screamed.
From nowhere an immense blue tentacle lashed from the air. The Bounty Hunter was flung backwards an off his feet, landing on the Arbalest.

Dismas herd the sound of the crossbow releasing almost at the same instant s he heard the Bounty Hunter’s agonized howl. He figured the shot had gone awry and when he turned he would see the man with the bolt jutting out of his back; the thought made the nerves prickle up all down his arms.
He fired grapeshot t the two women, but they dodged, hissing an screeching like a pair of banshees.
He was hoping she didn’t know the particular trick to make the tentacles rise from from the floor and wring you like a rag--
When he glance behind himself he saw the Arbalest had struggled to her feet, but the Bounty Hunter—he had been thrown down and landed on a piece of broken furniture. A spar of wood as long as a man’s forearm stuck through his shoulder; his left arm hung useless, twisted at a sickening angle. She was trying to compress the wound, trying to coax him to stay calm.

The Occultist uttered an oath. “An amateur trick! Here, stand back! I will show you what the well-tempered powers of the occult can do!”

This time there was the blood-colored light again. The Bounty Hunter’s screamed, fit to burst his throat: Dismas saw the man’s body reject the wood, thrust outwards by some invisible force. The blood, where it spurted, congealed like ropes, like—like tentacles, he thought, coiling back on themselves and withdrawing back into the wound. He watched as two of the blood tentacles re-emerged, flinging away large splinters of wood and crushed plates of maille. The piece of wood fell away, streaked with blood and shredded cloth, an for a terrifying instant Dismas could see a fist-sized hole through the man’s body, before the viscera within was crisscrossed with the lashing blood tentacles, knitting together with inhuman force and speed. The Bounty Hunter stood with his arms outstretched, clawing at the wound with his uninjured hand, too shocked to make any sound; finally, gasping, he staggered and fell.

Dismas got another grapeshot blast off, this time driving the brutes to cower, as well.

“Mademoiselle Arbalest! Is he alive?”

“You ask if he lives!” the Occultist said, his eyes wild. “Yes, he lives! He lives by my hand, guiding the hand of the darkness to knit his flesh anew!”

One of the brutes was drawing closer, one arm raised, and Dismas lunged past him again, this time twisting his slice. He caught a glancing blow into the fellow’s side, before he had time to swing the clawed greave around. Dismas dodged back, feeling it whistle past his chest. The brute was bleeding bad, though, and stumble back two paces.

“You see! You see, now, the power I have harnessed!” the Occultist was screaming. He held the skull aloft an all four cultists flinched, the women shrieking. “You, who would have stood in the way of my studies, look now!”

One of the brutes rushed forward, and the Occultist, his hand still in the air, just stood there. Dismas heard the hollow thud of the brute’s punch hitting home, the wicked claws on the greave sinking into the Occultists chest.

Who did not seem to notice. He staggered back, shouting something in the broken-glass language. Dismas felt the rush of air as the tentacles lashed down, striking the two women. One collapsed with a final gurgle and died.

Dismas could neither shoot nor stab the brute; he was too close to the unmoving Occultist.

“Magician! Fall back!”

“I will not be ordered by the likes of YOU, cur!”

But he could see the blood spreading in a dark bloom across the front of the man’s robes. Then Dismas did shove forward, grappling for a moment with the man, ludicrous in his fear that the Brute would stab him in the back.

Instead he heard the cultist woman’s strange intonation, and dread spiked in his belly. The torch guttered out, leaving them in a gloom as of twilight.

The Occultist shouted something again, and again the flash of blood-colored light. This time the tentacles missed their mark, lashing empty air and Blevins behind a wake of sound filled later with
the cultist woman’s harsh intonations.

He heard the Arbalest calling for the Occultist, calling for the torch oil, then her voice cut short with a sharp cry of pain.

“Can you not get another torch lit?” the Bounty Hunter was shouting.

In the dark something solid struck Dismas, but he could not see clearly enough, and it was with a lurch of terror that he realized it was the bleeding brute. He staggered back, making a clumsy swipe that missed. The brute’s swipe missed his face so narrowly that his elbow caught Dismas on the jaw and he staggered back.

Then suddenly the room was suffuse with pinkish light and sputtering smoke: the Arbalest had shot off a flare, which had lodge in the ceiling.

In the wavering light she struck another torch, hefted the crossbow. He could see one side of her armor was dented severely, and blood ran from the two holes.

Her eyes locked with his, black and flashing. “GET DOWN!”

He crouched immediately, hearing the bolt scream as it tore air.

One of the brutes had locked with the Bounty Hunter, who was going blow for blow but flagging; he would not be able to dodge forever--

“No! No! Focus your hate on ME!” the Occultist was screaming. To his horror, Dismas saw the man pull a penknife from a pocket and stab himself in the chest.

The cultist woman raised the bone scepter again and the not-voice’s poisonous whispering filled his mind. The breath left his body; his legs shook.

The Bounty Hunter flung his hook at her, but one of the cultist brutes caught it instead; the Bounty Hunter hauled him forward and stunned him with a massive upward swipe that struck the brute square on the jaw, snapping the his head back like a toy.

Dismas dropped him with a shot fired fast as a reflex.

The Arbalest, still bleeding grievously from the gashes left by the brute’s clawed bracers, still trying to wind her crossbow for another shot--

Dismas grabbed the Occultist by a handful of his robes and flung him back; the man stumbled back to the end of the line, swearing.

“You will interrupt me no longer!” the Occultist snarled.

The Arbalest had enough time to look over her shoulder at him, her mouth open to speak, before he raised the penknife again--and then viciously brought it down into her back.

She stumbled forward, caught herself, braced on the crossbow and tried to stand. One hand reached for her shoulder; she did not scream. He saw her shudder and cough.

“What the fuck--” Dismas shouted.

“I will SHOW you the true necromancy! You, illiterate doubters, look now upon me, in the fullness of my powers! I WILL WITH MY OWN BLOOD BRING FORTH THE FORCES OF THE ARCANE! I WILL SHOW YOU! I WILL SHOW YOU!”

He flung up his hands, the skull in one hand and the blood-streaked knife in the other--then, in a terrible instant, rammed the blade down into his own neck. Screaming, straining against the tendons, he began to draw the knife across his own throat. The blood spurted in jets, brilliant red spraying over the floor. From somewhere there was a dry retching sound, like dry heaves between teeth.

Dismas watched the man scream his last words, in no human tongue--and then pitch forward onto the blood-splattered floor.

He realized then that the dry heaving sound was coming from himself. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and then rushed over to the Arbalest.
“Monsieur Bretel…he…my lung,” the Arbalest whispered. There was blood in her teeth, but her color was still good. Dismas had seen enough stab wounds to judge that, at least.

“Where are the bandages, Ma’amselle?” he asked. “Can you tell me?”

“The left…left side of the pack…” she muttered. Her hand was clamped down hard against her side, but the blood was already spilling between her fingers.

He had to half-drag, half-carry her to prop her against a wall, where she sat a moment struggling to breathe.

He took the pack from her, rooted up the bandages. When he looked back at her he could see she had gotten the armor off; her green arming jacket had two deep punctures in the left side, the cloth already tacky with blood.

“Can you tell me what to do?”

“Fold a bandage,” she said. “Need a compress. Wrap it tight as you can. Air in the ribcage is a killer.”

Dismas obeyed, unclasping the jacket. In despair at seeing her shirt more bloodied than the gambeson, he folded one roll of gauze carefully as he could, then wrapped the gauze around her sides as well as he could. He tied off the bandages hastily, one eye on the Bounty Hunter still brawling with the remaining cultist brute.

“You’re gonna be fine,” he said, through gritted teeth. “Got to save some blood for the good doctor’s leeches, hey?”

She gave him a weak smile; he patted her uninjured shoulder. “Rest easy. We’ll take care of it.”

He stood and strode over in time to see the Bounty Hunter bury his axe in the brute’s shoulder, severing his forearm through the wrist as he raised it to block. The brute died choking; the Bounty Hunter stood over him, breathing heavily, before turning back to them.

He limped over and Dismas saw his sleeve was nearly black with blood. Fat droppets were running own his fingers and splattering on the floor.

“I need a bandage,” the Bounty Hunter grated.

Dismas handed him one wordlessly; the man shucked some of his armor one-handed and then bound up the wound hastily.

He looked long and hard between the Arbalest and the Occultist’s body. Then slowly he raised his face to Dismas.

Dismas, covered in blood he had not shed. Dismas, for once the one unscathed. He felt almost ashamed.

They approached the Occultist’s remains with some trepidation. He lay supine in a pool of his own blood, his face obscured by one of his sleeves.

The weird distortions of the air warped and shifted around his corpse, as though trying the body for signs of life: Dismas could see the translucent red-tinted tentacles moving faintly, disturbing the folds of the man’s robes and making the fabric seethe an crawl. Dismas thought of the skin of a dead animal being eaten by maggots.

The eyes of the candle-skull were empty and blank; an when the candle’s tiny flame guttered out, the tentacles dissolved, as well. The folds of material settled flat.

Dismas waited a beat before starting towards the body. The Bounty Hunter caught the wrist of his outstretched hand in a hard, trembling grip.

“What the hell are you doing? You saw those THINGS he called down!”

“Aye, I saw,” Dismas said. “But he was carrying the extra torch oil, an I’ll not go on without it.”

Dismas squatted on his haunches beside the body for a moment. He muttered, “Sorry, mate. No one deserves to go out like that.”
When he rolled the body over, he heard a series of discordant musical notes, tinny and faint.

He searched the man’s pockets--but carefully, an found a small rectangular red music box--the very one he’d been holding earlier. The case was enameled an unreal shade of red--sparkling, gold-shimmering red, now a pearlescent crimson, now a garnet color nearly as deep as fresh-pricked blood.

He nearly flinched away from it. Then he felt ridiculous about being frightened of a music box. It was only the horror of having seen the man run mad that stayed Dismas’s hand when he reached for the box. He took that and the lamp oil and bundled the box carefully in a spare kerchief, before putting everything into the man’s satchel.

He hesitated a moment, staring at the body.
“I think we ought to throw in the towel on this one,” he said t last.
“What do you mean?” the Bounty Hunter asked.
“I mean we’re beat. We can carry no more, and besides, I mislike the idea of leavin' him here for the skeletons or the cultists. And she can go no further with injuries such as those,” he said.
He nodded in the Arbalest’s direction, at where she sat against the wall, grimacing in pain with every breath. Even then, she held the crossbow in an iron grip, a bolt already prepared. He didn’t know whether he found her determination admirable or tragic.

“We’ve got to turn back.” Dismas finished.
The Bounty Hunter grunted thoughtfully, then rumbled, “The Lady won’t like it.”
“Aye, an’ she’d like it even less if TWO of us come back dead. I say we leave. Quit while we’re ahead.”

“You sure you want to take that box?” the Bounty Hunter grunted. “Don’t like it. Makes my skin crawl.”
“I know. Me, I share your sentiments. But the Traveler woman back in town will pay good coin for this, I’m sure. An’ we’re always short of cash.”

Their flight from the place was a blur, their return to the inn an unreal smudge of concerned faces, voices.
They had brought the Occultist back wrapped in a length of scavenged curtain for a shroud.
Dismas could not look on the blood-spattered folds a moment without feeling cold with horror.

He left the pack full of loot outside the Lady’s door, took all the money he’d managed to scrape together and went like a sleepwalker to the tavern.
At a back booth he sat and drank until the world blurred into meaningless colors. He did not taste a drop of what he swallowed, which made the Barkeep’s appearance seem strange.

“My good man,” he said, “The establishment will be closing for the evening.”
“Time is it?” Dismas asked.
“The tower clock’s struck midnight already.”
Dismas made a thoughtful noise at that. But he was in that pleasant becalmed liquid state where such practicalities became meaningless.
He reached into his pocket and fished out a handful of money, scattering coins on the table. He stared down at them uncomprehending for a long time before looking back up at the man. He could not interpret the strange look on the man’s face.

“Pay you for a room,” he said. “Upstairs.”
The Barkeep’s face did a complicated maneuver Dismas finally recognized as PITY.
“I apologize, sir, but this isn’t enough for a room upstairs. If you’d like, I can get one of my boys to
walk you back to the inn.”

Then Dismas snorted a little, half-laughing, half-sighing. He swept the money off the tabletop and back into one of his pockets.
“A’right, a’right, I take your meanin’. I can see myself out,” he said, but jovially, rising to his feet and slapping the barkeep on the arm, in a friendly way. “Fine establishment you got here, mate. Only you ought to maybe speak with her Ladyship, get your prices adjusted. Fair pay for hard work, hey?” he said.
“Aye, of course, sir,” the Barkeep said.
Dismas was distantly aware that the man was herding him towards the front door, but couldn’t blame the fellow. He decided to say so.
“An’ me, behavin’ like the worst kind of sod. Sittin’ here after closin’ time. You got people to go back to, don’t you?” he said. He paused, swung around to look up into the man’s face. Something felt like it was filling his chest, sloshing and blue of melancholy. “Don’t you? Your boys? Your wife?”

“You don’t need to worry yourself about that, sir,” the Barkeep was saying.
His tone reminded Dismas of the way people gently shooed away stray dogs they didn’t want to beg for scraps.
He felt very much like a stray dog, at that moment.
He looked away from the man’s face again, his pitying eyes, and a wave of revulsion and shame rolled over him, so strong he felt it like a physical thing.
He rocked a little on his feet. “You don’t need to…” he began. The words swam away from him; his throat felt very rough, suddenly. He wiped his nose and was surprised to feel it running.

“I can see meself out,” he said again. He stepped across the threshold on legs like jelly, and made it three paces into the street before turning to see the last light in the place go out.
He watched the dim yellow glow of the Tavern-keep’s lamp as he left the front, leaving the windows black.
Seeing the little light leave made him feel a stab of loneliness. His hand twitched at his side as if to wave goodbye or good night.
The street was washed in blues and ash-grays from the moonlight; seeing his way was no issue. The air, too, was cold, but he felt it only distantly.
He blinked in surprise to feel water running down his chin, blinked again to realize it was hot: tears were tracking down his face.

And he must not have been entirely sloshed, because he felt ashamed then: there he was, a grown man, drunk and sniveling in the street like a child with a broken toy.
He didn’t even WANT to go back to the inn, but wanted even less to try and break into a place while in that state.

Feeling wretched, he turned and started back towards the inn, pausing now and again to wipe his face on his sleeve.
He hoped Reynauld would not be there.

When he was near the square, a tall ghost in a white mantle approached him. In the moonlight the ghost’s face had a brassy gleam. He wore a black coat. Dismas could feel a spike of fear overlaid with helplessness: he had but one knife on him, and was in no state to fight. He stood unsteadily in one place, clenching an unclenching his hands, as he watched the ghost come closer.
“Dismas?” the ghost became Claville. His voice was concerned.
“It’s you,” he said. He wiped his face a final time, then hoped he didn’t have snot all over his upper lip.
“Yes. I heard the party had returned, but that someone had fallen, and I…” he trailed off. He sees through me, Disms thought. The thought filled him with a cold despair.

“Nothin’ to be said,” Dismas said. “M’sieur Bretel. He ran mad. Seems like it’s contagious ‘round here,” he paused; Claville seemed to be studying him.

He ws gla for once of the man;’s mask; he did not think he could have borne it, had he seen that same look of mingled pity and disgust on Claville’s face, s he had seen on the Tavern-keep’s. He took a breath that came in shudders.

“You are…not well,” Claville said at last. His voice was carefully flat.

Dismas snorted and waved a hand dismissively. “I’m fine now. It’ll be a different story tomorrow. But why worry today what you can put off til tomorrow, hey?” he gestured roundly, hoping the man would laugh, would move or show some emotion at all. He very bly wnted to ask if Reynul had told him. What he’d said. When Claville did not laugh, he dropped his arms, scoffing. “What? You don’t find that humorous? Hm?”

“Let us return to the inn. The sea fogs will be rolling in shortly, and the cobbles are uneven enough s it is without the reduced visibility.” Claville spoke plainly. His voice was still flat. Dismas felt frustration an loneliness and a strange grief heave in him, working his ribcage like a bellows. He took one step towards Claville, an was surprised when the man caught his wrist and carefully pulled his arm up and over those broad, sloping shoulders.

“You don’t ‘ave to do this,” Dismas said. Now he felt desperate, unable to articulate the feeling. His eyes kept running like fucking taps. He wiped his face again and again, trying to at least be quiet. Claville said nothing, merely took a step in the direction of the inn.

“I can see meself out,” Dismas said. He repeated himself; Claville was silent. Then, because Dismas could not take it any longer, he planted his feet and halfheartedly tried to pull away from the other man. “Someone like you shouldn’t waste your time on the likes of me. I’ve nothing for you. I’ve nothing for anyone. If you knew what I’d done, you’d say I deserved to hang. They’d string me up from one of them nasty trees at the edge of town and leave my corpse there for the carrion birds. An’ I would deserve it.” he scrubbed at his nose with the back of his sleeve. “You’d never smile nor laugh at a thing I said ever again. Everything I said before, you’d weight against that, an’ you’d hate me. An’ I’d deserve it.”

Claville had not released his arm; his large, blung fingers were closed cautiously around the bones of Dismas’s wrist. His sleeve had come up and the soft lether of the glove was touching his bare skin, the touch warm against the cold.

“Let me be the judge of that,” Claville said, “And in the morning. We must get inside.” Dismas clapped his free hand over his mouth before the sob could make its way out; the force of restraining the grief made him retch. Claville held fast to him, bending a little with him, until he could stand again.

Dismas felt like his body was turning to water in a heavy wineskin, heavier and looser-limbed with eveyr step. Once inside, Claville started for the stairs, but the dark hallway yawned like a gate into hell. Dismas flinched all over; Claville looked at him a moment and then murmured, “Would you prefer a seat here?”

He nodded. He could not explain why the darkness was so terrifying, or the way hallways were evil
and threatened to crush him. He could not explain why a man would try to cut his own throat, or what made the dead walk again.

He was too frightened to think about what happened to those who died in the ruins, and whose bodies were left there.

Shamed an embarrassed at the state he ws in, as soon as Claville let him go he staggered to an armchair nd collapsed into it, dropping his face into his hands. He could bear to look at the other man, and it ws with mingled relief, gratefulness, and shame that he heard his footsteps retreat ing across the floor. 
Sleep stole over him like a black blanket, the drink smothering his dreams into meaningless smears.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The Sanitarium again. Dismas learns some things about his employer's late ancestor. Gifts are given; gifts are misunderstood. What, after all, is the price of friendship? And are such things chains, or an anchor in a wild sea?

Chapter Notes

i love you all~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He startled awake a few hours later, coming quickly back into painful consciousness. His head was pounding, his mouth dry as an old bone.
It was dark and cold, the fire having long since gone out; but as he sat up he felt something slide off him and, looking down, realized it was a gray tartan blanket—not the one from his own room.
The gesture was probably meant to be sweet, but it made a fresh wave of shame roil in his gut. At first he could not tell how long he’d been asleep; going slowly to the window, he twitched one of the drapes aside and saw the sky a deep indigo blue, barely touched with the light of dawn.
Though looking made his eye burn and his head pound harder, he was glad he knew what time it was.
That meant that it was unlikely most of the others would have seen him.
He went back to the chair, but the thought of trying to nurse a booze headache in the soon-to-be-noisy common room was beyond him, as was going upstairs to his room.
The blanket puzzled him. It was not one of the place’s usual coverlets, which were of crimson woolen stuff; but it was too nice to have been anyone’s travel blanket, either.
He folded it carefully, then left it in the chair.

On his way into the kitchen he heard a low murmur of voices, and for an agonizing moment was about to turn back when the door swung open.

Osmond stopped like a dancer on her toes with a wooden tray balanced one one hand, saving the tray’s contents—a bowl of chicken soup—from splattering directly in his face.
When she saw him, she smiled. The expression was subdued, but even in as much pain s he was he could recognize a gentle gesture when he saw one.

“You’re awake,” she murmured.

He nodded, scrubbing one eye with the heel of his hand. “Aye,” he said. His voice was a dry rasp; speaking hurt like swallowed needles.

She nodded back at him, looking over him with a bird-quick glance before stepping aside and tilting her head in the direction of the kitchen.

“Come inside, sit by the fire and warm yourself.”
He obeyed, walking into the kitchen on stiff, sore legs. He felt meek as a lamb now that he was caught in that trap of manners. She led him to the spot at the table nearest the hearth, setting the tray with the bowl down before the chair.

The Doctor was already there, grinding something in a little mortar and pestle. There was a teakettle set on the hearth, and a stockpot of soup simmering, with chicken pieces, carrots, and little white lobes of garlic like knuckle-bones bobbing in the sun-colored broth.

Dismas took the seat and a spoon from the basket, staring down at it as if in a daze.

A rustle of cloth to his right, an a dove-gray blur that resolved in his bleary vision into Osmond’s shirt s she moved to sit down beside him. She leaned forward on the table, her elbows on the wood, her hands bare.

“How are you, my friend?” she asked. Gone was the levity from her voice, replaced with a sort of calm gentleness that frightened him worse than if she had merely pretended nothing was wrong.

“He is not sleeping, that much can be plainly seen,” the Doctor said. But even the sharpness in her voice was the sort aunts used with disobedient nephews, and nothing unkind.

Dismas felt somehow even more ashamed; he could not meet her eyes.

Osmond made a dismissive noise. “Who sleeps ‘round here anyway? There’s fun to be had at night, you know, dearie.”

“Yes, with all the horrors of all the hells afoot on all the roads. ‘Fun’ indeed,” the Doctor said.

The kettle began to sputter and whistle, and before Dismas could flinch t the noise the Doctor went to it and took it from the flame.

Then Osmond said, “Are you really just going to sit there staring at that soup? I got up bright an’ early to make that, you know! Practically divested myself of two fingers in the process. Mamma always used to say that a lady did not cook—or, if she could, she ought never to admit to it.”

Dismas smiled down at the soup, the image of Osmond swearing and trying to joint a bird with her throwing knives coming into his mind. Before taking a mouthful, he mumbled, “Am I meant to take that as a vote of confidence for the soup, or a strike against it?”

She clucked disapprovingly; he chuckled a little and then ate some.

It was good. He could taste the garlic cutting through everything like a bright yellow-green blade drawn across his tongue, the lightness of the broth soothing his throat and removing the bitterness from his mouth.

He ate for a bit, the soup helping his gnawing hunger but doing nothing for his headache. He was glad his stomach hadn’t turned over on him from drinking too much, but then he suspected he had the barkeep to thank for that; the man had probably begun watering his drinks at some point.

Even the knowledge of having received that backwards kindness from strangers made the food turn to ashes in his mouth, the shame overwhelming everything else.

“Is it that bad, then?” Osmond asked. “Never seen a man stop mid-bite before. They usually make it at least two-thirds through before they notice the arsenic…”

This startled a laugh out of Dismas, even though it made his eyes throb and his temples pound. He hunched over the bowl afterwards, rubbing his head and groaning softly, but still smiling.

“Ahh, dearie, you needn’t worry. Can’t afford to waste good poisons on friends in a place like this, hey? Not even it it WERE a great prank, or if you already look s though you’ve got one foot in the coffin and the other only lightly upon the ground.”

“He had better not throw away my hard work an research,” Doctor Guideville said. “I’ll have you know, I need a LIVE first patient, else all my theories will have no living body of proof!”

“So I am forbidden from death?” he asked.

“Preferably until you are of such age as it becomes naturally inevitable. Or until I have published my
entire body of relevant work. Whichever comes first.” Doctor Guideville said.

Dismas snorted, shaking his head. “Well, when the choice is put to me like that…”

He ate in silence for a moment; Osmond poured hot water from the kettle into a very ornate, very tarnished silver teapot. He watched her shake some tea leaves into it before she fetched some scones from the larder, slicing them in two and setting them in one of the spider skillets to toast on the fire. When he finished the first bowl of soup and tried to stand to take it to the washing-sink, she came back, scolded him a little, an took the bowl from his hands.

“You’ll eat another,” she said, then dipped the bowl up and handed it back to him.

He sat back down without another word.

The Doctor tapped the contents of her mortar and pestle onto a pair of tiny hand-held scales, weighed it against a tiny brass weight, and then gently spooned the contents into another mug. She poured some tea from the kettle into the mug, stirred it a moment, and then pushed it over to Dismas.

“Drink that. It will ease your headache.”

When he took a sip, the bitterness made him draw back in disgust.

“Willow bark extract! It will cut the pain.”

So grumbling a bit, he drank the hideously bitter tea and ate the (really very good) chicken soup, and though the guilt and shame were not removed, they were soothed somewhat.

“So I was meanin’ to bring this up to you,” Osmond said, after a few long minutes. “Maybe you ought to talk to somebody.”

Dismas gave her a disbelieving look. “Ain’t goin’ to confession, if that’s what you’re gettin’ at. I’ll eat a handful of hair before I go an’ tell some monk or nun my business, so’s they can give me prayers to muddle through that won’t do nothin’ for me nor anybody else.”

Osmond wrinkled her nose, but laughed. “Easy, there! And I’d never dream of it. Laws, it’s been more than a decade since I’ve been to any sort of service.” then she sobered up. “No, but I meant, speak to a doctor. It may help to clear your mind, a bit.”

Dismas looked broadly over at Doctor Guideville, still grinding more of the powder in her mortar, and then looked back at Osmond.

Who grinned and shook her head. “Not a physic, dearie. I mean, doctors of a different sort. A psychologist.”

And then he almost flinched; his face must have shown his feeling, because she patted the tabletop beside his arm and continue speaking, as if it were perfectly normal that she had suggested he WILLINGLY go and speak to a head-shrinker.

She was saying, “Oh, plenty of people go, for plenty of reasons. A school friend of mine used to see this doctor who she was positively MAD about. She had womanly troubles, you see,” she said, intoning the last two words carefully, as if Dismas had ANY IDEA what they meant.

Dr. Guideville added, “Shell-shocked soldiers returning from war often benefit from speaking to such doctors, as well.”

He managed to look between them, feeling both so confused and panicked--and more than a little ashamed--that he could do no more than open an close his mouth like a landed fish.

Finally he managed, “I--I ain’t a hysterical woman, and I ain’t--some soldier what saw his mates blown to bits by cannon-fire--” he faltered. He was not a soldier; but what was he doing, if not fighting some type of battle? Still--“I ain’t so far gone that I need to be locked in the loony bin!” he protested.

Osmond shook her head. “No one suggested such a thing.”

Was this what they thought? Was he so pathetic now, to be exposed as a useless drunk and tossed aside accordingly? He could feel the acid bile of shame start to climb his throat, almost as soon as Osmond began talking again.
“But...dearie, I must say, while before you were firmly astride the line of ‘mysterious, dangerous stranger’, these days you look rather like a corpse dressed in your own clothes. I know you come in at odd hours, because *I* myself come in at odd hours. Have you been getting any rest?”

Dismas wanted to lie. He wanted to say he was fine, that he’d just overdone it with the booze and would be fine after drying out for a day or two. A week, perhaps, so his liver could settle its humors. But hearing her mention a corpse in his clothes only made his mind’s eye conjure a lurid vision of himself as a skeleton, his clothes reduced to mold-spotted rags, his dessicated fingers clutching his pistol and dirk--

He wanted to lie, or to pretend that this was not the case.

But there was the uncomfortable truth of the way he slept only fitfully, and always with a knife near at hand; how often he’d need a tipple before being able to rest. The way hallways made him feel as though the walls were pressing closer, with hidden horrors lurking in every gaping doorway, and darkness and the sound of splattering liquid on stone made his skin prickle up under a cold sweat of fear. The way, if he admitted it, that half a dozen perfectly ordinary things frightened him so badly now that even the idle thought of them made his guts twitch and tense in nervousness.

“All I mean to say is, there is no need to suffer on in silence,” Osmond’s voice came to him quietly, gently. She did not give him the impression of pity or disgust, either at his behaviour or the nervous conditions he had so recently fallen victim to.

With a sweaty, shaking hand, he wiped his mouth, and nodded once; but he found he could not meet her eyes.

~

The Sanitarium’s mental wards were not what he expected.

The whole of the place was, of course, built of the same heavy dark blue-gray granite as most stone edifices in the town, the floors tiled in smooth-waxed granite flagstones.

They had passed through a heavy oak door, reinforced with sheets of metal, and which boomed shut behind them in a way that made his hands twitch for his weapons.

Doctor Guideville had said to come unarmed, but Osmond gave him a knowing look; he would no more have ventured from his room totally unarmed s he would totally naked. He had but one small knife, hidden in a pocket in his vest; the thought of leaving it had made his skin tense and itch all over.

There were more of the metal-reinforced doors to either side of the hall, and the whole scene looked s though it took place underwater: the light came only dimly, and through the frosted shades of the strangest lamps Dismas had ever seen. Every lamp had a glass shade encased with a wire mesh-work around it, like a basket. But there were no bars anywhere, no filthy cringing wretches in rags locked in cages, nor madwomen in chains and torn, stained frocks shrieking and ripping out their own hair. The entire place, while old, was also meticulously clean, dispelling any myth of poor senile old folks shuffling around barefoot and tracking their shit and piss behind them.

They passed a large, open room, where there were some people in gray garb sitting. Two of them, dressed in what looked like long gray shifts, were crouched down upon the ground in a corner, engaged in some inscrutable game; an alarmingly thin woman with her black hair messily hacked short was sitting at a pianoforte, playing it with a dreamlike slowness. Her eyes were fixed, unseeing, on the wall in front of her.

One of the nuns, apparently the one supervising the room, was sitting on a bench with a fourth person, an aged man who trembled all over s if with palsy. They were speaking quietly.

Dismas swallowed and tried to calm himself.
Finally they entered another room, this one furnished with a plain chair, a table, and a bench. There was a window, tall and narrow and crossed with bars set so closely he would not have been able to get his arm between them, h e broken the glass.

Doctor Guideville explained everything very plainly.
“You will speak with Doctor Fremont. She is quite reputable. While their surgical technology may be some years out of date, their mental care facilities are quite in the new school. The effects, I suppose, of having been once a great center of trade had in the past attracted a number of prominent and illustrious doctors here.”
“And this Fremont is one of them?” Dismas asked.
The Doctor nodded.
They were silent for an uncomfortable beat. Then Dismas glanced between she and Osmond and blurted, “Well—what is she going to—to do to me?”
Doctor Guideville gave him a strange look. “DO to you? Nothing whatsoever, I expect. Though I admit I have no experience—”

“I’ll not be chained like some ravening beast,” Dismas said, before she could finish. The pressure upon his nerves was too much; he sounded exactly s desperate as he felt. “I’ll not stay here a night, either.”
He remembered too well the poor cringing wretch in the soiled straight-jacket; the fear was enough to make his heart clench.
“She may ask that of you. But you saw for yourself that the inmates here are free to walk about the wards s they wish.” the Doctor said, but gently.

Dismas couldn’t believe what he heard, or what he saw. There must, he was sure, be a catch.
“I will speak with the Lady in regards to payment for your treatment.” Dr. Guideville continued.
“You will?” Dismas asked. He had known, approaching the situation,t hat he was out of his depth, but the truth of it was that he had no idea what was going on, or what to expect.
“Yes, I will. This is a matter of your health, and I am your physician,” she continued, “And as it is clear you cannot continue to function in such a manner, the Lady must be notified and the necessary steps taken for your treatment an recovery.”

Dismas looked between them again, unsure even what to say. He felt equally embarrassed, grateful, and confused.
Someone passed in the corridor and the Doctor excused herself.
“I’ll be posted right outside this door, dearie. Do please try not to do anything regrettable to the Doctor, for she’s sure to be a frail old bird. As they seem to go, around here,” Osmond said, nudging him in the side conspiratorially. She winked at him a little; he smiled back, feeling a bit better.

But Dr. Guideville didn’t return, an that worsened his nervousness again; he paced a slow circuit around the bare little room, glanced out the uncurtained window out into the gray, dreary morning. The townspeople were just lighting their fires; across the square he could see the tavern’s lights go on. The little houses in the quarter across the bridge, just off the square, were beginning to come alive as well.
He knew that, on the Sanitarium’s other side was the Abbey; but the thought of being a stone’-throw from where Reynauld and Claville likely were, did not give him any pleasure at all.

Abruptly he wondered if they would still want to help him, if they knew what he had done. Or would they, in fear and disgust, withdraw from him completely, an leave him again cut off and friendless?

Before he had time for the thoughts to take root further, there was a quiet knock on the door; he spun on one foot, jumping back from the window like a kid caught about to steal a pie from a windowsill.
Then the doctor was there, and there was no way to back out without looking like either a coward or an ungrateful sneak.

~

Dismas was back in his room before the morning bells, before the wake-up breakfast call. He always was; it was easy.

Then again, he’ hardly have been a thief worth his his salt, if he couldn’t sneak past a group of old nuns an nurses. Besides, he told himself, as he settled into the narrow little cot, his nighttime meanderings were harmless, because there was never anything left out to steal. The furniture, what little of it there was, was all the heavy solid sort that required the effort of two--or more--people with strong backs to move, an was the plain sort that clearly concealed nothing of value.

The other rooms he had seen, all contained the same furnishings: narrow wooden cot like a monk’s, with plain wool covers; maybe a little table with a chair, maybe a chest. Then there were the rooms whose locks he’d not been able to pick, an these frightened him worse of all: little more than cells, with heavily padded walls and floors with drains in the middle. The reinforced doors had tiny grates at about eye-level, and another slot at at floor level, which was how he had to assume they put the foot into the rooms for the inmates there. All but one of these were empty, and the one he passed, he could hear low, mournful groaning coming from it. A few of the more typical rooms had a be and nothing else, which left him to consider himself fortunate that he had manged to get into one of the rooms that was, by these standards, furnished quite opulently. If such a thing could be said, of a madhouse.

He thought it with a jolt of mingled shame n panic that faded as fast as it had come.

He closed his eyes against the sight of the bare stone of the ceiling, and recounted the details back to himself.

Three days. He had, for the last three days, been an inmate t the Sanitarium. Osmond and Dr. Guideville had found him, fed him breakfast, nursed him through the abominable self-inflicted next-day headache he had.

Then Osmond had very gently suggested that he needed to speak to someone bout his troubles. Dr. Guideville had been fr more blunt, telling him he was poisoning himself to death, that his liver would be a bloody mess and he would end up dead of jaundice.

And by then even HE was willing to admit--he clung to drink like a babe to its mother’s tit. Often he could not sleep without a nightcap, and the idea of trying to relax without a cup of wine or a tankard of *SOMETHING* alcoholic was beyond the pale.

But that was just what people did, he had thought. He had never known anyone who id not have one vice, whether it be cards or horse races or drinking or fucking, and who was to say what was was, or was not, excess? He was, he thought, not one of those rich nobs who bankrupted himself to collect a cellar full of rare vintages from around the world; nor was he a one like the Lady’s cousins, killing themselves with expensive horseflesh they could not handle. He liked gambling, sure, and was goo enough at it to know when to cheat and when to play fair--and how to win in either case.

He wasn’t even one of those drunks who got mean and fought for the hell of it, or beat their wives or children or animals.

He just drank to relax, to quiet his nerves--same as anyone else.

At first, he had resented his friends’ suggestions to the contrary. Then Osmond had pointed out that he seemed unable to calm down without it. The Doctor was the one who had said, bluntly, that most people did not *NEED* to drink themselves
into a stupor before they could rest.

And then there was the fact that though he could not recall what he had said, he knew Claville was the one who found him, drunk and crying and stumbling in the street, and brought him back to the inn.

The shame of that alone made him want to crawl out of his skin and die.

He had of course not spoken to the man since; he would rather wished to have staggered around lost all night, slipped and struck his head on a paving stone, and died in the street, than to have had anyone else see him like that.

It would have been undignified, to be sure, but then, an understandable way to go out, after having seen what he’d seen. Surely no one would have blamed him for that.

But that was not what had happened. He had been saved, again, and again he was in someone’s debt, and he found himself utterly uncertain of the motives of the people helping him.

So, because he felt he owed them at least enough to listen to them, he’d followed their suggestions, and gone with them to the Sanitarium that very day.

~

The days had a set routine. Breakfast was between nine and ten, followed by a break--a long stretch of empty time in which the calmer, more stable inmates were allowed to roam as they pleased, until noon. The doctors saw their patients between noon and three; luncheon was at one and dinner at four, followed by supper at seven. He hadn’t eaten so frequently before in his life.

Outside his appointments with the doctor, there was not much to do. By the second day he was helping at the laundry out of sheer boredom, surprising the nuns who worked there with the way he knew precisely what to do. He would stand beside the others on laundry duty that day, up to his elbows in a tub of hot water, scrubbing and wringing the coarse garments the other inmates wore. (He had been admitted in his own clothes, and while he’d changed his shirt and coat for one of the buttonless smocks, he was in no hurry to relinquish his pants for the shapeless baglike trousers they had offered.)

They sang, and he was surprised he knew the washerwomens’ songs; when he joined, they laughed, without malice, and when they teased him a little he’d explained what his mother’s occupation had been.

That was for the morning; but once he finished helping with the washing, there was the vast, yawning gulf of time between then and his meeting with the doctor.

He’d retire to his room and read the book of mythology, puzzling through unfamiliar words and sometimes mouthing things aloud until the word came to him.

At the end of the second day he’d gotten a surprise when, just after breakfast, one of the nuns called him to the desk and handed him a parcel wrapped in brown paper.

Opening it back in his room had filled him with equal parts confusion and anticipation, and when the cover came away he was surprised to find a volume of poetry there--of sonnets, no less, written by soldiers at war.

He figured Osmond must have sent it, to cheer him. He was pleased and puzzled in equal parts then. Poetry, of all things, he wondered? Perhaps she thought other things would upset him worse. The idea of being discomfitted by something found in a book, after the horrors he’d seen in waking life, was funny enough that he snorted a little laugh.

The book was bound in sensible emerald-green linen, with white pages just barely touched with yellow on their margins. When he opened it he found that some of the pages were marked with little slips of paper, and he suspected she had actually lent him the book, and meant for him to return it.
Still he was touched by the gesture, and would switch between the book of sonnets and the book of mythology when he was bored with the one or frustrated with the other.

He met with the doctor at noon every day, and submitted with only minimal complaint to the series of questions she asked him, which had at first seemed merely absurd and then strangely personal. She prescribed him some pills for sleeping, and proposed to treat the issue with his nerves with talk. The sleeping pills he would sometimes tongue and then stash for later, for they put him down like a stone, and he still could not reconcile himself to being unconscious and helpless in a building full of strangers. Those were the nights he reserved for his nighttime walks.

~

They had passed the polite introductions. Dr. Fremont had indicated that she was already aware of his condition, or at least as much of it as Dr. Guideville knew and had told her. The thought that there were now two people aware of his failings made him equal parts saddened and ashamed.

Dr. Fremont was a plump, stately woman, somewhere past sixty; she wore the same blue habit most of the other nuns wore, but in place of the wimple wore her hair drawn back from her face and under a white snood.

He sat across from her at the bench in front of her desk, his elbows on his knees and his head hung between his shoulders. Several times he had to will himself to stop jogging his leg or fidgeting with his sleeves.

“You are free to walk about the room, if doing so would help calm your nerves,” the doctor said. He stood with a huge sigh and went to the window, but stared out of it without taking in any of the scene below.

“What is on your mind?” she asked, a few moments later. Their conversations always began like this; Dismas would sit down for a few moments, stewing in a guilty silence; then he’d get up, pace like a caged tomcat for a few more moments before finally working up the nerve to talk.

Today he said, “I don’t think I ought to be here.” She made a thoughtful noise. “And what do you mean by that? Where to you think you ought to be?”

“Down there! Fightin’ with the rest of ‘em,” he said, his voice dying to mumbles midway through his speech.

“Your physician and your friend said you have not been well for quite some time. And, based on our first conversation, I would agree with their assessment.”

“So, what’s to be done?” he finally asked. “About–” he gestured vaguely at his own face, his head. “‘Cos I’ve been here near a week already and ain’t done much but take sleepin’ pills an’ have these chats with you.” he paused, realized how rude he’d sounded, and amended, “No offense.” Dr. Fremont did not seem to be offended.

“Let us see what can be done. What do you think you need?” she said asked, at last. She had folded her hands--soft, plump little hands, very like his grandmother’s--on top of a stack of papers on her desk, and was regarding him calmly. The scene was so strikingly NORMAL that for a moment he could forget that somewhere in that very building there were people so insane they had to be strapped down to prevent them from maiming themselves.
“More than talk,” he said. “Is that all? No chains, no racks, no buckets of freezing water?”

She smiled, but the expression was one of pity. “No, Master Dismas. Such methods are regrettably still practiced in some less-informed hospitals, but not here. Many of them do not produce results, in any case, having been designed primarily to frighten patients until they cease to exhibit the undesired behavior. But they are by no means sound types of treatment.”

He was silent. Then finally he sighed and mumbled, “I feel like I’ve gone out of my head. There must be--is there not somethin’ to take--a pill, a draught, SOMETHIN’--”

Her eyes went soft and understanding and he felt it like a punch in the gut. He couldn’t look her in the face anymore; his eyes went out the window again instead.

She said, “We can of course prescribe you medicine for your nerves; but they will only treat the physical symptoms of the underlying mental issue. This is something that will require a dual approach.”

He could hear her quill moving over the paper for a long moment.

Finally he said, “I just have to get back on my feet. I cannot just…lay about here, doin’ nothin’. People will die. D’you have any idea--” he began, then wondered if he ought to tell the nice old doctor lady even half the things he’d seen. He amended his statement, “There’s--there’s evils afoot out there, an’ I mislike the idea of spendin’ my days in a hospital while my--” he hesitated again. Did he still have friends?-- “While my friends are out there fightin’ tooth an’ nail not to die.”

She made another considering noise, then said, “Your devotion to your comrades, while admirable, seems to come at significant cost to yourself. Do you not also think that perhaps you ought to take your own life into consideration?”

He wanted then, very badly, to just come out with the truth that burned like a coal under his ribs--he wanted to tear his own hair and scream aloud that he was a murderer many times over, that he had killed a CHILD, and that now because he’d become a sloppy drunk, he could not even try to atone by using his life as a shield for his friends’.

His hands came up and gripped his skull hard enough to hurt; but when he heard her subtle gasp, he turned the gesture instead, and merely ran his hands through his hair.

“Don’t worry,” he said sardonically. “I ain’t gonna bash my head against your nice clean wall. Be a hell of a mess, cleaning up all those blood an’ brains. Shame to do that to the, er, maids here.”

She did not laugh or even smile at his joke; he sighed and shrugged, and held out his hands in a placating gesture. “I’m only kiddin’ with you, doctor,” he said. “Hard to stay serious about anythin’ too long, with the sorts of…things you see around these parts.”

She seemed satisfied by this, at least. “Do you often joke about self-harm as a means of coping?”

When he nodded, she hummed thoughtfully, and wrote something else down. He wondered if he was allowed to ask her what it was she was writing, or to see it after she finished.

Then she said, “I notice your hesitation. You must be referring to the cultists who haunt our woods.”

Dismas took a breath and finally looked back at her. Her eyes were sympathetic. He nodded.

“So you do know about ’em. Who ARE they? Where do they come from?” he asked. He went back to the bench and sat down again.

She sighed. “The first sightings were decades ago. At the time, the only ones who saw them were people who lived at the outskirts of town, and a few young people and children who had wandered into parts of the woods that they shouldn’t. And initially they were dismissed as idle rumors, or tricks played on some unsuspecting victims.”

Dismas wanted to ask how long it was before the cultists had begun kidnapping the Sanitarium inmates, if they’d started with other townsfolk first and then moved on, or if they’d strolled right up to the Sanitarium doors, knocked politely, and asked for their craziest mad-people.

Instead, not wanting to interrupt, he sat and listened to her talk.
“But then, there were…abductions. The first few were young girls who nevertheless knew the woods very well—not the sorts of people who could easily lose themselves, or fall victim to any of its dangers. No remains were ever found, though there were many search parties who hunted through the woods very thoroughly. Boats were sent to search the harbor; the river was dredged.

“Yet it became increasingly obvious that something else was afoot. More of the cultists were sighted, this time in the environs of the Villemont estate itself.”

Dismas nodded, openly eager to hear more.

“There were of course the sorts of fetes he threw, and had he been anyone else—a younger man, perhaps—he would have been marked a rake—and a dangerous one. Out of respect for the family name, however, the rumors had until that point been kept in the realm of the typical, if not genteel. But of course even the most loyal servants have their breaking points, and word somehow got out that his lordship was performing…evil rituals. Indeed, many of the more educated townspeople suspected it was these rituals and their foul energies that drew the cultists to this town in the first place.”

He was leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, listening raptly.

She gave him a shrewd smile, and said, “Excuse my bluntness, please, Master Dismas, but I cannot help but wonder how learning this grim portion of local history will aid you in your recovery.”

He sat back chuckling, but he felt only slightly caught-out. He shrugged. “Had to take the heat off me for a bit somehow; nothing wrong with that, is there?”

She shook her head a little and pursed her lips, but still looked amused.

“Perhaps not,” she said. The bell struck the hour and she looked out the window; he rose to his feet and wiped his hand on his pants.

“I believe that puts our conversation for the day at an end,” she said, smiling a little wryly at his haste. “I do expect we shall speak again tomorrow at the same time?”

Dismas paused with one hand the doorknob, but he looked back and nodded.

~

As he was passing down the hall he could hear the roll being called for mail, and was surprised to hear his own name. The nun handed him a rectangular parcel wrapped in brown paper, surprisingly heavy for its size, and while he puzzled over what it was and who could have sent it, he went back to his room.

Osmond was leaned against his door when he got back. He could see she was dancing a ring between her fingertips, looking nonchalant but totally out of place against the drab stone wall.

“THERE you are!” she said, smiling.

“How did you get in here?” he asked, breaking into a grin of his own.

“Ahh! Questions,” she said, and then pulled him into a hug.

He had not been expecting it, and so subtly tensed all over. But she only patted him between the shoulders a few times—holding onto him long enough that finally he relaxed, and hugged her back. Then she stepped back, smiling up at him.

“Well, don’t YOU look like a man who rediscovered sleep! The nuns been good to you, hm? Though I must admit, I did not peg you as the sort of fellow into women so much older than yourself…but I suppose it takes all kinds,” she said, stroking her chin and affecting a thoughtful air.

The bray of laughter that escaped him felt good—better than he’d felt in days.

“Nothin’ of the sort!” he protested.

They went into his room and she pulled the chair from the desk and sat down in it crossways, in a very unladylike way, throwing one arm over the back. “Oh? I seem to recall you saying something about a certain parlor game…?”
And then when he remembered the conversation they’d had after his first release from the hospital—coupled with the mind’s-eye image of Dr. Fremont, the aged apothecary who doled out the pills, and the old wisp of a woman who took the other inmates out on their airings—he roared with laughter so hard he had to sit down.

“So, I must ask you to tell me everything, and leave no detail unspoken, for things are MONSTROUSLY dull now that you’re in hospital.” Osmond asked, when he’d caught his breath. He snorted a laugh. “What’s to tell? Food’s the type of pap they give old folks in pensioners’ almshouses—better’n prison, tho’ I’ll have you know, sometimes we wasn’t entirely sure WHAT that slop was. I knew fellows who preferred roasted rat…”

She shrieked a laugh and kicked her feet. “Don’t lie!”

“It’s true, I swear!” he said—but he was laughing.

A moment later she finally mentioned the book, which he’d set beside himself on the bed.

“So what’s that, then?” she gestured with a tilt of her head.

He made a noise and then picked it up, unwrapping it carefully.

This book was a faded purplish dark blue, the gilt words on its spine and front almost completely rubbed away. He looked it over before setting it aside.

“I should have thanked you for the first one. I’d have sent a note back, but they will not give me paper nor a pen, and I’d have no one to carry it, besides. Did you want to exchange ‘em?” he said.

“The other is on the desk there.”

But she looked at him in confusion.

“What?”

“Those weren’t from me, dearie,” she said. Then, “Though, that DOES explain why the pencils I sent you came back. I suppose they don’t want their tenants here unsupervised with pointy objects.”

He smiled and shrugged. “Eh. It were a good thought. Thanks for tryin’.”

“Ahh, pshaw. ‘Twas no trouble, and besides you don’t even have ‘em yet. I’ll hold ‘em ‘til they let you out, of course. Although now I’m curious—we have another mystery on our hands! For whoever would send you gifts?”

“Could have been Doc Guideville,” he said. Though he didn’t think she knew he was barely lettered, and he also didn’t think she’d have sent him a book of poetry, of all things.

It could have been Reynauld, perhaps. But then he struck the thought down; if Reynauld were going to send him any book, it would be a prayerbook.

The last person who could reasonably have sent it was Claville.

The detail fit neatly into place.

Of course the man who collected rhymes would send him a book of poetry.

Then Dismas felt both grateful and anxious. Claville, moral and upright as he was, would not have sent him a gift, had he known what Disms had done. So it was very likely, then, that he did not know, and had not been told.

And Osmond, if she knew anything, was treating him no differently. But then he had figured by then that she was an inveterate actress, who likely would have betrayed no sign of her knowledge until such point that she wanted him to know.

Which in turn meant that perhaps things could be saved; that there was yet a glimmer of hope.

He wondered if he could somehow explain to them what had happened; if they would hate him less, at least, if he were honest or forthcoming with it.

The alternative being their scorn and hatred, which, while deserved, he still dreaded. Only now he could not run; Dr. Guideville had put in the word to the Lady, and besides that it probably cost an
obscene amount of money to get him treatment in the first place. He could never repay them. He owed them his life.

His thoughts must have shown on his face, for after a beat of silence too long Osmond said, “Well, if it displease you so much, I can take it away for you.”
“No! No,” he said. “No, thank you. But…I think I’ve worked out who sent them, and I’m…indebted to them already.”
She looked at him then, smiling with an expression wry and knowing enough that it made her look far older than her years. “If you’ve debts, you’d best settle them as fast as you are able, lest they grow into things quite untenable.”
He chuckled unhappily. “Aye. They do.”

Chapter End Notes

lmao i hope you guys don't mind me, uh, throwing Our Gentleman Highwayman back into the hospital for a little bit. I swear i know how to do what I'm doing.

also no, Osmond did not pay for that chicken.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Some answers. Visits from friends. A misunderstanding is resolved.

Chapter Notes

There is mention of mentally-handicapped people in this chapter; I have used very mild period-appropriate language to refer to them. Again, this is supposed to be an emotional rollercoaster, not an insulting one. If this is at all offensive (though I have tried not to be), please message me and I will change and fix it as best I can.

Osmond came back the next day, and the day after that. Eventually Dismas figured Dr. Guideville had just told the nuns to allow her free passage, for she walked the corridors with an assurance that did not match the attitude of someone sneaking about in a place.

Today she all but herded him into his room, slamming the door behind herself. Then, turning to look at him, she gave him a strange look.

“Well, you’re practically soaked! What’s this?”

He held up his hands, still red from the wash-water. “I was helpin’ the sisters with the laundry.”

Then Osmond gave him a crooked smirk. “Is that what you gents are callin’ it these days?”

Dismas had to laugh. “I do not think I have the finesse to draw the attention of anyone who has made a vow and held it for that long,” he confessed.

“THAT’S what’s stayin’ your hand?” she said. “Not the fact that they’re all old enough to be your mother?”

He shook his head, laughing again.

They sat and she produced a bunch of scones tied in a handkerchief from her coat, and a small notebook and pencil.

“Now,” she said, “I wouldn’t dare to presume, but I figured you may want your knitting.”

“Yes,” he said slowly, feeling both grateful and hopelessly lost. “If you could, next time--”

“Think nothing of it,” she said. “You’re likely to need warmer clothes in the months coming up, anyway. They’re getting the harvest in--what little of it there is to be got in, anyway. Laws! D’you know, I went to try and buy a pumpkin for a pie the other day, and you would not believe the price the grocer-woman wanted for one of them!”

He had propped his chin on his knuckles, and smirked lazily at her. “How long did it take you to nick one anyway?”

She patted at her hair and looked around, feigning innocence, before murmuring, “That is a trade secret, sirrah. Though now there are several of our comrades in arms who likely think I am quite far along with child.”

He had to laugh.

Then, quieting, he asked her, “What are the rumors now? Any news?”
She sobered up a minute, looking down at her hands.  
“The Arbalest is still here in the hospital, in the medical ward. As is your friend, the Leper.”

Dismas felt a sudden stab of dread. “Is she going to be all right? And--what happened to--to--”  
“I’m given to understand the Arbalest is convalescing from a surgery still, while Dr. Guideville is, with the Arbalest and the Antiquarian, undertaking the impossible. She means to cure Master Leper him of his leprosy.”  
He sat and chewed over this mentally for a long moment, glad to hear his comrades were all right, but especially relieved that Claville was in no apparent danger.

“If she thinks she can do it, I reckon she probably can,” he said.  
“The doctors here don’t seem to think so,” Osmond said. “They’ve quarantined off an entire wing just for the poor fellow. No one is allowed in or out but our good doctor, and they’re being quite ridiculous about making the Sign of the Light when they see her enter the place.”

That would probably explain why Dismas had gotten no more books.  
He tried not to feel greedy, but he’d nearly finished the book of mythology and was currently devouring the book of poetry, surprised at how quickly the rhymes came to him. He read aloud to himself the ones he enjoyed especially, confident that the thick doors and thicker walls would muffle his voice if he slipped up and mispronounced a word.

He sighed and ran one hand through his hair, thinking absently that it was getting shaggy and needed to be cut. He probably had quite a scruffy beard, too, but there were no mirrors in the place. He wished he had managed to sneak a bigger knife, the better to at least examine his face in its blade. Seeing him, she snickered. “Yes, you’re beginning to look like you play quite a different part in our little narrative.”

He smirked. “Do I now look the part to play the drunken rake, ending at last in the madhouse after a life of dissolution?”

She pretended to study him, cocking her head. “You haven’t the pox,” she said, “Nor that distinctive pallor of consumption. No, no. Not quite yet.”

He had to laugh. “Thank goodness. Dunno what I’d do if I ever lost my looks…” he pretended to tug on the lapels of a coat, staring off to one side with a ‘dignified’ expression on his face, and she rolled her eyes and snorted in amusement.

She continued, “The others are all as expected. Oh! You’ll find it most diverting to know that the copper and the man-hunter both think you’ve absconded an’ run off to parts unknown. The nun--OUR nun, I s’pose you could say--has been goading them on. For a Sister of the Light she has a tongue like a lash, when upset at something. I’ve heard her after your Crusader to go through your things for two days now.”

He startled a little, at that.

“D’you mean to tell me,” he said, “That no one knows where I am?”

She gave him an almost offended look. “Pardon my bluntness, my friend, but far as I’m concerned, all the relevant parties know where you are; and anyone else looking for your whereabouts is naught but a busybody, an’ should be treated as such.”

He made a breathless noise. “Reynauld…”

“I’ve heard him defend you against her accusations, time and again. He’s a good fellow, that one.”

The wind felt like it had gone out of him.  
Even on the tail of those accusations, Reynauld still defended him against attacks.  
Did he know, then? Could he still have stood up for him, had he known?  
Dismas was not sure.
It was with an effort that he pulled his mind back to the present. He and Osmond spent a few pleasant hours talking of the theater, and now of mythology. When the bell rang for dinner he invited her, but she made a face and laughed.

“Why, sirrah! After what you told me the other day? I should think not! I shall take myself elsewhere, sir, for you see I simply cannot abide overcooked food…”

~

Something unexpected happened one morning while he was helping to hang the day’s laundry. The others on laundry duty for the day were the old nun he had seen the first day, and a simple-minded girl with a face like a doll’s and a quiet, sibilant voice. The two of them had been struggling to carry one of the heavy laundry baskets across the gated-in side yard, to the far corner where the laundry lines were strung, when he joined them.

“I’ve can take these ones, ladies,” he said, hefting the basket.

The nun and the simple girl giggled behind their hands and hurried away; he turned back to the laundry lines smiling.

He had not gotten six sheets hung up when a shadow fell across them, drawing slowly closer; then a man’s voice, quietly clearing his throat.

“Er…pardon me…” and of course he recognized Reynauld’s voice.

He whipped the sheet aside so fast the whole line swayed, his wide eyes flying to the other man’s face.

Reynauld, for his part, looked as surprised to see Dismas as Dismas felt to see him; for a long moment neither of them said anything, but stood there staring at the other.

Dismas realize he must have looked ridiculous—over the smock he was wearing a laundry apron, his own trousers, and his heavy boots. Both the apron an the smock were mottled with damp.

“Dismas?” Reynauld asked.

“Aye,” he said at last. “What, er. What brings you here?”

“You are hanging sheets,” Reynauld said, mystified. He looked around the yard again, as if scarcely able to believe it.

Dismas folded his arm across his chest. “Aye, well, someone must do it.”

“Yes, but…” he began. He made an unreadable gesture with one hand. “Why you?”

Then Dismas hesitated, the secrets filling his lungs like air drawn into a bellows. It was only with a serious effort that he forced them down.

“Because they needed me,” he said.

~

They walked along the margin of the yard, past the gardens, where two more of the nuns and some more of the patients were tending the kitchen gardens.

One of the nuns waved at Dismas as they passed; he waved back, shifting the basket under his arm.

“You have apparently made an impression,” Reynauld said, seemingly for want of other things to say.

Dismas shrugged. “I help out around the place. Naught else to do.”

“And are they…” Reynauld trailed off, then tried again, “How have they been treating you?”

Better than I deserve, Dismas wanted to say. Aloud, he said, “Well, they wake us up at dawn, hustle the lot of us down to the basement, and toss cold water on us. Strengthens the nerves, they say. Anyone who has more severe troubles gets injections of Light-only-knows-what…awful big needles on those syringes, too. Then there’s the Hole, where they put the screamers…”
When Reynauld looked horrified, Dismas made a bark of laughter, then elbowed him in the side. “Ahh! Look at you, you’re shakin’ like a shittin’ dog. I’m only kiddin’ with ya!”

Reynauld sighed and relaxed with palpable relief, which only made Dismas laugh harder. “I am pleased to see your sense of humor unchanged by treatment,” Reynauld said, his voice a bit prickly. But he was smirking a little, at last. Dismas snorted and shook his head.

“So, then, I take it they are not…treating you harshly,” he said. “And is the…treatment working?” “Aye,” Dismas said, after thinking a long moment. “There’s this psychologist I see, an’ I’ve got meds for the problems.”

There was that glimmer there, of their old easy camaraderie. Dismas felt it come and go with the same resignation as a starving hunter watching a bird flit past, for which he has no snare. Reynauld’s hesitation, the careful way he kept his hands behind his back--Dismas wondered at it. He wondered, too, at how his formerly raging obsession had been tempered, and seemed to mellow into a sort of gentle affection. He could look at the man now without feeling a fist clench itself around his heart.

Perhaps it was the thought that he would soon lose his regard and friendship, he thought. He’d never before had the luxury of examining a friendship before having to break it off.

Yet while they walked he steeled himself. He would tell Reynauld what he could, he decided. The man deserved that much, and then to make his own decisions after that.

“And I’ve had time to think on some things,” Dismas said. He was trying to marshal his control of his nerves. Reynauld made an attentive noise; Dismas shifted his grip on the baskets.

Finally, now that they were well past the garden patch and in an area of the yard where there were no walls to bounce back the sound, Dismas said, “Look, I don’t know what you’ve heard, but I wanted to give it to you straight. You can choose to weigh what I tell you against whatever it is you’ve heard, and believe what you will.” He bit the inside of his lip hard enough to sting, then forced himself to stop, to soldier on, forcing out the next words before his nerves could trip his tongue up. “There’s…things I’ve done, that I ain’t proud of. Thing I never even meant to do. I--” Reynauld’s hand came down gently on his shoulder, his palm hot through the layers of cloth, and Dismas froze as if rooted to the spot. He looked over into Reynauld’s face but slowly.

The other man’s face was somehow both saddened and hopeful. Still he looked at Dismas with the steadfast gaze he had always held, and there was no disgust in his expression at all. Dismas was sincerely confused, before the other man spoke.

“My friend, a great sage of the Light once said, ‘Every saint has a past, as every sinner has a future’. Whatever it is you have done, if you have since bent your steps down the straight and narrow road, away from the paths you once trod--if you have truly done your utmost to atone for your sins--you will find the absolution you seek.”

The forgiveness came like a slap and an embrace at once; Dismas stood there feeling like his knees were made of jelly, knowing neither what to say or what to do. But finally he managed a bitter, unhappy chuckle, his eyes falling to the uneven paving stones that made up the walkway. “You say that,” he said, “But you don’t know what I did.”

He wanted to say that there was no atonement for what he did. Men who did what he had done hanged, or spent the rest of their days in windowless cells, and deserved that; they did not deserve their very own doctor dedicated to working out the mess they’d made in their own heads, and they certainly did not deserve the luxury of real friends.
Then Reynauld snorted a little, and shook his head. “Everyone has been referring to you as ‘Master Highwayman’. I am fairly certain that was an accurate descriptor rather than an idle nickname.”

“Sins for which you must atone. And so you will,” Reynauld said. As if saying anything made it so.

“Are you not, after all, penitent?”

Dismas looked away, but grunted once in assent. “If regret were a physical thing, mine would be a millstone I’d have to drag behind me.”

Dismas wanted to bite his tongue and tear his hair in desperation, but instead began walking back towards the laundry basement steps, to the courtyard’s far end, with the unsaid words making his throat feel like it was bulging, a wine-skin full of rotting wine.

He stopped partway across the yard, to look back at the other man.

“So that’s that, then?” he said.

Reynauld gave him a confused look.

“Why were you so angry with me before?”

Reynauld frowned, at that.

Dismas tried, “What were the specific complaints? I’ll not ask you again to tel me who told you, only what they said. Please. i prefer to know what it is I’m apologizin’ for before I begin.”

“You were accused of heresy and blasphemy, and your secretive comings and goings have raised the suspicions of many people,” Reynauld said. “And there are some who believe you to be an agent of the brigand forces that stalk the roads; an that your leaving at odd hours is to go inform on our movements to them.”

Dismas snorted, then. “I ain’t a spy, you know that.” Dismas paused. “And, well, pardon me, but if the Light has the time to be mad at one fellow for swearing to it in vain, but cannot or will not step in to deal with the foul deeds goin’ on here, then mate, someone upstairs ain’t doin’ their job right.”

“I…had thought on that,” Reynauld said. “I have had ample time to think on…many things.”

“Oh, aye?” Dismas said. They were back into the laundry kitchen, by then, surrounded by the warmth and the noise. Two of the sisters had tapped the biggest of the wooden rinse-tubs and were scouring out the soap scum, and again smiled and waved as he passed.

He did, as well, and left the baskets in a closet with the others.

Reynauld had watched all of this with a nearly mystified expression on his face; Dismas looked back at him once, then looked away, slightly embarrassed.

“Is it that strange? Thought you’d be pleased I’d found good, honest work,” he said.

“And I am,” Reynauld said.

He was quiet a moment, and Dismas felt a pang of misery well up in his chest. He could not place its cause, however; Reynauld seemed to have as good as forgiven him. That should have settled it.

It did not feel settled.

“You said you’d been thinking on something,” he said. He spoke quietly now. They were walking through a hallway down where the kitchens were; Dismas took them up and into another corridor he knew would be empty. The narrow windows, with their reinforced mullioned glass panes, admitted a pale, watery-looking grayish light, now and again flashing with light from the river beyond the gardens.

“Yes, I did,” Reynauld said. “The Hound-Master is a good man; trustworthy and stalwart.”

Dismas considered himself fortunate he had years upon years’ experience s a gambler, for he did not flinch or display any surprise at the other man’s mention, despite the fellow being the source of most
of his most harrying worries over the last weeks.

“I haven’t been out with the fellow on a mission, myself.” Dismas said.
“I have, more than once,” Reynauld said, “And the Bounty Hunter, though I do not know whether
the man’s loyalties lie with true justice, or merely with the hand that offers the most coin. Still, he
seems a decent enough fellow.”
Dismas nodded; he could agree with that. His heart had begun pounding.
Here it was, though--where Reynauld told him he Knew.
Dismas could feel the bile of nervousness start to crawl up his throat.

There was no turning back nor running, now. He had said his piece. He supposed he ought to be
glad that it had not come down to shouting, or to blows.

Then Reynauld continued, in the same gentle tones, “I do not…believe the Light would begrudge
them what comfort they may find, with one another, in these trying times. Nor do I believe it could
be a sin, when there are true evils lurking in the world.”
Dismas goggled at him, his mouth actually falling open.

“I did not understand, then, how it could be,” Reynauld continued. “The many shapes of love, as
numerous as trees in the forest. And in this case some more hidebound of the clergy may say I take
too free of an interpretation of the Book of Light, but all men are imbued with its fire…”

Then the pattern became clear to him.
Reynauld continued, apparently taking Dismas’s silence for another sort altogether.
“And I must say that I hope, in time, you will find someone with whom you could share a bond so
depth.”
He laid a hand on Dismas’s arm, then, again so warm through the thin cloth that Dismas’s skin
prickled; and he fixed him with a steady gaze so soft that a knife sliding up under his ribs would have
hurt less.

He started to shift to face Reynauld more, when the abbey bells rang out--louder here, where they
were closer to it.
Reynauld’s hand left a bloom of warmth in its wake, his skin still tingling faintly where it had been.
“I must apologize, but I am needed at the abbey again,” Reynauld said.
Dismas could only nod. He managed to close his mouth, but still had not regained his wits enough to
speak--not until Reynauld had gone three steps.

“Reynauld!” he called, and hesitated. The other man half-turned, a question on his face. Dismas
clenched his fists, wiped his hand on his shirt, an finally managed to say only, “Thanks. Thank you.”

The Crusader only smiled before turning and striding away.
Dismas stood in the hallway, feeling unburdened--clearer-headed and freer than he had in years.
Looking out the windows into the white-gray of the hazy skies, he wondered how long it would last.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

A flashback. First meetings explained. The Old Road is unkind to unsuspecting travelers. Our Highwayman and Crusader find themselves lost. Ominous warnings from superstitious strangers. The first winds of suspicion reaches our heroes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The day Dismas first saw a knight in shining armor, he’d thought he’d died. It had pissed down for days--weeks, it felt like. He never thought he’d be dry again. The roads had turned to mud underfoot, the trees like draggled scarecrows. At first he had tried to see it as being to his advantage--in that boot-sucking mud, there was no way to leave tracks, and any scent a hound might follow would be washed away, as well. He’d counted himself lucky--until the rain kept on without abating even once.

By then he was beginning to curse himself for attempting the whole venture, juicy rumors be damned. His bedroll was soaked through, his kindling damp. For two days he’d been trapped on a high embankment, watching the road slowly turn into a torpid river of grayish mud.

His hands shook, wracked with ceaseless shivers, as he huddled over the sad embers--remains of an equally pathetic fire. He’d been trying, without much success, to warm a tin of beans, and was bout to resort to eating them cold when he heard the rumble. The mud-road-river sloshed higher against the embankment. He stumbled upright, nearly falling into his bedroll-made-tent. There was another thunderous rumble, yet no lightning lit the sky. Any thought he had of wondering about this disappeared next, as he looked and saw through the trees, a slanting wall of greyish mud came own where the road used to be, dragging with it the blackened stumps of uprooted trees, and boulders galloping and bounding in the wild sudden current.

The waters crashed around the trees on his embankment, mud and slurry surging everywhere. Dismas clung to the old pine behind him like a drowning rat to a spar of driftwood. He had enough time to look over his shoulder and see the mud completely wipe out his little camp--the first wave brought the mud to his knees, the current slacking as it traveled over the little hillock.

Swearing mightily, he reached and grabbed at a corner of the canvas tarpaulin and tried to jerk it closer, but could not even get a good handful of it. The bedroll and tarp were the only possessions he still owned, aside from the clothes on his back and his weapons; there were not even any places nearby to get replacements, and with the weather inclement as it was, sleeping in his coat was not an option--

He turned slightly, grabbing more of the tarp and making another effort to haul it closer. That was his first mistake. The current buffeted him from behind, sweeping out his knees--then suddenly the tarp an sloshing mud were rushing up towards him as he overbalanced and fell. Mud rushed up his back, the cold like knives, before the weight pulled him under.
The rain had stopped, finally; even the terrible current of debris-choked mud-water had slacked off. Even the sky seemed to lighten, barely, as the storm moved on. The woods were full of the sound of dripping, the distant, flat sound of rushing of water elsewhere. Dismas realized this only dully.

He was trapped up to his chest in the settling mud, only his left arm free. His life had been saved by one of the trees’ low gnarled limbs, which he’d clung to even as the mud washed higher and higher.

He was so cold his entire body besides his arm felt like a solid, invisible ache, as if made of lead. He’d exhausted what little strength he had left thrashing around in the grip of whatever debris was pinning him, and now lay gasping. Even his teeth did not chatter anymore. He could not move his legs, and when he tried to lift his other arm he felt branches, or roots, in the mud tangled tight around it.

So, then, he thought, this was it. Travelers would find his bloated, maggot-eaten corpse half-sunk in the earth already; a fitting end, he thought.

He dropped the side of his face to the mud and tried to remember to breathe. He would be lucky, he figured, if the cold got him first; you just drifted off and never woke up from that. It would be bad if the rain began again, drowning being an excruciating—and sometimes slow—way to go. Better still if he could have reached one of his guns, and finished himself. But that was impossible, because the world was cruel, and there was no such thing as mercy—even one as cruel as that. The brace of guns was across his chest still, the strap cutting into his neck slightly. Not that he could have fired any of them, even if he could have reached them.

There was a sound from somewhere, and somehow, half-dead though he already was, he felt a spike of fear knife through him. Whoever had managed to track him through all of this was not someone he wanted to encounter in such a situation.

But when he managed, with great effort, to twist his head around to see who was drawing closer, he still could not make sense of what he saw.

“Ho! Are you alive?” the other man’s voice was hoarse; Dismas blinked hard and then, when he saw the man was wearing armor—actual armor—he blinked harder still. I am dead, he thought, and this is the hereafter I have been sent to—a hell, trapped where I died and menaced by bizarre talking apparitions. Was a princess on a white horse going to show up next?

But this apparition was coming slowly closer. He had a soldier’s stolid, determined gait, even as he waded awkwardly through the mud that was, to him, hip-deep. Dismas could see now that he was also carrying a saddle slung over one shoulder.

It would figure, he thought, that the only knight he would ever see would be horseless.

“I say!” the horseless knight shouted, “Are you still alive?” And this time, a bit more certain that he was neither dead nor seeing things, he gathered a deep breath and replied, “Aye!” and then, in warning, “You cannot cross there. ’Tis too deep! You will sink!”

“There is a bridge of fallen trees, just there,” the knight said. He was an easy stone’s throw away now; Dismas could see, in addition to the saddle he carried a large rucksack, with a long cloth-
wrapped bundle lashed across the top.

Dismas would not believe it, later--that a knight had come to his rescue. They sat now around a fire, Dismas warming his shaking hands while the knight cleaned mud from his armor. Dismas’s own clothes were nearly ruined, his coat and trousers stiff with mud, his gansey and shirt sodden. He’d hung the coat in a tree to wait for the mud to dry, so he could scrape it off, in the hopes that it could be saved. The gansey and shirt he kept on, however, since the slide of mud had swept away every other possession he’d had.

They’d not said much to one another, besides introductions, the knight being busy as he was with freeing Dismas from his sodden, muddy would-be grave; and now they sat around a small campfire, mutually engaged in the pastime of being sopping wet and miserable.

“I cannot thank you enough,” Dismas said. “Truly.”
The knight looked over at him and managed a tired smile, likely for politeness’s sake. He said, “You are welcome.”

They were both quiet a moment, before the knight spoke again. “What was it enticed you onto the roads, and afoot, in weather like this?”
Dismas licked his teeth and considered which story to tell. He settled on something simple.

“Same reason anyone’d be on the road in all this. Lookin’ to get to town, for work.”

The knight made a noise of understanding. He stirred the fire’s embers a moment, before saying, “I myself am in similar circumstances…thought not so straitened before as now.” he glanced at the saddle and sighed, and then threw his stick into the fire.

“Two days ago, I still had a horse.”

“HAD? What happened?”

The knight looked around at the trees with an unreadable expression.

“Wolves.”

Dismas winced sympathetically. “Poor beast.”

The knight sighed again, then spoke. “These forests do not appear to be under any management,” the knight continued. “Nor very well-traveled; I was met with many puzzled looks when I named the location I am searching for.”

Dismas nodded, humming. Then, feigning ignorance, he asked, “And what location is that? If you don’t mind my askin’. These parts don’t seem too civilized; I’m only passin’ through, meself. And where have you been travelin’ from, if you don’t mind my askin’?”

The knight sighed and suddenly looked very tired. He said, “I am recently returned from a campaign in the eastern desert lands; my vessel landed on the eastern shores here, and I have since been traveling westward.”

Dismas hummed a little. He had of course heard there was a war on over there, but these days it seemed there was always some conflict or another going on--chiefly caused by greedy nobs getting into petty spats that common folk would have solved with some good honest fisticuffs. Instead, they dragged thousands into wars.

Dismas said, “I had heard about that. Figured you wouldn’t have been from ‘round these parts, not clad as you are.” he wanted to make a proper joke out of it, but was unsure how the other fellow would take it, and he did not want to risk upsetting his savior and sole traveling companion. The knight snorted. “Really? I am truly the only knight-errant you have crossed paths with? In the
lands I recently quitted, men such as myself were common as grass.”
Then it was Dismas’s turn to laugh--surprised and pleased. So, he did have some bite in him!

“Aye, well. You’ve been away a long time, my friend. You’ll find knights of any type scarce ‘round these parts, these days.”
The knight made a thoughtful noise. “That is, perhaps, for the best,” he said. “From what I have managed to glean, the country I seek is one already stricken. I am bound for the Villemont marches; you have heard of them?”

Dismas managed a grin, then, though he was sure he looked like a death’s-head.
“Finally, a bit of luck! We are headed in the same direction! As to news of the place--no, I must say, I’ve heard naught but what little I’ve managed to get from a scant few post-couriers and the like. Seems the place is quite cut off.”
The knight nodded. “Indeed.”

~

He was surprised at how easily they got along. Sure, Reynauld would have them pause and pray before every meal; but he had a strong sword-arm and a dry wit, and a sense of decency which Dismas found by turns refreshing and ridiculous.

He also learned fairly quickly that the man was a fellow thief.

One afternoon they passed into an area of the forest where the crows were circling and calling; somewhere a jay was scolding. The underbrush thrashed with small creatures in a state of agitation. Dismas cleared his throat quietly, and when the other man looked at him with raised eyebrow, he muttered, “Somethin’s up, mate. Don’t like those birds…”

Reynauld made a thoughtful noise, then hefted his helm from where it hung at his hip, and settled it over his head, buckling the chin strap.
Dismas loosened his dirk in its sheath and surreptitiously stretched his knife arm; he pulled one of his pistols from its brace almost casually.

They had not gone much further when two bandits in drab green hoods and battered leather armor stepped into the path. One carried a rusted blunderbuss, and the other a dirk. Dismas had a cutting quip on his tongue, but the other fellows didn’t even give him time; one of them hefted and fired the blunderbuss he carried, the shot mercifully going wide.
Reynauld stepped around Dismas, drawing the sword and with one crushing blow sent the fellow reeling backwards.

The other took a swipe at Reynauld with his small-sword, the sound of the blade meeting armor a harsh clash. Reynauld made a low, sharp noise of pain, and thrust the man back: Dismas could see the blow had badly dented his armor on one side.
Dismas got off a shot, feeling an ugly joy as the fellow jerked at the impact.

A moment later the stunned one came back to his wits. This time when he fired his shot, Dismas half-turned and caught much of the shot in his dirk arm. He drew back, swearing mightily.
The fellow with the short-sword, seeing him wounded, decided to try him, but Dismas was quicker than he was, and feinted aside; in the same motion, he reversed the grip on his own dirk and brought it around in a wicked slicing arc, catching the fellow across the chest, the battered leather breastplate parting before the knife like cardboard.

He coughed and staggered back, clutching the bleeding gash. Dismas could see the one with the blunderbuss hunch his shoulders a moment before lifting the gun again.
His wounded arm screaming in protest, he snatched another of his pistols and whipped it up, dropping the other gunner with a shot to the chest.

The fellow with the dirk, seeing his band-mate fall, turned and tried to run; he had not gone thirty paces, however, when he slumped to the ground in a heap.

Dismas an Reynauld checked the bodies for signs of life, then scouted the area for further threats; finding none, they sat a moment on a rocky outcrop, their breath heaving.

“You all right?” he asked Reynauld. The Crusader fingered the dent in his armor, frowning in pain. “It can be hammered out. The bruises will fade, also. And yourself?”

Dismas scoffed. “Stupid sod had it loaded with birdshot. Smarts like the devil’s pissed on it, but it’ll work itself free in no time.”

Reynauld made a grousing noise, then pushed up the helm’s faceplate. With one hand he rummaged around in the knapsack, before coming back up with a metal flask of whiskey.

“You should still clean it. Here,” he said, handing him the flask.

So Dismas gingerly rolled up his sleeve, exposing the many tiny gunshot wounds, each running with blood. He fished up a spare kerchief from one pocket, poured some of the whiskey on it, and then sopped the blood off his arm, hissing and wincing as he did.

“Where do you think our assailants came from?” Reynauld asked, when he had got more of his breath back in him.

“Seein’ as how there was only two,” Dismas muttered. “Must be scouts, working with a larger band, for these are not places where one goes alone, nor in such small numbers. Likely members of a roving band.”

Reynauld made a noise of agreement, then asked, “Do you suppose they followed us?”

Dismas paused a moment to consider, then rejected the idea. “Don’t think so. More likely we blundered across ’em, an’ they set this poorly-laid trap for us once they realized we was comin’ their way. If it were a proper planned ambush, there would have been more than two of ’em.”

That he did not ask Dismas how he knew such things spoke loud enough, itself.

Then Reynauld made an unhappy noise; they bent to drag the bodies off the road. Dismas was going to cover one of the fellow’s eyes and leave it at that, when out of the corner of his eye he saw the knight surreptitiously take something off the other corpse.

Thus emboldened, he shucked the other fellow of his jerkin, shirt, boots, and socks; he looked over at the knight and their eyes met for an uncomfortable flinching instant before the knight looked away. Dismas could hear him begin to strip down his fellow’s corpse, as well, an when he glanced over again saw the other dead man missing his gloves and now his entire pack.

“Hard times make for hard decisions,” the knight muttered. “Aye,” Dismas said, and left it at that.

It should not have lifted Dismas’s spirits to know that even holy Crusaders could be brought to desperation severe enough that they would rob the dead.

And yet the thought of a Crusader of the light being human enough to steal made him like the fellow a bit more—even if it meant he might never leave his belongings unguarded around the other fellow.

~

He realized he’d been uncharitable when, the next day, the man returned from the stream they’d
camped near, and wordlessly handed him a fish--one of four he’d pulled from the muddy stream. They cleaned and roasted them on hickory sticks Dismas broke off a nearby obliging tree, but the wood being green meant they leant no real flavor.

Reynauld smirked a little when he realized what Dismas was doing, though, and seemed to appreciate the thought anyway. And he snorted an rolled his eyes when Dismas joked that he’d done some dirty deed with a river mermaid to get the fish--but he also smiled.

~

The miserable little village where they were to meet their contact was so small there was not even a signpost pointing its direction. Not that such a thing mattered to Dismas; he memorized directions as he went, and generally had no use for signs or maps of any kind.

All the villagers had a hard-bitten look about them; dirty children stared from windows and doors standing ajar, and hard-eyed women stood in knots on stoops or at garden gates, and watched them openly as they approached. Not a child nor stray dog wandered or played in the streets.

Conversations died s they passed; finally Reynauld, being the more presentable of the two, went to ask some of the women where the inn was.

Dismas thought the Prancing Pony was a ridiculous name for any sort of establishment, but figured it must have once fit; and that the current state only attested to how far, and how severely, the whole place had fallen. The town, as it was, didn’t even look big enough to warrant having an inn.

The inn was one large, ramshackle building, clearly once fine. He hoped that Reynauld wouldn’t go flapping his jaw at everyone while they waited; loot divided much more evenly between two than among many, an he had traveled far and was not feeling generous.

He ordered a pint at the bar and took himself to a booth in the back, where he surreptitiously pinched the wicks of all but one of the lamps.

As if summoned, a pretty young thing with red hair in ringlets slipped like a rose-and-wine-smelling shadow into the booth beside him. He was wearing too much makeup on, and a faded pink dress hanging from his thin shoulders.

“Lookin’ for company, love?” spoken in husky, soft voice, and more of the wine smell wafting over Dismas’s face.

He felt the hand creeping up his thigh and left it there in favor of grabbing the wrist of the one already slipping inside his coat pocket. The little cat’s eyes widened, and Dismas felt saddened and a little sick. The poor kid couldn’t have been more than seven-and-ten.

“What say I let you keep whatever you got in that hand, if you tell me what I need to know, hm?”

~

“You’re REALLY goin’ out there?” the kid asked again. Dismas took a drink. “Aye.”

The kid shook his head. “The woods are crawlin’ with bandits. You’ll not last three days. Then there’s the wolves, and some say they cannot be killed, that they are demons summoned from the very gates of the hells themselves…”

“Oughtn’t listen to so many fairy-tales,” Dismas said levelly.

The kid gave him a disbelieving look.

“There’s the ghost. He rips off people’s heads and leaves the bodies for the crows. I seen one of his victims with my own eyes.” the kid sounded, somehow, both plaintive and annoyed.
Dismas was rather beginning to regret having given him the small change he’d pulled out of his pocket; a lot of twaddle about demons and ghosts was no information to go on at all. Though now he’d begun to half-suspect the kid of deliberately misinforming him, to throw him off the trail and perhaps convince him to leave.

He looked again at the kid.
“How many other fellows ‘ave you told this story to, hm?”
The kid gaped at him like a landed fish.
Dismas continued, “How many fell for it, an’ turned back?”

Then, with incredulous, insulted look still building on the kid’s face, he gently put one hand on the kid’s skinny shoulder, driving their complaint out with a single shuddering breath.
He leaned closer, not at all relishing the way the kid’s eyes widened suddenly. When the kid leaned in, as well, Dismas turned his head.
Up close, he could see their ears were dirty, he could see—the earrings cheap cut glass set in tarnished pot metal.
Dismas dropped his voice low as he spoke.
“Go home, kid. Wash your face. Cover up before you catch cold.”

The kid leaned far enough away to look at him, wide-eyed with indignation, for moment; then his face clouded and he stood in a hasty flurry of ratty skirts and yellowed lace.
“Stupid ass,” he spat—then whirled and rushed away.
Dismas watched him go impassively, feeling nothing. Pity would be useless, as well as unwanted; he knew that particular stripe of street urchin all too well.

Reynauld did not join him until some time later, having evidently learned nothing of any value or credibility, either.
“A ghost?” he said, after Dismas had relayed his tale. “Blasphemous nonsense. But at least the nonsense you received made sense; the old fellow I spoke with did nothing but ramble on about an ensorcelled cannon that had taken a bunch of cannon-men and soldiers s its slaves.”

Dismas made an ugly laugh. “I see you got the more entertainin’ mad tale. Though I feel I ought to say now, I suspect they’re playin’ us for fools.”
He made no mention of the reward money; though they sat close, an spoke in low tones, he knew ears were everywhere.
“Reckon we ought to go?” Dismas mumbled. “For it’s clear these people don’t know anythin’, or whatever they do know, they ain’t sharin’.” he amended this with a little shrug. “Or, whatever they think they know is a load of superstitious nonsense that ain’t going to help us anyway.”
But Reynauld shook his head. “From what I have been able to glean, this is the last village for leagues. Even traveling the Old Road, the place an entire day’s walk away, yet.”

In the end, they booked a room instead, Reynauld balking at the price, and Dismas quieting him about it. A moment later he explained, “The man likely ain’t had customers in ages. ‘Course he’s gonna squeeze us for all he can get. Better’n sleepin’ in the bushes again, at least,” Dismas said.

They spent the night in a room the size of a matchbox, sleeping back-to-back on sheets that smelled of grease and mildew. Dismas dreamt of riding a steel-blue horse down a white road between black trees, everything obscured with a milk-thick fog; and though he kept trying to turn the beast around, it continued to plod forward implacably.
In the morning they met the man who would change both their lives for ever.

Chapter End Notes
Somehow they ended up in Bree for a little bit--just long enough to dip into the Prancing Pony. Or else, Something Awful Happened, and the Prancing Pony was displaced into our Darkest universe...I hope someone here is a big enough nerd to think that's clever, too...

I WAS going to name it after the Silver Eel, but i figured that might be too obscure, and besides, it's from a town too big and too cosmopolitan to plop down in some nameless, near-abandoned town. So! The Pony it was!
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Remembering past wrongdoing is hard; speaking of them is harder. Dismas receives a visit from a friend. Of what significance is a pretty red mechanical box? Dismas pays a visit to a dear friend. Words are nearly exchanged.

Chapter Notes

I love you all, everyone who's stuck around!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Master Dismas? Master Dismas?”
He felt the tug on his sleeve only distantly; blinking a few times, he turned to look down at the simple girl standing next to him.
“Are you well? Sister Gertrude has been calling you a long moment, and you did not ever reply…” she said, in her quiet voice. She stood with her head cocked to one side, looking up at him very intently.
“Oh,” he said. “Sorry, Margie. You can go tell the Sister I was just distracted. I’ll be out in a moment.”
She nodded, and started to turn away, when he whistled like a bird and produced a soap dove from one pocket surreptitiously.
She smiled an gasped in delight as he handed it to her, making a shushing gesture. She took the little bird, cradling it in her hands, before nodding and hiding it in one of her smock’s pockets. He watched her hurry away.

He was standing at one of the big laundry cauldrons, staring down at his wavering reflection in the dirt-gray water; in one reddened hand he held a scouring brush, and in the other a threadbare rag. He shook his head; his mind had wandered way from him again, in ways it usually didn’t have the time to do.

These were the times he dreaded, normally; times when he was not afoot, when he was trapped somewhere, when he had to be still. Without the distraction of constant action, he was too often left alone with his thoughts; and now, here, without even booze or grass to soothe things over, his minds wandered like a yard dog.

He knew the guilt was looming just around every corner, waiting to eat him alive.

He sighed, then bent to turn the spigot on the tub, standing back s the filthy water gurgled down into the drain in the open floor. After a moment he turned and left the brush and rag on a shelf, before wiping his hands on his apron and striding from the room.

~

Sister Gertrude was in the hall already, talking to Dr. Guideville. They were speaking softly, the
nun’s back to Dismas; but he could see, over her shoulder, that Dr. Guideville’s face was sorrowful, if calm. 
When she caught sight of Dismas over the Sister’s shoulder, she gently touched her arm; the Sister drew her into a hug before releasing her and striding away, with a little backwards wave to Dismas.

He returned it, smiling faintly; but this expression left his face altogether when he noticed how drawn Dr. Guideville looked. He felt his belly tighten up in nervous anticipation just looking at her. They ducked into the large front parlor, deserted at this time of day, and sat on one of the benches beneath the barred windows. The autumn sunlight was warm enough, a pale gray.

“I apologize for not coming to see you sooner,” Dr. Guideville said. She wrung her hands together a moment, then spoke again, “How is your treatment coming along?”

Dismas shrugged a little. “Well, I’m sleepin’ again, and I don’t need to have a drink in my hand to feel like my arm is complete. S’pose that means I’m doin’ better, right?”

She smiled a little, and nodded. “So it does. I am glad for you; ‘tis good to see you on the road to recovery.”

She looked down at her lap, then, and he notice she was nervously jogging her leg.

Part of him immediately began spinning lurid scenarios that could be the cause of her nervousness: the Arbalest had not recovered from her injuries; the doctor had contracted leprosy herself; Claville’s illness had taken a turn for the worst, and he was dying…

There was only one way to stay the nervous web-spinning before the beast entirely cluttered his mind with such thoughts. He grabbed at a thread and yanked.

“Is everything…all right, Doc?” he asked.

“Yes, yes. I am well. That is…not the reason I wished to speak to you, nor the reason I have until now been too busy to do so.” She sighed. “I have been quite busy, trying to arrange Monsieur Bretel’s belongings, particularly his writings, into something resembling cohesion. But I have found that his latest writings are…disturbing, where they are legible at all, but lapsing into meaningless scribbles and scratchings, sometimes partway down a page, which began with a coherent thought…”

She paused, pursing her lips. Finally she drew a breath and then continued, “I wanted to ask about…Monsieur Bretel’s last days. He was a very good friend of mine, and I cannot reconcile the circumstances of his death, nor his actions leading up to it, with the man I came to know. I was hoping you could provide me with some much-needed detail. If, of course, such a thing will have no detrimental effect on your own mental health, or set back any progress you have made. I would not trouble you with this at all, except I searched his books, but had to abandon that course of action, for various reasons, not all of them the illegibility of his writing. He appears to have written several entries in some of his books in what looks like blood, though of course I have no way to ascertain whether it is human or otherwise.” she paused, then frowned. “I must apologize. I do not know if speaking of these things will cause a setback in your treatment, or--”

“It’s all right,” Dismas said, before she could contort the conversation worse. He felt oddly touched that she was worried about saying the wrong thing and upsetting him. He’d fought the reanimated dead, but because she was his friend, she did not want to distress him by talking about blood!

“I don’t reckon talkin’ about it could make it much worse than seein’ it first-hand,” he said. Then he fixed her with a considering look. He was not of the sort to think women had feeblower nerves than men, having been raised himself by a woman with an iron will; but he wondered if it was a wise decision to tell someone that a good friend of theirs had run stark raving mad, stabbed someone, and then tried to slit his own throat.
In the end he told her plainly, without embellishment, and watched her eyebrows jump and her nostrils flare in shock; but she did not weep or begin to carry on at all.
He did not know if that was a good sign, or bad.
When he’d finished, she asked, “And the red music box? Where is it?”

“With the rest of the loot,” he answered. “I left it at the Lady’s door. I wanted nothing more to do with it.”
She nodded, frowning. “I do not recall seeing him with it when he first arrived. He must have found it somewhere.”
“If you see anyone else with it, tell ‘em it’s a killer, and to do away with it,” Dismas warned. “Poor bastard was completely out of his mind, mutterin’ to himself and ravin’ about usin’ his blood…”
She stiffened all over; he reached out an slowly put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry about your friend. He…that weren’t no way to die.”

Then she nodded; but her lips trembled a little. She wiped her eye, and patted his hand.
“I thank you. The Lady has sent for his next of kin, but I have already been in contact with another of his colleagues, from the very same university. At the very least, his research will not…will not have been in vain.”
Dismas marveled, at that, but then felt a cold shock when she spoke next.
“Master Dismas, please listen. Should any harm come to ME, I expect the same. You must—you must not destroy any of my work. Even the least scrap of paper may have some importance to science. Can I ask you to contact—”
“No,” he said, before he could think.
She looked at him, hurt crossing her face, before he continued, “No, I—no harm will come to you. Listen, Doc—what else are friends for, hey?” his voice was steady, but he felt weak.
Then she gave him a hard, tremulous little smile. “I see. Still, plans must be laid. Can I count upon you, should that come to it?”

He bit his lip until it stung, but he forced himself to nod.
He owed her his life.
“Aye,” he said. “I will do what you ask.”

~

He ate lunch alone, resisting even Margie’s pleas for him to join them at their table; he scarcely tasted a bite he put into his mouth.
Dr. Guideville talking of her own mortality was not the sole damper on his slightly-improved mood, for now he had thoughts running in his mind about the damned music box and whatever poor bastard picked it up next.

He did not have the Lady pegged for a fool, but he had not mentioned it to her, an he was not certain the Bounty Hunter had, either.

And of course there was the fact that most of the others did not even know where he was; they would be after Reynauld like stray dogs behind a butcher’s cart, an he could defend neither himself nor Reynauld.

The illusion of the place being a true haven, already thin, had been completely ruptured. Now more than ever he felt his stay there was turning into a pointless waste of time, a roadblock between he and important tasks he needed to do. He went grimly to his meeting with Dr. Fremont, feeling the bleak mood sink its claws into him like some hulking carrion bird on his shoulders.

~
He had not, somehow, ever considered WHAT he would do, should any of his own friends die. Before, there had been nothing to consider: when he’d run with a band, it was implicit that whoever died was dead, his closest mate got his stuff, and the charity chapel got his body. That was that; the issue was settled.

Until they’d been caught, and then the band had broken up; then he’d run solo, and that was that.

“Master Dismas,” Dr. Fremont said. He realized she must have called him at lest once before, and he had the sense to be properly embarrassed; he came back and sat down, hanging his head.

“Aye,” he said, in ten general direction of his boots. “I’m listenin’ now, honest.”

“I was saying that discussing your past may give you insights into how, and why, you react an think as you do in present life.” Dr. Fremont said patiently. Dismas huffed a little, disbelieving. But he shrugged a little, noncommittally.

Dr. Fremont asked her initial question again. “When was the first time you used strong drink to escape a strong emotion?” He had to stop and think, at that.

“First time I was sloppy about it, I was eight-and-ten,” he said. “Out with…friends.”

That was the final time he had run away, had fled the miserly, cruel chandler after stealing half a dozen silver-plated candlesticks. He and some friends had hawked them and taken their earnings straight to the nearest tavern.

“And what did you feel, then?”

“I—I don’t know,” he lied. He remembered feeling exhilarated—and terrified, and guilty.

“I was a stupid kid. Ran away from—from where I was living, took what little money I had…” he trailed off. She was looking at him with the same patient, calm eyes. He knew she could see through him; that he was telling her a half-truth.

“I…I’ve done some things I ain’t proud of, but I was just a kid!” he protested, holding out his hands. “Would you like to explain what these things are?”

He snorted an wanted to tell her she was being nosy; but she ha also promised that everything they said to one another was said in confidence. Then, too, there was the fact that she could hardly report him for thefts he’d done over a decade ago. He wondered how much he could, or should, tell her; how much it was wise to share.

“Did you only drink in social settings? While you were out with your friends, I mean,” she asked. He nodded. Drinking alone was piteous, and a good way to end up robbed and stabbed, with no one to watch your back.

Then of course booze cemented friendships; you could learn a lot about a fellow, based upon how he acted while he was drunk—or how he treated his mates who had had a bit too much.

“That was the first time I was sloppy about it, I was eight-and-ten,” he said. “Out with…friends.”

“Of course, if your mates offer you a few drinks, some beer, a pint of ale—you wouldn’t decline,” he said. She nodded. “Drinking together is a common bonding activity.”

“Aye,” he said, “So—that’s just how it was.”

“Did you do anything else with your friends, things that you enjoyed?”

He thought on this—thought back on their first few big jobs—how it had barely seemed real, how afterwards—after burgling a particularly juicy penthouse of all their silver, or waylaying some
nob’s carriage and relieving them of their valuables, how alive he’d felt. They’d laughed an joke an drank into the night.

Looking back, he now saw how sloppy and careless they’d been; but at the time, none of that had mattered.

He’d been free.

He rubbed his hands together, dry palm against dry palm.

“Aye,” he said. “We—we worked together. It was…it was good.” he amended this, knowing of course that it wasn’t GOOD, that he’d done fewer honestly ‘good’ thing in his life than he could count on both hands. “It FELT good.”

“And you did this after you ran away?” she asked.

He nodded, chewing his lip.

He couldn’t take it anymore. “Aye. Look, me job title says ‘Highwayman’ right there, don’t it? So you know already, what I did weren’t somethin’ frivolous, like pickin’ pockets or the like, all right?”

She seemed a little surprised at how forcefully he spoke; but there was no flinch, even when he stood up and paced again to the window.

“I am given to understand you are a reformed highwayman, yes,” she said, primly.

He sighed, harsh and through his nose; his nerves were turning his guts into a roiling mess, and he could not get himself under any kind of control. He felt equally frustrated and nearly panicked.

“Been reformed for a lot less time than I was a highwayman,” he said. “Went to jail over it an’ everything. Reckon I ought to be grateful they didn’t hang me. I can’t say the same for—” and then he choked, the words sticking in his throat and in the back of his mouth like tar.

In the end he came back and sat down heavily. He could not look her in the face.

“I haven’t…done too many things in my life I can be proud of. I got nothin’ but a quick shot with a pistol, an’ a good knife-arm. I cannot…give anyone anything else. I wasn’t ever GOOD at anythin’ else. You take to the road on the best horse you can steal; you got the coat, you got the guns, and by hell, you are SET.” he wiped his clammy hands on his pants, aware in a distant way that his face was doing something strange.

”’S only after it all goes to hell that you realize you’ve got nothin' left. You got nothin’ else. You cannot even…anyone who calls you friend, you’ve got nothin’ for ‘em. Empty hands can only take, an’ usually what’s not theirs,” he said. He hated how small his voice sounded; hated how his head felt stuffed full of wool. The numbness was creeping into his fingertips, too, as he stared at them hard, as if looking could slow its creeping progress. “I was just…bad at everything, except making wrong choices an’ hurtin’ people.”

“And why is it,” Dr. Fremont asked, “That you feel this way, do you think?”

He drew in a breath, and exhaled a sob. His mother’s tired face came into his mind, her forehead lined with worry. He thought of her chapped hands, the skin splitting along their backs and over her knuckles.

“Because I was a bad son, first,” he whispered.

He dropped his face into his hands, his fingernails digging hard into his scalp at his hairline.

“Because I failed to become the kind of man she set out to raise. Because in the end, I really WAS my father’s son. I betrayed her an’ in the end I didn’t even go back to—to tell her—” the force of his grief choked him, crushed the breath from his lungs. A body was not made to hold such shame and grief, he thought; surely this was the heartbreak that killed in the plays.

He whimpered and drew in on himself tighter.

Dr. Fremont’s voice was very gentle, and very slow. “Can you tell me what you mean, Dismas?”
“My father,” he groaned. “He left us when I was a boy. He went to go to the city to get work, but he--he never meant to come back. Wasn’t til months later we got news there was a typhus outbreak, an’ he was one of the ones carried away.” he given up wiping his eyes, and was instead just letting the tears run down his face, burning in their wake.

“My mother didn’t tell me. I overheard her talkin’ to one of my aunts, one night. An’ then she goes an’ breaks her back to pay up front and get me apprenticed to this chandler, an’ I--” he shook his head. “Miserly old bastard, fed his fucking dog better’n he fed me. I ran away first chance I got, but my mother’ house was a day’s coach-ride away. Out of the city, inna miserable countryside. I made it back in two days, on foot, an’ got there filthy an’ fallin’ down with hunger.”

He remembered that as clearly as a dream, or nightmare. His mother’s house with its whitewashed stone walls, the lowering thatched roof, the black soil of the road giving way to the clusters of sad daisies growing along the lane before their garden wall. She had been in the kitchen garden at the time, hanging linens to dry.

His aunt had been with her, and it had been her cry of alarm that had caused his mother to straighten from the basket and call out his name.

He had stumbled in through the gate and embraced his mother, sagging against her in mingled exhaustion and relief.

At the time he had mistaken the feeling for joy.

His mother had held him in something like an embrace before shaking him off with another cry--and without another word slapped him across the face.

“How did that make you feel?” Dr. Freedman asked.

Dismas almost choked. Then, in a tiny, dry voice he whispered, “I wanted to die from shame.”

She nodded, her face open and sympathetic. “How old were you?”

Dismas looked back, looked back through the eyes of himself as a boy, through the hurt an the haze of hunger at his mother’s drawn and haggard face, at the unreadable expression there. She had struck him hard enough to turn his head, and when he looked back to her an raised his hand to touch his cheek, she had thrown her arms around him and crushed him close, with a sob.

He had gotten mud all over her pinafore.

She held him like a baby, alternating between kissing his dirty face and calling him a stupid, ungrateful boy.

That night he had sat an eaten with his mother and aunt--a thin cabbage soup with hard rye bread that, after his two days without eating, tasted as sweet as pound-cake. He’d had to sleep in a pallet upon the floor, s his aunt was sleeping in the trundle bed that had used to be his. Nd then, the next morning, his mother woke him at first light with a gentle, but firm touch.

She put a bundle into his hands--some bread and cheese and a jar of strawberry preserves, redder than rubies and lifeblood, and more precious. Then she kissed him, buttoned his coat, and walked with him as far as the gate.

When he looked back she still looked on, but he knew better than to turn back a second time.

As a man, he murmured, “I was twelve.”

~

That night, he took his sleeping pills and the cup of water, meek as a kitten, and welcomed the sucking void of dreamless sleep that pulled him under.

~
The next day when Osmond did not show, he felt like he’d go out of his mind with nerves. He could not read a page, nor sit still long enough to write a word, even if he’d had a mind to do so. The thought of going into the yard an looking out at the free world through the yard’s high iron fence made his skin prickle with a strange tense itchiness.

He looked forward to his meeting with Dr. Fremont with a creeping dread, and after breakfast rushed to the laundry kitchen. Half an hour later he was sweaty-faced and soaked to the elbows as he wrestled armloads of hot, sodden linens from one tub into another.

The motion was good, his mind smoothed blank by the repetitive task as a stream-bank by a swift current. For awhile, he had that peace.

Then pausing to wipe his brow, he overheard voices coming closer, and in a moment Sister Gertrude and Margie were coming in. Margie was clearly upset, fretting with the hem of her apron and unhappily pouting her lips.

“There’s no cause for that, now. Come, now, Margie dear,” Sister Gertrude said. They went to one of the tables, where there was a mound of dry clothing waiting to be folded.

“But I’m frightened,” Margie whispered.

Sister Gertrude was fussing uselessly with a smock, and turned to gently pat the girl’s shoulder and shush her at the same time.

“Hush yourself, girl, there’s nothing to worry yourself over. They will not send us in, even though Doctor Guideville is not here to do it herself. There must be someone else. --One of the orderlies, most like.”

“George?” Margie said, her large eyes going sad. “But I don’t want HIM to go, either! He will catch it, and then his fingers will drop off, and then he will die!” She covered her face a moment later, her high whimpers threatening to tip over into sobs at any second.

“Here, now,” Dismas said, coming over. He wiped his hands on his apron a moment, and then, for want of thing to do, picked up the closest piece of clothing.
It turned out to be a pair of underpants.

He sighed inwardly, but then continued, “What’s all the fuss about, hey?”

Sister Gertrude looked at him twice, her frank, open face drawn with worry.

“It’s nothing, Master Dismas, nothing you need trouble yourself over. Only--we’ve received news that the Lady has called Doctor Guideville off to a mission, and so there is no one left to tend to the...the gentleman in the quarantine ward,” she said, whispering word ‘quarantine’ as if it were a curse.

Dismas had only a moment to wonder at how selfish and stupid it seemed, to drag a doctor out of a hospital where she was needed, an send her off on some dangerous mission--before it occurred to him that naturally she would, as the doctor would likely be more needed out there than in the Sanitarium.

He didn’t hesitate long enough to blink.

“I’ll do it.”

Sister Gertrude’s eyes widened, before she smiled, a bit panicked, and began to shake her head. “Oh, no, Master Dismas, we could not ask such a thing of you. No, no, and certainly not with the risk of contagion--”

“Beggin’ your pardon, Sister, but the gentleman there is a good friend of mine, who I have already spent quite a bit of time in close quarters with. An’ I must say, I haven’t noticed any ill effects yet, if there be any.” he said.

Then her mouth fell open a bit in surprise, an she drew back slightly; but looking him up and down a
few times, she sighed and tugged a bit on one end of her wimple.
“Well--well--I suppose,” she said. “I must… I must consult Dr. Fremont first…”

But of course no one else even wanted to go near the quarantine ward, and in the end Dismas ended up with a cart loaded down with a week’s worth of clothing and linens, standing just before the barred entryway.
He’d amassed quite a group of looky-los and nosy busybodies; the thin girl with the hacked-off hair stood staring at him with her dark eyes, and Margie clutched his sleeve in one trembling fist.
“You won’t get sick?” she pleaded.

Laws, Dismas wondered--and not without his heart clenching in his chest--what did he do to earn such care, such worry over his well-being?

“I’ll be fine, Margie, don’t you worry your pretty little head,” he said. “He’s just one sick fellow, an’ it ain’t even as catchin’ as all that. And he’s awful nice, once you get to know him.” He spend a moment considering whether or not he ought to tell her that Claville was a real prince--thinking whether Claville wanted his business spread about, or whether or not Margie or the others would think him a liar.
In the end, he merely shrugged a little, giving them all an almost apologetic smirk. He patted her shoulder a few times; she took her hand from his sleeve, but clasped both of them together in an almost supplicating gesture, instead.

“‘S just one sick man,” he said. “He ain’t going to rush up to the bars to try an’ bite ya.”
But some of the other sisters were already clutching posies to their noses against the threat of infection, and all the sisters and even a few of the patients made the sign of the Light as he turned and began to push the cart down the hallway.

The door boomed shut behind him, and he flinched a little when he heard the rasp of a key in the lock; but he did not stop or turn back.

This area of the Sanitarium, the medical wards, had whitewashed walls and stone floors worn smooth with repeated tread and scrubbing; there was a persistent sharp chemical smell in the air.

The place unsettled Dismas almost immediately--memories of his own deathly brush with sickness an infection springing into his mind.
But he brushed these fears aside; the past must be buried, he told himself.

~

Dismas found the whole room to have a humid, stuffy air, worsened by the kettle boiling on the little potbellied stove in the room’s corner, and by the fact that the room’s only window--already narrow--had been heavily curtained.

For a moment Dismas hesitated, hating the almost funereal stillness, the dimness of the room, where the only light came from the lamp’s turned-down wick, and was further dimmed by the fogged glass of the shade.
Then the figure on the bed shifted minutely, coughed twice, and then spoke in a hoarse voice that he would know anywhere, “Dismas?”

Claville was swaddle d in bandages and reeking of liniment, visible only as a pair of eyes peering between a gap in the cloth.

“Aye,” he said, making an effort to brighten up. “The one an’ only. For a minute I wasn’t sure anybody was there; you do a dead-on imitation of a lot of old sheets, mate.”
An then Claville was laughing, his voice rusty and furred with phlegm.
“I must apologize, then, for I am in no fit state for any sort of entertaining, let alone the sort that goes on in bedrooms.”

Dismas had to look at him twice, biting his lips in an effort to suppress the laugh, failing, and letting out a bray so loud it echoed into the corridor outside.
He cast a guilty look behind himself, then took an armload of the things he needed from the cart before closing the door behind himself.
“Ain’t you surprised to see me?” he asked.

Claville had sat up and kicked his feet over the side of the bed, slowly and with some difficulty; Dismas let him be, wondering if these were one of the case where the pride was more fragile than the body, and which was likelier to be injured worse.

The other man coughed a few more times, the sound changing midway through into a rasping chuckle.
“I have schooled myself not toe be surprised by anything you do. You are ever surprising me.” he said.
“Well, then, let it be a pleasant surprise this time. I’ve come to deliver fresh linens,” Dismas said.

Claville rose slowly to his feet and tottered to the room’s sole chair, an collapsed rather than sat in it, his head lolling forward a moment.

“Aww, mate. You look like hell,” Dismas said, sympathetically. Claville made a noncommittal sound, and Dismas turned and made quick work of the bed, stripping the old sheets and pillowcases. They held a musty, sharp smell of stale sweat and ointment. Dismas had braced himself, half-expecting bloodstains, an surprised--and relieved--not to find any.
“Then my appearance matches my emotions, for I am sure I feel s badly as I look,” Claville said.
“But I suppose that does not matter. I have decided at last to donate my body to science.”

Dismas bit his lip, billowing out the fresh sheet.
“Surely the good doctor’s physic cannot be that bad,” Dismas said, still trying for a sympathetic, bit light tone.

Claville coughed some more, but Dismas knew him well enough to red the sound as a laugh. They both fell silent awhile, and Dismas quickly finished remaking the bed. By then he ha worked up enough courage, an finally spoke, “I…ah, I wanted to thank you. For the other night,” he said.
“Dunno what came over me; must’ve just ha a bit too much, hey?”

Claville leaned slowly forward in the chair, pulling aside the bandages on his face to see better.

For a very long moment he only looked at Dismas; then a flash of something--some unreadable emotion, fear or perhaps sorrow--crossed his face, an then was gone.
Then he sat back, sighing. “Think nothing of it, my friend. You are always welcome.”
Dismas fought himself over the urge to lie and say he didn’t remember what he’d said, anxiously anticipating what he could say if Claville pressed him. But the other man was merciful, and said nothing further about it, although Dismas knew the man had a mind like a steel trap and certainly ha not forgotten about it himself.

He remembered the books, then. “Ah! And I thank you for the books, as well. Meant to say so sooner, only I hadn’t the means, nor the opportunity. I’ll return ‘em quick as I can. I’m yet but partway through the book of rhymes, but the myths and legends I’ve finished. I’ll bring it the next time I come with the linens.”

“I wish you would not,” Claville said softly.

Dismas looked over at him and found him staring down at his bandaged hands.
“What was that?” Dismas asked.
Claville shook his head. “They were meant as gifts.”

Dismas thought of them, their worn, but still lovely bindings, the gilt pages and the paper as thick as cloth. Almost immediately he knew he could not keep them. He had nothing to give in return.

“I--well, I thank you, friend, but I cannot keep anything so valuable. Besides, you must want them now more than ever--now you’ve got so much time on your hands.” It was an awkward pass and they both knew it. Still, keeping them would have put him even more solidly in the other man’s debt, and he wanted very badly not to end up on the owing end.

Claville was silent, but his hands shifted against his legs in a way that suggested he wanted to drum his fingertips against his legs, or the chair’s arms, but could not.

“Then--if you will not keep them, share them with me,” Claville said.

Dismas gave him a quizzical look, and Claville continued, “You see my hands re in no shape to turn pages. Bring them with you, when you come, an sit with me. If you will. I have no hash to share this time, I fear, but--”

Dismas was smiling, feeling a strange, soft eagerness filling his chest. “Aye, that’s a good deal if ever I’ve heard one!”

He felt better now, too, much more confident in his skill at reading, but even now the thought filled him with a kind of nervous excitement. He tried to tamp the feeling down, telling himself it was childish, but it persisted.

He left the quarantined ward feeling like he’d just been blessed, like he’d stood in the first ray of spring sunshine on a winter day.

Chapter End Notes

Edited to clean up the jumbled mess that was Dismas’s conversation with Dr. Guideville. Thanks for reading! :)
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Bonds of friendship strengthened. An unexpected, and only somewhat welcome, departure. Gifts are given. Dismas, despite being afflicted with hypervigilance, still misinterprets the details he picks up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Strange place to end a story, that,” Dismas remarked. Claville smiled a little. “That is because it is not finished.” he murmured. His left hand smoothed idle shapes into the coarse woolen coverlet, and he clutched the empty pewter cup in his right hand, his face slack and dreamy.

Dismas had seen pictures of martyrs and saints that had that look about them--their minds clearly elsewhere, dwelling in higher places.

“What d’you mean, it isn’t finished?” he asked.

“The other books have been lost to antiquity. Scholars believe there were five in total; this story is only the first three books…”

Dismas replaced the book’s red silk ribbon marker and set the book in his lap, leaning closer. This was the green volume Claville had sent him--old legends and myths, recorded in verse. Dismas was surprised to see some of the same stories repeated over from his own book of mythology, and some others he was familiar with from having seen them onstage.

Rather than admitting his familiarity with some of he tales was not from literary sources, however, he decided not to mention this. Instead, he said, “If they was lost, and this was written in all that long ago, how do they know how many there was s’posed to be?”

“Contemporary writers mention it very often. The tales were well-known and well-liked, even then,” Claville said.

“How was it only these were saved?” Dismas asked. Claville took a deep breath, and released it very slowly. The way his chest sank, combined with his loose posture, gave the impression of a sleeping man; Dismas felt a strange pang at intimacy of all of it.

Then Claville continued, “There was a fire that destroyed the library containing ll the known copies. Apparently the originals were quite badly damaged; they currently rest in a museum, well away from the eyes of the public. We would not even have these, if not for the tireless work of one determined scribe.”

Dismas cradled the book in his hands, staring down at it. A strange feeling of awe passed over him; he had known that individual people wrote books, of course, but he would not have believed that a nine-hundred-year-old myth could be saved from oblivion by the hand of one person.

Then something else occurred to him. “What d’you think happens next?” he asked.
Claville had closed his eyes, and now blinked at him slowly, as in a dream. He smiled slowly.
“They come back to the fortress. Iolanthe would be waiting for them.”
Dismas smirked. “Olivere would’ve had to bind Harald’s wounds and carry him back; you recall he was unhorsed.”

Claville nodded, still smiling, but his eyes had slipped close again.
“Of course…delivered home to his family…his life saved by his dearest friend…” Claville’s voice softened from a murmur into sleepy mumbles, and in a moment his head lolled to one side slightly. Dismas took the cup from his slackened fingers carefully, and set it on the nightstand.
For a moment he felt a bit awkward, but told himself it was no different from someone nodding off after smoking some potent grass.

He set the book on the nightstand, refilled the water in the cup, and set the cup back on the little bedside table. As quietly as he could, he stirred up the embers in the stove and added two more sticks of firewood, before shutting the grate.
He left the room before he could stop and let his thoughts run away from him again.

～

That afternoon, in the gap of slack time between his work in the laundry and his appointment with Dr. Fremont, Dismas sat down at the little desk in his room, frowning down at the small notebook Osmond had brought him.

After a few moments, he recalled what Claville had said; then, flipping back through the book of myths, he re-read the end of the epic once more.

“Harald was unhorsed…” he muttered to himself. He hesitated only once more before putting pencil to paper.
The story was there, now that he thought on it—the sights and sounds so clear as if the play was going on inside his head. He’d never have figured his childhood bad habit of his mind wandering could ever be helpful for anything; yet here he was, with the words practically falling off the tip of his pencil. Only he felt frustrated at himself for not being able to write fast enough, and then knowing his writing looked like chicken’s-scratch.
Still, he told himself, there was no need to hand the book off to anyone; he could read it aloud to the man, though the thought made his belly clench and squirm in nervous excitement. What, he wondered, would the other man think?

～

The first few finished pages burned like a brand in his mind all afternoon. He could think of nothing else; Dr. Fremont, seeing him distracted, spoke to him briefly about finding other ways to calm his nerves, that did not require strong drink.

“Be a right stiff at parties,” Dismas said, smirking.
She returned this with a sardonic little smirk of her own. “I think, Master Dismas, that moderation is most important in all things; but it is my professional opinion that you ought to get this under control before you indulge again. I am afraid, therefore, that you will have to find other ways to entertain, and be entertained, even at social events.”

He laughed a little. “That ain’t so hard, I s’pose. I happen to be a rather entertainin’ fellow, if I do say so.”
“I had a distinct feeling that you would say that.” she said. She did not smile, exactly, but her eyes sparkled with amusement.
Then he laughed again.
“But I must speak seriously,” she said, after her own chuckles had died down. “It would do you much good to pause and evaluate your mental and emotional state, before pursuing any course of action. Perhaps something as simple as asking yourself what you are feeling, and what you actually need, may help you towards the path of moderation, in this aspect.”

He nodded, fiddling with one of his sleeve cuffs absently.

She continued, “It may also help you to do other pastimes…other things you enjoy.”

He snorted a little laugh. “Point me in the direction of the nearest theater an’ I’ll be set,” he said.

She gave him an amused smirk. “Perhaps something on a smaller scale.”

The thought of his little notebook raced across his mind like a greyhound after a hare, but almost as suddenly, he knew he could not tell her of it. To do so felt illicit, somehow, as if divulging a secret not entirely his own to share.

He shuffled a little in his seat, and mumbled, “Friend of mine sent me some books.”

She seemed pleased to hear that. “Ah! Very good! Literature is an excellent way to both occupy and strengthen the mind.”

The conversation wandered, after that, but stayed in safe, calm waters.

~

Scribbling in his spare time became a regular hobby, after that. He would stop and think of something to add, and then spend the day muttering the lines to himself under his breath, until he could go back to his room and scribble what he’d thought up.

One day he was startled so bad he almost drew his knife. He’d gone to fetch some linens from one of the supply rooms. Thinking himself alone, he had said one of the verses aloud; and when someone made an indignant noise, he startled like a splashed cat.

One of the Sisters was there. He did not know her name; she was one of the haughty ones, who had not spoken ten words to him since he’d come to the place.

For a moment he just stood there--stack of bed-sheets crushed against his chest like a shield, and the other hand jammed into the pocket with the knife. Then he relaxed enough to pull his knife hand out of his pocket--without the knife, of course--jerking on the smock’s hem to straighten it.

When finally he realized how he looked--a drunkard madhouse inmate, sneaking into empty rooms to talk to himself--he swore inwardly.

Aloud, he said, “Had the same song stuck in me head for days now.”

that removed the uneasy look from her face, but replaced it instead with a disdainful one.

Dismas decide he could live with that.

~

Claville sat back only slowly, after listening to Dismas read what he’d written.

His silence was so tense Dismas could feel it settle over him like a leaden mantle; he sat and willed himself to be still while the other man ran his hands over the wool coverlet slowly for a long moment.

It was two more days before he’d had something he felt he could share with Claville, and even then, he’d had to pause outside the man’s room door for several moments, trying to calm himself.

After he read, he flipped the notebook closed. He shifted once in the chair and then made himself look up at Claville.
Who was sitting bolt-upright in bed, the bandages pulled away from his face. He looked about to say something; his hands were clenched in the blankets.
Yet he was silent.
Dismas shuffled his feet and had to will himself not to jog his leg in nervousness.

Finally, finally, Claville sighed, and then said, “You are very good at that.”
Dismas felt the bloom of pride spread through his chest, equally with the surprise. He smirked a little, trying to cover his hesitation with a slow, affected shrug.
“Just tried to make it sound the way the tale did,” he said.
“Well, you have done splendidly,” Claville said. He was smiling, much more broadly than Dismas had ever seen him do before. Now he shifted so that he was half-lying on his side, moving to prop his chin on the knuckles of one hand. “An excellent effort, quite worthy of the work it was written to continue.”
Dismas actually had to fight down the feeling as he felt his face heat at Claville’s continued praise.

“Figured you’d be good enough at poetry that you wouldn’t be all that impressed,” Dismas mumbled, plucking at the smock’s collar. He wished he had his muffler to hide his face; he was trying not to grin like a complete loon, and mostly failing.
He’d heard the other man recite some lines to himself, once in battle and once around the barracks-inn, while he was talking with the Lady; but what he’d heard was nothing but tantalizing snippets—like the last few seductive notes of a song, whose player is ending it without mentioning the name of the tune.

Claville only snorted a little, at that. “Every courtier an prince and noble does a bit of scribbling, now and again; much of it is little more than pretty piffle. Once, I flattered myself by thinking myself a poet.”
Dismas raised his eyebrows. “So, you DO write verses!”
Claville nodded, very slowly. “Less often now than before. Being so long on the road has not left me much time to hone the skill.”

The way he spoke of it—of writing, of poetry, s a craft an an art, rather than idle play, pleased Dismas: when he had run with the gang, some of the others had thought his liking the theater was a soft, silly thing. Rat-baiting and cock-fights an boxing matches were fine now and again, but sometimes the mind craved more than shouting and teeth and blood.

~

Osmond was waiting outside his door, like a miracle, when he got back.
“THERE you are!” she said.
He broke into a grin, and this time when she hugged him, he didn’t freeze up; he slapped her on the back a few times, chuckling.

“No time for much else! Get yourself packet, for you’ve been discharged! And not a moment too soon, for there’s a monstrous grim task which needs doing.”
He started to protest.
“But I ain’t done with--well, Dr. Fre--the head-shrink hasn’t told me I’m in the clear yet,” he blurted, and then stopped himself. Was this not exactly what he’d wanted? He could go now and do what he was best at, in the service of keeping his friends and comrades alive.

His hands shook as he hastily stuffed has few belongings into his rucksack, and went to yank the drawstrings closed hen he realized the bag would not close.

The books Claville had lent him made the bag’s load too bulky.
Thinking about leaving them gave him a pang of regret, sharp and fleeting.

“So Doc Guideville’s back, as well?” he asked. “Figure I can ask her to take a note to Claville, to explain my sudden departure.”

For an instant, her smiling, excited face slipped; then the mask was back up. She gave him an evasive glance and said, “The Doctor as decided to take a brief leave of absence. She sends her regards from our Tavern’s gambling parlor.”

Her attempt to make light of the news with flower speech fell flat; the pang of regret at having to leave the books turned into a strong sinking feeling instead.

“What happened?” he muttered.

Osmond tried a joking, flirty smirk next. “As if a lady needs a reason to want to play a few hands of cards!” she affected being offended, and he managed to mirror her smirk, but thinly.

He did not press her further.

~

His return went strangely: the Man-at-Arms looked at him twice, his expression widening further into shock both times; the Bounty Hunter looked him over once and grunted, and the Hound-master gave him a look of mingled disbelief and disdain, before muttering a curse in his language and striding away.

The Vestal, having apparently heard the noise, stepped into the hall from the kitchen; but while she looked shocked to see him, she quickly schooled the expression into displeased nonchalance.

The Antiquarian poked her head into the hall from the storeroom-turned-library as he passed; she smiled and waved a little, which he returned.

Reynauld was the one who greeted him with a friendly oath and a back-slapping hug; Dismas thumped him once between the shoulder blades, and made no effort to hide or dim the grin that spread across his face as Reynauld stepped back.

“Come, you ought to warm yourself by the fire, and rest for a bit,” Reynauld said.

“Well, with the way they rushed me out of there, I thought we was leavin’ on the eve!” Dismas said.

“We have a few hours yet,” Reynauld said. “To prepare ourselves. The Lady wishes to speak with us before we depart.”

Dismas remembered several things that needed doing; he excused himself as politely as he could, then went up to his room.

He took the green damask hatbox from the trunk at the foot of his bed, and came back down looking for the Grave Robber; he found her sitting at a table in the common room, counting her throwing knives.

He paused long enough for her to look up at him, and then presented the hatbox with a flourish.

She accepted it with a smile and an undisguised cry of pleased surprise; taking the lid off, she stared down at the Gainsborough hat.

But then she had fallen silent; then he wondered if he had overstepped, or if she hated it. Again, thinking of something Dr. Fremont had said, he murmured, “I didn’t think my taste was as bad as all that…”

But then she looked back up at him, her eyes brimful of tears, but a wavering smile on her lips. “Master Highwayman, I have never heard a bolder lie in my life. You know perfectly well that it’s a--an absolutely divine creation, and--” she drew a huge, shivering breath, “Oh--thank you!”

Dismas figured, at the rate he was going--two hugs per day--it just might make up for the lost time
and cold solitude of before; she stepped away from him, still laughing and crying, and then swept off her own capotain hat. With the Gainsborough hat cradled in her hands, she walked to a cracked mirror propped in one corner and settled it carefully on her head. After studying herself a moment, she turned to Dismas, striking a pose.

“Well? What do you think? D’you suppose I shall turn heads in town, with this on?”
“I expect you’ll turn quite a few people quite green with envy,” he said.
She preened some more in the mirror, laughing now. When she turned to him, he could see she was blinking back tears again.

“Thank you, Dismas,” she said. “From the bottom of my heart. It’s perfect.”
He felt his face heat; uncertain what to do or say, he shrugged a little and mumbled, “Midwintermas is close enough. Figured I’d give you your present a bit early, is all.”
She laughed again, and pulled him into another hug.

~

He had only a few rushed moments to hurry back to the Sanitarium; the nurse sitting at the desk gave him a strange look as he hurried in, hastily rambling off all manner of probable--but also completely fabricated--reasons for his sudden, early return.

The quarantine ward was still quiet, and still, and Dismas hastened down the hallway as quickly as he could move without making undue noise.
Claville sat up in bed as he came in the door; he seemed surprised to see Dismas dressed in street clothing, rather than his usual smock and apron.

“Sorry if I woke you, mate, but they discharged me. The Lady has tapped me for a mission,” he said.
Claville did not speak, only nodded a little.
Dismas produced the books from his pockets, handing him the green volume of myths in verse first. This Claville set on the night-stand without a glance; but when Dismas held out the purple volume of poetry, his hand dropped back down onto the coverlet.

Dismas tried, “I meant to return this sooner…” Claville looked between the book and Dismas’s face, and an expression of sadness touched his eyes.
“The tide rises, and the tide falls. All things must too come to their ends. I must thank you,” he said, “You--your company is all tat has made this last week bearable.”

Still, he made no move to take the book of poetry from Dismas; at last, in a phlegmy, choked voice, he said, “You--you said you had not finished it. Pray, read it to the end--and then, if you will, return it.”
Dismas gave him a smile that he hoped looked more cheerful than he felt.
“Well, if you insist, I’ll not press further. I thank you for providing a diversion during the mission.”

Claville nodded once, jerkily. His hands clenched and unclenched once in the sheets, but otherwise he was still; Dismas hoped Dr. Guideville would come and look in on him soon, if she had not already.
Still, he figured he ought to let the man rest; he turned to go.
But as he was stepping over the threshold, Dismas glanced back. He saw the other man roll over in bed, to face away from the door, his big shoulders shuddering beneath the blankets.

Chapter End Notes
I am so pleased to finally be able to bring this to you. I have been very busy, and absolutely exhausted, but I have still tried to write something that is up to snuff. Please do tell me how I've done. Thank you again for reading, and for sticking with my story as long as you have!
They left later that day, after a brief meeting in which the Lady explained that she had found some papers confirming her suspicions that her grand-uncle’s stories about pirates were, in fact, entirely true.

It was nearing noon, but the autumn chill rendered everything so cold that the Lady’s hands shook as she tried to reattach her key-ring to her chatelaine; in the end she thrust the keys into her pocket with a quiet noise of annoyance, before turning to face them. This time the party was composed of Dismas, Reynauld, Osmond, and the Vestal, looking none too pleased at having to party up with the likes of two thieves. She stuck close to Reynauld, and kept throwing catty looks at Dismas.

They hadn’t even begun the mission and he’d already resolved to ignore her, both for the sake of his reputation and his nerves.

They walked in silence away from the town, taking first a gravel path, then walking single-file down a steep and wending stair cut into the cliffs. Finally they reached the beach, stumbling a moment over surf-turned stones to which there clung huddled masses of seaweed, all of them roiling with flies. Part of him itched at the very sight of them, his eyes reading them as huddled bodies—but there was nothing in the piles but decaying seaweed, and on the beach farther out, the sun-bleached remains of an enormous tree, jutting crookedly from the pale sand like a club thrust down by a giant.

Crossing the long, sickle-curve of a beach, they ascended another steep granite stair, climbing until they reached a narrow, flat table of land. This was mostly granite as well, covered with a thin scree of tawny sand.

Dismas had been fighting down shivers the entire way; the sea chill and constant wind bit right through his greatcoat. He wished the town were still populous enough to have warranted a second-hand clothing shop; or at the very least, someone careless enough to leave a flannel shirt to dry over a fence. Still, he was in good enough spirits. He flexed his hands in his gloves to warm them, and took deep breaths of the sea air, the sharp marine air stinging like smelling salts in his nostrils.

The Lady showed them an iron gate between two rising granite walls. “This way leads to the back gardens of the estate. Further down, you will find the uppermost mouth of the cave. There is another entrance that opens out onto the beach, but that one is made perilous by the tide.”

Down, they went--down, into the dripping, dark, rocky grotto. There had been steps cut in, here, as
well, in the pale gray stone. Dismas counted himself fortunate that the air moved, at least; though the constant sea noise was no help to his nerves. He could feel the tension winding tighter and tighter between his shoulders, and had to remind himself to take deeper breaths. After a moment he paused to roll back his dirk shoulder, in an effort to keep the muscle loose.

The water plinked down quietly on Reynauld’s armor, and made soft muted sounds against the fabric of Osmond’s hat. Dismas was surprised, very briefly, by how much the cave was dripping; but the constant sea fog, combined with the chill in the air, was ample explanation. A quick glance upwards showed a ceiling of water-smoothed rock, ribbed like the roof of a mouth, shining with water here and there.

He could hear the muted, metallic clicking of Reynauld’s armor as he moved, and the quiet jangle of Osmond’s satchel. He could even make out some faint rattling coming from the Vestal; he figured it was some prayer beads she had on her somewhere.

Dismas swallowed, then reminded himself to hang onto these sounds, trying to comfort himself with them. He reminded himself he was among friends; that they were watching his back as he watched theirs.

In a moment the stairs took a slight turn, and the light from the outside grew too dim to see by. The Vestal lit the torch, and the light flared brilliant and yellow from behind him. The light caught in yellow gleams on the back of Reynauld’s helmet, which glinted like a beacon in the dark. They continued on like this for some time, plodding through the dim darkness, with Dismas touching the hilt of his dirk and his pistols now and again, to calm himself.

They came to a landing of sorts—the way blocked by a detritus of mangled wooden flotsam, pocked with barnacles. This took what felt like a quarter-hour to break down, and cost them a shovel. Dismas muttered, “Small wonder she had us go in from up top. If the tide gets high enough to wash bits of shipwrecks up here…” Reynauld made a noise of agreement; Osmond thumped the wood with the backs of two knuckles, and seemed to be considering something. But whatever thoughts she’d been working on, she did not share them, and he had no time to ask. A moment later they were pushing on.

This time they came to stone doors, sea-battered and standing half-open, which Reynauld and Osmond had to force with her pick and his sword; these groaned open and admitted a view of another stair, stretching down and down into the sighing darkness. Now there was a smell of seaweed in the air—and the tidal reek of rotten flesh, faint but present. “Laws, I wish I had a posey to cut this stink,” Osmond muttered.

When Dismas glanced over his shoulder at her, she winked; he snorted a short laugh and shook his head. Behind her, the Vestal gave him a cold look, and said, “Shh! Be silent!”

Dismas turned away from her to hide his eye-roll, figuring an argument at that time to be both fruitless and dangerous.

“Mind your step,” Osmond murmured. “The steps are uneven and quite slippery.”

And they were: when Dismas looked down, he saw the steps level off at last into a flat corridor, paved in a stone not of the same sort as above: here, the stones were a dark blue, sparkling faintly here and there. They all paused a moment; the Vestal raised up the torch, throwing its wide, flickering circle of light higher, exposing them to be standing in a hallway with high, arched ceilings. Now Dismas felt they stood inside the stone ribcage of some vast oceanic beast; the sighing of the sea nearby, the crash of the surf of the waves, served to give the imaginary beast breath, as well.
And farther on, Dismas saw a place where the ground’s settling, or else the action of the water against the stone, had formed a pool. When Dismas looked down into the pool, he noticed the rocks were slick with some translucent slime.

And in the pool…

“Wait,” he said.

The others, who had moved off down the corridor, turned to him, and he beckoned them closer.

“Osmond, d’you see that?” he said, pointing.

“Looks like the leavings of some animal,” the Grave Robber murmured. “Not TERRIBLY strange, as we ARE in a cave, dearie. Though I do feel sorry for the poor fellow upon whom that creature dined, and whose remains are left in this puddle.”

“I have seen no wild creatures since we arrived here, aside from the…wolves,” Reynauld said. “The very skies seem almost devoid of birds. And the creature that can eat a human being, and leave droppings that size, is not a creature that can hide.”

After that they walked on in silence and increasing tension, and Dismas could feel the dread looming up over his shoulder like a real tangible thing, waiting just behind him with a bared knife.

~

“What’s wrong with the WALLS?” Dismas muttered.

Here and there were half-bricked areas where segments of some older structure stood; the stone was a dull slate-blue and gleamed a brighter iridescence in the closer torchlight.

“Tis either very old or very shoddily built.” Reynauld said.

“The former,” Osmond said. “Here, you can see the new places here they tried to reinforce the bricks.”

There were crude wooden trusses, seemingly built of driftwood; Dismas did not think the slapdash assemblage of these trusses pointed to any skill, and was almost certain that they were not the work of the original builders.

“I wonder if her Ladyship is aware that all this is down here; I’m sure we’ve traversed corridors enough to fill a manor of no inconsiderable size,” Osmond continued.

No one else had anything to say; Reynauld inspected the wooden trusses and proclaimed that, though the wood was swollen and warped with water damage, they were sound enough that they would not collapse and trap them down there.

More walking. They came once upon a trap laid in one of the sunken pools, which Osmond disarmed with an almost careless ease. Dismas looked on admiringly while afterwards she juggled her lock-pick and knives, before putting them away.

The Vestal made an annoyed scoffing noise at her, which Osmond returned with a smirk and a shrug.

They pushed on.

~

They’d gone into a room off the main chamber that was strangely finished; in the darkness beyond the firelight, the stones seemed to shimmer with their own bluish luminescence--beautiful, and too alluring to be safe. He could see in some places that the walls bore carvings of whorls, shells, and waves, and these, too, cast a faint glow, visible only in the darkness.

And this far down, he realized the tides must indeed reach high, for there were masses and columns of coral covering the frames of some doors, or growing from the walls. The strange cauliflower-like shapes reminded him vaguely of wasps’ papery nests; he thought it strange, to see it there, having thought corals grew only in tropical oceans, in deeper, warmer waters than those.
When they broke camp, Osmond waited only long enough for them to build a fire, before she set the supply pack down. The Vestal gave her a confused, and then disbelieving look; Dismas glanced around and saw Reynauld already about to unroll his bedroll.

He rose and went to join Osmond.

“Would the lady care for an escort on her evening constitutional?” he asked, with a mock salute. “Why, sirrah, how kind of you to offer! Do let us enjoy this wonderful, er, seaside stroll,” she said. They laughed quietly; Reynauld, already kneeling on his prepared bedroll, looked up from his Verse-book long enough to give Dismas a long-suffering look.

“Take care,” he said. “We do not know what lurks outside those doors.”

~

What they found was two hastily-stashed packs—all full of rations and medicinal herbs, and one containing a grimy, tattered map.

Farther down, Dismas’s ears pricked up; some sound was echoing down the hallway, and it was not the noise of the sea. He touched Osmond’s arm and she came up short; they exchanged a knowing glance.

A moment later she took his hand and then extinguished the torch. Then, creeping down the hall like a pair of naughty children sneaking out, they followed the sound down the corridor and around a corner.

“Damn it, I don’t care what the boss says, I’m gettin’ out of this deathtrap,” a voice said. It was a man speaking, sounding faintly panicked.

“He’ll ‘ave your guts for garters,” another man said. “Them fish-folk wants to turn the lot of us into FOOD for that she-beast! The boss can do ‘is worst, for it’s sure to be better than THAT!”

There was a sound of fabric moving against other fabric, pulled quickly.

“‘Tween them an’ them devil-worshippers, the roads ain’t safe even for thieves…”

Osmond gave Dismas a meaningful look.

Together they crept closer to the edge of the ruined wall, and peeked over.

There were three of brigands there, crouched around a meager fire. One of them, an ill-favored fellow with a greasy green hood plastered to his scalp, was hastily fastening the straps of a pack.

“We ain’t got enough of the gold to head back yet,” another said. He was a massive fellow, this brute, a huge chest crossed and re-crossed with scars. The shredded remnants of a green gambeson were tied just around his middle.

The one fumbling with the pack swore, and flung it down in a fury of frustration. “I don’t give a damn about the gold! I don’t give a rat’s ass about any of this! I--”

“Stop your yelpin’ or you’ll bring them down on us!” the brute growled.

“Aww, let ‘im go,” the other said. “It ain’t as if the old bastard is comin’ back to pay us the rest of what we’re owed, anyway.”

“Boss sent three of us out, and three will return.” the giant rumbled. “Need more hands around to carry back the pirate loot, when we find it.”

The fellow with the knapsack snorted. “You still believe that crock of shit? Look around, mate, it’s plain to see this place has long since been picked clean!”

“We ain’t been but partway through,” the big fellow said. “You know well as I do there’s caverns down there we ain’t even been able to open yet.”
The fellow with the knapsack made a scoffing noise like a sob.
“Any tunnel we ain’t opened yet is bound to be overrun by those fish-men. You ‘eard what happened to Grimlow and his crew!”
“I didn’t hear a THING that made sense. Far as I can tell, Grimlow ran mad an’ the others—”
“I don’t care. I said I was leavin’, an’ damn it, this time I meant it!”

He picked the pack up and slung it over his shoulder, but when he went to take a stick from the fire to light his torch, the brute rose and strode over to him.
“You’ll not leave this camp, d’you hear me? You do, and them fish-men will catch you an’ gut you like a hog, and then track your path back to us. An’ I ain’t dyin’ because some coward pants-wetter wanted to go home afore a job was done.”

The ill-favored fellow was quick--Dismas had to give him that. Pity the gun he had was a piece of shit, though, because while he shot the brute in the gut at point-blank range, the bigger man did nothing but grunt in pain. He made an upward swipe with what Dismas saw now was a cat-o’-nine-tails, catching the smaller man across the chest and face.

He staggered back, groaning, blood pouring from his face.
The third man had stood up and was standing by with one hand outstretched as in a placating gesture, and the other on the hilt of his short sword.

“Get back over here an’ we’ll not speak of this again,” the bloodletter brute growled. He pointed back at the fire as if he were directing a dog where to sit, and Dismas had time enough to feel insulted on the bleeding brigand’s behalf before the injured man snorted and spat, and hefted his gun again.
“I ain’t stayin’. You’re an idiot if you think there’s anything else down here but death. Or are you too stupid to see that? Oi, Curt, look what a fine fellow we got here, loyal to the band to the last.” He scoffed, but it was a high, desperate sound. “You think the boss is gonna hand you some rubies on a silver platter, nice as that? You think we got even a snowflake’s chance in hell of ever gettin’ back what the old lord--”

Dismas saw it coming--the point-blank shot that set the man reeling. He staggered back against the rock, falling finally against a pile of bricks and rubble. One of his hands was clutching the wound in his chest where blood was welling through the cheap armor, black as tar in the flickering firelight.

The bloodletter brute, still holding his smoking pistol in one hand, strode over to him and leaned over, grabbing his pack. Without looking, he tossed it back to the man who still stood by the fire.
“Curt, you put that stuff back with the rest.”

Then the bloodletter reached into a leather pouch on his belt and pulled out a roll of gauze, which he dangled in the air in front of the injured man’s bleeding face. The bloodletter himself wore an ugly smirk on his own.

“Only those who’s loyal gets to share the band’s supplies. An’ you made it clear you ain’t one of us anymore, didn’t you?”
“Please,” the bleeding man said. He shifted his grip on his blunderbuss--useless now that it had no shot left--and Dismas saw his hand left behind bloody smears.

Beside him he felt Osmond shift; her face was drawn and hard, her mouth a compressed line. He nudged her gently, but she only glanced at him and shook her head.
But the man’s next words were a surprise: “You’ve got to see--we’re all gonna die down here--”
“Give him the bandage,” the third man said, pleading. “Give it to him!”
“Shut your yap!” the bloodletter snarled.
The bleeding man took a final hitching breath and managed to rasp, “Stupid…son of a bitch…”
Then he shuddered all over a final time, whimpered once, and was still.

The one with the short sword came up slowly, keeping well clear of the big brute; the big brute was still breathing heavily, holding the roll of gauze now like an afterthought.

Then the one with the short sword muttered, “Why in hell did you do that?”

“Shut up,” the bloodletter said. He knelt and was going through the dead man’s pockets when he stopped and looked up at the other brigand.

“Don’t tell me you’ve gone soft now, too. Get over here and help me with this, or I’ll lay YOU out as fish-food next, an’ carry back the spoils on my own! Fuck’s sake, this whole mission has been like a nursery school trip, runnin’ after scared kids.” he was muttering now, his hands jerking viciously at the dead man’s clothes as they ransacked them.

Instead, the fellow with the dirk went quietly back to the fire and began to transfer things out of the slain man’s pack and back into the other, but he had not finished emptying it when he sighed.

“The big supply pack can hold no more.”

The big brute flung down the dead man and rose to walk over with viciously quick strides; he grabbed him by two fistfuls of his jerkin and yanked him up onto his feet.

“Then MAKE it fit! Lash his pack to the side of the big pack. We’re not leavin’ anything behind, d’you hear me?”

Then he shoved him away; but the fellow with the dirk gave him a cold, hard look and said, “We’re overburdened, and there ain’t but two of us left. Bad enough when we were three strong. We ought to go find reinforcements, afore the fish-men scent all this spilled blood and come after us.”

But the bloodletter wasn’t even looking at him; he was staring hard at the slain man’s body, slumped just at the edge of the circle of firelight. Then he seemed to make up his mind.

He went back to the body and grabbed him by arms. “Get his legs. We’ll dispose of this to throw the fish-men off our trail.”

~

“Well. ’Spose the Lady’s grand-unkie wasn’t tellin’ tall tales after all,” Dismas whispered, after they’d gone.

Osmond was grinning, her eyes flashing in the dark.

“Do you know,” she whispered, “I always wanted to crack open a pirate’s chest, ever since I was big enough to open an atlas.”

Dismas returned her grin, shaking his head. “I reckon you may get to, yet. You reckon they might find it for us, an we could relieve them of it?”

~

But the others, when they told them of it, were less than amused.

“Blast and damnation,” Reynauld muttered. “Are we to be dogged at every step by that ragged bunch? And how comes it that the know the lay of these lands so completely?”

Dismas remembered his earlier theory. “They spoke of a boss; I’d wager they ARE an organized band. And they mentioned an old man, someone not around anymore, to pay them what they was owed.”

“But of all currently working here, I am surprised you do not know something of them,” the Vestal said coolly.

Dismas bristled with mingled guilt, embarrassment, and anger; but he took a breath, thought of Dr. Fremont’s advice about hesitating, and did so before he spoke next.

“If you want to know, I never worked these roads, nor ever came near these parts. And a band so large as they cannot hide; by the time your outfit has more than 20 fellows in it, you ain’t just runnin’
a racket on the roads, you’d have moved on to somethin’ bigger--holdin’ the whole county hostage, maybe, the better to squeeze the nobles and the gentlefolk to pay you for safe passage.”

The Vestal colored slightly at his frank, blunt speech, and pursed her lips, but added nothing else. Dismas felt annoyed resignation rather than any sense of victory at having caught her out. For a moment he wondered how long such suspicions must persist--how many times he would have to prove his loyalty and trustworthiness.

But he also remembered the way he’d snapped at Dr. Fremont--how quick he’d been to throw his past in her face, if only because he’d thought it would feel good to shock or frighten someone else with it.

He sighed again.
Reynauld said, “And did they mention anything else?”
“‘The fusilier said something about getting something back from the old lord. I can only guess that he means the lady’s uncle, but I don’t know what he could have owed them.’
“‘Maybe it’s as you said, and they were extorting him for payment.’ Osmond said.
Reynauld made a doubtful noise, and then said, “If her uncle owed them, maybe he was paying them--though not necessarily for extortion. Maybe they Were the guards.”
“But for an entire armed force to turn so completely? I cannot imagine that they were local residents; or else how could they be so cruel?’” the Vestal said.
“The military does evil things to some people,” Osmond said. She had made a little pile of snuff on the joint of her thumb, delicate as a lady, and then sniffed it quickly with a similarly dainty tip of her nose. When she saw him looking, she offered him some, but he shook his head. She shrugged and the little tin of snuff--a pretty thing with a mother-of-pearl lid--disappeared back into her clothes.

Dismas understood her, and half wanted a pinch of snuff to calm his own nerves; but Dr. Fremont’s words were still fresh in his mind.
He said, “They ain’t locals. Didn’t seem to know the land, and besides, I spoke with--” here he balked, not relishing the thought of revealing to the Vestal that he’d been seeing a head doctor-- “--I’ve been speaking with some of the older hamlet folk, who’ve lived here all their lives. They tell me the brigands came from elsewhere.”

They ate their rations in an unhappy silence.

Chapter End Notes

I’m most likely going to come back and alter this later, but it feels like ages since I’ve posted anything to this. I hope you enjoy this version of this chapter! :)
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Hymns in the night. Some things are made clear. A Confession.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dismas slept like a stone, dreaming he lay in some vast and echoing place, which when he began to wonder about it, changed: now he was lying in a four-post bed, heavily curtained in swathes of scarlet. Beyond the curtains, the chamber was huge, the walls gray stone: the great bedroom in a castle from a fairy-tale. Pale dawn light was striking through the curtains, falling in faint, milky-colored shafts and striking against the curtains. A single bar of light fell across his lap in the bed. The bedclothes—scarlet, to match the drapes—were downy-soft and so warm he felt like he was buoyed up in a hot bath—warmer than he’d been in months, in the waking world.

A figure moved just outside the curtains—tall, broad-shouldered, moving slowly and carefully. Then a man’s hand, large and blunt-fingered, brushed aside the curtains, and he was there. Though his face was shrouded in shadow, Dismas knew him; he felt he would know him anywhere.

The phantom Claville put one hand on the pillow beside his face, and Dismas stared up into the satiny night-sky darkness where his face would have been, and was comforted.

He said nothing, but his hand lingered there, a warm phantom weight.

His clothes were strange, a dream prince’s, with silver braid and gleaming silver buttons all down the front now and again shifting to simple clothes of rough black linen.

The dream phantom sat near the bed, and his other hand hovered near where Dismas’s lay on the coverlet, without touching him. He seemed about to speak; though no sound left him, he seemed about to draw a breath, hesitating as if upon a precipice.

Dismas wanted to sit up, to speak to him—but he was afraid if he did, the atmosphere would shift, and the moment, like a thread of spider’s-silk, would break.

Instead, he turned over his hand, offering his cupped, loose palm, his fingers only slightly curled. His whole body thrummed with suppressed energy, and as though lightning-struck, his skin tingled.

The phantom Claville turned his head minutely, noticing Dismas’s hand. When he slid his own into Dismas’s, and meshed their fingers, his grip felt like a glove, sun-heated against his skin, like kidskin suede wrapped round a core of iron.

Dismas woke up with a violent jerk and a rough gasp.

Osmond was already awake beside him. He started to apologize for waking her and she snorted a little laugh.

“Oh, no, my friend, quite the contrary. I’ve not seen someone dance such a jaunt since I last saw a ballet. I should ask what you were getting up to, off in the land of nod, but a lady must have SOME manners,” she said.
“What,” he managed.
“Careful when you turn over, my friend. I’ve seen ships with masts smaller than that.” she glanced once down at his body, and then back up at his face, her eyes sparkling with suppressed laughter. And then he realized that the same dense, almost suffocating warmth that had been so pleasurable in the dream was real, and it had of course produced side effects.

He swore a little and carefully rolled onto his side, so that he wasn’t pitching a single-poled tent in his bedroll.
“Well, a body likes to know all the parts are still in working order,” he said, once he’d loosened the covers to cool off a bit; but he knew her teasing was good-natured. He managed a crooked smile, though now being aware of his cock he could feel the cagey, tense excitement running up and down under his skin, like a cat tearing around a house in the middle of the night.

She only chuckled again, then yawned and said, “By my watch, we’ve hours yet til we are supposed to be up and about. The Sister has been keeping watch, walking about and chanting prayers and hymns. Whatever savage beasts lurking out there must indeed be soothed by music.” She yawned another time, hugely, and continued, “You missed a bit of a show. She has quite a lovely voice, when not using it to castigate us sinners.”

He hummed a little, settling in comfortably again. It had been years since he’d had the luxury of owning a watch, and so if granted extra time to rest or sleep by the presence of hers, he was not going to question it.

“Perhaps she can be convinced to do a repeat performance, in some place where singing is less likely to invite so much trouble.” Dismas said.
“Hmm,” Osmond said, in tones of agreement. A moment later she sighed, comfortably, and her eyes drifted closed again. Dismas accepted the silent, tacit compliment of her willing to sleep--or at least close her eyes--so near him, and sighed again himself.

But, rolling over to face the fire, he found a few flames still licking at the charred logs, and no relief; and when attempting to adjust his erection made treacherous little fingers of pleasure crawl up his thighs and down the back of his neck, he sighed and realized he would not sleep again.

Still, rather than being annoyed, he found it something of a relief--his spirits had been depressed so severely of late that the desire and need had all but dried up; he’d been too preoccupied with both staying alive and staying sane to worry much about getting lucky with anyone.

And then there was the secondary embarrassment for realizing that it had been his friend in the dream--the second time.

There was no question that princes--even those who had handed their crown off to someone else--did not, fool around with down-on-their-luck reformed thieves. This thought flitted through his mind before, a moment later, with a sigh, he realized how lovely it had felt. An idle, passing fantasy--one that needn’t make him feel guilty, or cause him look askance at the man who was one of his best friends.

He raised his head enough to let it fall back against the lumpy pillow made by his pack, and sighed again.
He needed to get laid.

Of course sneaking off to take rub one out was out of the question; the nun would catch him instantly and raise hell, and that was the best-case scenario--the one that DIDN’T involve him sitting in a rocky little niche with his cock in one hand and the other up his shirt, and end with some of those brigands finding him alone.
Instead he freed one arm and slid it into his pack, and spent a long moment rustling around until he found the book of poetry Claville had lent him.

Though he had to squint in the ruddy light, he found it easy enough to read. He flipped to a page Claville had marked, only to have the paper bookmark fall out. This was a larger piece, folded small, which when he turned it over he saw his name written there, in the same sliding hand he recognized as Claville’s.

His stomach gave a hard clench in excitement, and unfolding it he found a poem written there. His eyes hung up on the first line, barely daring to read more--and then, glancing hastily up and around, almost guiltily, he saw Reynauld huddled, fast asleep. When he cast a glance over his shoulder he saw Osmond in the same position, but a fold of the heavy woollen blanket pulled up over her face.

And now that he listened, he could hear the Vestal’s prayer beads, now clicking softly against each other; in a moment she crossed nearer, into the circle of firelight, and he saw that while with one hand she held a rosary, in the other she carried a heavy spiked mace.

Before she drew nearer, he slipped the paper back into the book and quickly, quietly turned the page. When she saw him awake, she glanced between him and the supply pack. His lip curled in mingled disbelief and annoyance, but he said nothing; she seemed satisfied that he had not moved, and in a moment she turned and moved away again. In another moment he heard her voice murmuring another prayer, and when he was satisfied that she was far off enough for him to have sufficient privacy, he flipped back to the marked page, unfolding the letter but keeping it concealed within the pages.

There, he read,

I thought once how Theocritus had sung
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished for years,
Who each one in a gracious hand appears
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straightway I was ‘ware,
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair,
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove, --
“Guess now who holds thee?”— “Death,” I said. But there,
The silver answer rang, -- “Not Death, but Love.”

And after it, in a faltering hand-- “Forgive me. I have nursed this selfish secret close to my heart for a long while now--an age of time, for one with so little left as myself. I must beg your pardon and forgiveness a thousand times, for every idle flirtatious remark, and each glance, which I must confess I began as an idle game, a thought perhaps to gently put you off, rapidly became half-serious, and then wholehearted. Yet I knew while you returned my repartee, it was done in innocence, and I did not wish to offend you by my earnest pursuit--as if someone such as myself could even attempt such an act. Please forgive me again for turning your honest friendship into an idle, selfish pleasure for myself. And please forgive me for confessing all this to you in this cowardly, underhanded manner: I should have faced you bravely, as a man, but my spirit quailed at the thought--at the certainty--of
your rejection.

And now instead I must give you this: please let me tell you at last, that I have for you the highest regard and esteem, and consider it a mark of pride that I have had the privilege of fighting beside a man such as yourself, who has clawed his way up from the pit of disrepute and now fights to rid the world of some of its grimmest horrors. I have neither words nor time to express my complete feelings.

Forgive me. I could not speak a word of this to your face. I expect nothing. I lay this laurel wreath at your feet, and if we never speak again of this, I will understand you completely.

But my time is fast slipping away, and I must speak. Forgive me once more: I must with a rude disregard for tact bring back up something you said to me while under the influence. --You said you had nothing for me; but I would have asked for nothing more than for you to stand beside me.

Forgive me again. I draw this letter out as a dying man draws out a last breath, or as a chevalier breathes before he must ride out into a battle hopelessly outmatched.

Dismas, I love you.

And I am yours until the torch of my life is extinguished.

--Claville"

Dismas stared unblinking at the letter for several moments that felt like hours, his heart pounding like he’d galloped a mile astride a racehorse. He went to re-read it again, his breath catching a few times in his chest.

But there was no time for any action; the Vestal was returning again, having apparently been saying her rosaries to keep the time, and having decided they had slept for long enough. She knelt to shake Reynauld awake, and Dismas, abandoning all pretense of sleep, sat up and cradled the book of poems to his chest, as if it were some sleeping thing, too delicate to last.

Chapter End Notes

I was considering making this the end of Chapter 17, but ultimately decided that the end of that chapter was a good enough cap, and that this deserved its own space.

This is what Dismas gets for not reading his mail right away...

The sonnet is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Sonnet 1', from 'Sonnets From the Portuguese'. I may move it out of the actual body of the fic and down into the notes, but I'm not sure yet...
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The tide rises. And the tide falls. Treasures found in the sea-caves. Dismas thinks on many things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What d’you suppose they meant by ‘that she-beast’? Dismas asked Osmond, as they walked later. He was trying to distract himself, though his mind ran over the letter’s contents again and again, like a river seeking the sea. Water seeking low ground.

That someone could have written such burning words, to him!

Several things had run through his mind at once, not the least of which was that Claville had given him that book almost an entire fortnight ago, and he’d only just found the letter. Claville must have lain in bed those days, listening to him read, thinking himself rejected and steeling himself to be calm--and Dismas must have seemed incredibly callous, a stone-hearted bastard, to sit there in his face and play at simple friendship, after receiving such a confession.

Or else he may have thought Dismas was trying to let him down easy, by pretending nothing was up. Men turned ugly over such a simple thing as an honest expression of affection; now he wondered if maybe Claville had taken his silence as a tacit rejection.

The memory of Claville’s odd behavior, his refusal to take the book back, clicked with the suddenness of a struck match flaring into light.

Dismas suddenly felt cold to his bones.

“Hmm?” Osmond said. “Oh? The unfortunate pack man and the others, you mean. That’s what you wonder about? They also mentioned fish-men.”

She laughed a little, and prized the lid off a tin with a filigreed silver knife, delicately as a lady buttering toast. He had time to wonder at the practiced, elegant way she turned her wrist, before she was dipping the knife’s tip into the tin and picking up a sardine with it.

“Jugged sardines. The guiltiest pleasure. Care for one?” she offered.

He nodded with an enthusiastic noise, and shucked one glove to accept it. He spent a moment sucking the briny-sweet oil off his fingers afterwards, not relishing the idea of it getting into his gloves.

“Well, we fought swine-folk already. Cannot say I’m terribly surprised to hear there’s fish-folk, too. Rather hope the Lady’s unkie didn’t do a whole menagerie’s worth of creatures, though, else we’ll never be finished dealin’ with ‘em.”

Osmond laughed. “That is true. And it may be these fish-folk--whose lodgings, you can plainly see, are of a much more refined sort than the shit-caked hovels the swine-people live in--have a queen, or something of the sort.”

She spoke lightly, jokingly, but he figured her idea was as good as any other explanation. The Vestal was not amused.

“You profane against the Light and the laws of nature when you jest that lower animals are imbued with the spark of knowledge, or that they are civilized,” she said, prim and cold.
Dismas and Osmond exchanged glances, and then Osmond covered her mouth with one hand, her eyes glittering with suppressed laughter. She ate the remaining sardines in quick succession, slurped the oil from the tin with relish, and then knelt to splash water in it. Finally she replaced it in the pack. The Vestal made a disgusted noise, and Osmond shrugged. “Best calm down about it, friend, unless you’d rather I tossed it down for the brigands to find, and use to track us. Or worse. ‘Sides, last time I checked, the fish smell will wash out much more easily than bloodstains.”

They had passed through several empty, echoing corridors, finding nothing more interesting than strange, glowing coral formations, and once coming into a large chamber, down into which pale fingers of light shone through some high opening in the rock far above. The light struck down on the water-smoothed figurehead of a ship, jutting from a pile of flotsam in the room’s center. This was obviously well-made, and once of great beauty: even in its water-worn state it gave a sense of soaring serenity.

The remainder of the wreck was scattered about, crushed into broken spars of wood by the force of the tide.

Dismas grunted in thought. “Must have been one hell of a storm, to wash something that big in here an’ break it up like this.”

“Yes,” Osmond breathed. She drifted closer to it, her hands coming up to caress the wood of the figure’s skirts.

“Only imagine what oceans she must have crossed, how lovely she would have looked in her prime. See here! Her skirts would have been white and blue, and her hair black. The craftsmanship is stunning…”

After a moment she heaved a deep, satisfied sigh, and stepped away.

“I do wish the light here was better, and that I had time to make a good sketch for later.”

The Vestal was staring at the statue, too, with something like awe on her face; but when she realized Dismas was looking at her, she glanced away in embarrassment. A moment later and she’d put her usual pinched expression back on.

They walked on, now and again passing ruined statues and strange carved reliefs, the statues obviously not of human design or make.

Once, as if to prove Osmond’s point, Dismas paused beside one of the statues and gave it a significant up-and-down look, before looking over at Osmond with raised eyebrows. She smirked and glanced at the Vestal.

“So you say animals have no societies, then?” Osmond said.

The Vestal shook her head.

“Such things are impossible. They do not even possess the gift of speech, or indeed the higher thought needed for it.”

“Then how d’you explain bees?” Osmond asked. “For they do seem most industrious and civilized to me, building their little cities of wax rather than stone or wood, to be sure--but still, they do build them.”

The Vestal gave her a thin-lipped, testy look.

“Those creatures,” she said, “Are directed by he Light, to do as they do in service of humanity, who are the flesh-and-bone children of the Light. The only children of the Light.”

“Ah,” Osmond said, affecting a deep and thoughtful aspect; then Dismas, unable to help himself, murmured, “I met a fellow once--a sailor, he was, who had a gray and red parrot that could talk.”

“Ah, yes, I recall hearing of such birds,” Osmond said.

Somehow she managed to keep a straight face; Dismas’s lips twitched and he had to turn away and force himself to cough to cover the laugh.
The Vestal made a noise of disgust and pushed past him, to go walk beside Reynauld. She muttered something about lying heretics under her breath as she passed. He felt a little pang of guilt as he saw her hood twitch as she turned to speak to him.

Later, when they came to a section again blocked by barnacle-crusted flotsam, as the Vestal hung back with the torch, Osmond, Reynauld, and Dismas attacked it with shovels and her pick. Reynauld spoke quietly, but his low voice carried anyway. “You should not tease her so,” he said. “There are many who, in devoting their lives to the Light, forego a great deal of worldly knowledge and experience.”

“All right, mate, all right, we’ll stop. We was just jokin’ her,” Dismas said.

“You may joke, but now she insists you have actually met a man with a demon-possessed bird,” Reynauld said wryly.

He felt a bit chagrined; but he knew the Vestal would not even speak to him to allow him to apologize, and dropped it. Osmond merely took the chiding with pursed lips and a raised eyebrow. But she said nothing else, either.

In the newly-cleared section of corridor, they found three packs clumsily stuffed into a little grotto in the wall. All three were full of food, and the last had a crude map.

“These must be the cast-offs the brigands dumped, to make room for loot,” Dismas said. “Poor stupid sods. Still, better luck for us, hey?”

“Mm,” Osmond agreed. “Our erstwhile friends’ map says there’s eight more rooms accessible, if we keep going this way.”

Eight rooms. Eight more chances to be surprised—to die, potentially, before getting to see Claville again, to speak to him. To sit in the same room as him and feel warm without a fire.

Dismas felt thunderstruck by his own stupidity. But then, he reminded himself, men such as themselves could never be too cautious; even in he most accepting, free lands, there were still backwards people who would not hesitate to put a bullet or a knife into someone merely minding their own business—if that business happened to be playing for their own team.

And now that he thought back on their conversations, Claville’s easy grace, his jokes, the limericks, all rolled together neatly. He had been friendly—and Dismas, always so on-edge, had misread the man as being merely glad of company when no one else would even approach him.

It was, again, a strange luxury, to be able to appraise a man in such a way. And it had been years since he had had any such attachment; it had been safer, of course, to dabble with handsome strangers and the occasional gentleman of the evening. Running with a gang had meant he was not lonely, but the end of that had been a messy end for many things, one of which was his desire for romantic entanglements.

And now this. With an actual, real prince, who wore armor covered in gold and left him love poetry pressed between the leaves of his favorite books; who told dirty jokes to make him laugh and shared his hash with him.

He felt his scalp prickle with excitement and pleasure at the mere thought.

Which he crushed almost immediately, himself. A real prince, he reminded himself, would not dirty himself with a common highwayman; and if he wanted to be cruel to himself, he could work himself down farther than that, to mere horse-thief and
murderer.

He thought for a moment that perhaps Claville had written it while in the delirium of a fever, or under the influence of his drugs; and then remembered with shame that the book was the one the Leper had sent him before he, himself, had come to the Sanitarium. And the fact that grass, rather than making the man stupid, seemed to loose his tongue and make him more philosophical and talkative. And so it stood to reason that he was in his right mind when he wrote it, and therefore had thought on it completely.

The thought of Claville, sitting exactly as he had the day Dismas had warned him about the Hound-Master and the Bounty-Hunter’s gossip, in his linen shirt, made his mouth dry out slightly. He would have written it alone, he knew. Had he gotten up to pace? Had he written it out, then struck lines through, until finally he had perfected it?

To be wanted, Dismas thought. The excitement mounted and grew inside him until he felt like he could whoop and throw open his arms and run in circles.

~

There was an ever-present, faint bluish light. Some of the carved stones showed that peculiar, weird lambence, the carved whorls and waves giving a blue glow that faded maddeningly under the nearer torchlight. Much of it came from the coral formations that seemed to have grown from the floor and grew like weirdly-shaped, bone-white trees; some of these had red veins like antlers, and strange blue fronds like alien ferns, all showing the same soft light.

For a long while now Dismas had noticed this, gleaming dully whenever he turned to look back at the hall they had passed down.

He was about to remark on this when they came to a door. For a moment they stood outside it, readying their weapons; then, with a shared nod, Reynauld threw his shoulder against the door and pushed it open.

This was a vast hall, the ceiling stretching up and away, full of the sigh of water, and when they stepped down into the room they found themselves ankle-deep in it. From somewhere high above there was a pale light coming down, illuminating the remains of several stone structures. In the flickering torchlight, some of them looked like giant heads, with inhuman features glaring down at them from the rock…

“How…how far have we descended?” the Vestal whispered. Though she was holding the torch aloft as high as she could reach, they could not see the ceiling; and if not for the sound of contained echoes and the lack of stars above, Dismas might have thought they were standing outside.

“I could not say,” Reynauld said.

They tried to follow the wall, but came up against the crumbled foundations of a ruined pavilion, the foundations half-washed away and the dome of its elaborately-carved stone roof tilted on the cracked, slanted pillars still supporting it. The whole structure leaned sharply to one side.

This was slow going, as the ground was littered with an uncountable number of large, jagged rocks, perhaps scattered in by the tide. The rocks had no barnacles on them, suggesting that they had recently been moved there; Dismas wondered if the brigands had gone that way.

“I don’t suppose you think that’s fake too, sir Crusader?” Osmond asked, tilting her head in the direction of the pavilion. But her voice was humorless, and Reynauld only gave her an unreadable look before shaking his head.

“How long has this all been down here? And who would build such things in a sea cave, of all
places?” the Vestal said.
“I do not know,” Reynauld said. He was beginning to sound peevish in a way Dismas knew meant that he was both fearful and frustrated. “But we should not tarry—”

Whatever he said next was interrupted; he half-turned to face Dismas and stumbled on one of the rocks.

But the rock gave a venomous hiss, and Reynauld jeked back with a shout of surprise.
Then the rock grew slimy eyestalks, and a huddle like melted, living putty seemed to suddenly pool beneath it.
“Holy Light, what is that thing?!” the Vestal gasped.

“Giant snail,” Dismas grunted--and then shot at it.

The snail did not even flinch, and he saw the bullet strike sparks as it ricocheted harmlessly off the thick shell.
“Damn! Not even—” he said, and when he went to sidestep, hs foot struck something.
He looked down and swore.

The ground was covered with them--more than he could count. The jeering, sarcastic thought that came to his mind was that if anyone sneezed, the ones likely on the ceiling would fall and end all of them.

The Vestal was staring around, her face a waxy-pale mask drawn with panic, unmovnig and transixed with horrified revulsion. He could hear her making tiny, choked squeaking noises, both her hands grasping the torch as if it were a club--and her mace hanging forgotten from her belt.
He saw the one near his foot poke up its eyestalks, and realized there were no eyes at all. Somehow seeming to sense they were near, it reared back its slimy body and from the pus-colored, fleshy suckers on its belly, ejected a jet of what looked like spittle, or snot.
The stuff splashed his boots and up the legs of his pants, and he swore again and tried to take a step back. But the stuff was like tar; he found he could hardly budge.

To his left, ahead of the others, Reynauld was raising his sword against two more of them, and behind him the Vestal finally managed to get a sound out--a high, thin scream. The torch began guttering fearfully; when he looked back at the Vestal and saw her swinging it as if it were a club, he was not surprised.

“We’ve got to turn ‘round!” he said. “Before they overwhelm us!”
And he saw Reynauld land what would have been a devastating strike, but whch merely glanced off the beast’s shell with a metallic clang.

Behind him, the Vestal had actually begun praying, and when the almost comical absurdity hit him, he rather wanted to laugh.
But the chuckle died in his throat; he saw the two advancing on Reynauld with a lurch of realization that he coud not move to defent or aid him, and his guns were useless agains the beasts.

Osmond made an annoyed noise.
“You’ll not ruin these boots, you filthy little pests!” she said.
Deftly, she swung her pick down onto one of them, the heavy pick piercing the shell like a hot knife plunged into butter.
The beast shrieked--an inhuman pitch of sharp sound--and then its feeler-stalks went limp.

“What--” Dismas began.
She jerked the pick loose, her lips pursed, and then stepped past Dismas and the Vestal.
“Master Crusader, do stop swinging that huge blunt thing around; it exhausts me to see you struggle so.”
Reynauld turned to her with an offended grunt, but she was already moving over, stepping lightly.

In another moment she had dispatched one of the giant snails menacing Reynauld. Then the other reared back and caught her across the side with a jet of slime.

She feinted back with a noise of disgust, and flicked a handful of darts at it. He saw, when they struck, that the darts were made up of syringes filled with some green liquid. The snail shrieked like the first one, and the flesh around the darts bubbled and frothed as the poison in the darts ate away at the flesh. In another few seconds it shuddered violently, its shell quivering, before vomiting its visceras in a slimy jet all over the floor. Finally it was still.

The Vestal had begun praying again, her voice thin and wavering.
Osmond sighed and said, “We may have a problem after all.”

He holstered his pistols and stabbed the nearest one with his dirk, satisfied that the beast at least bled. Moving awkwardly, they all walked backwards from the room.

Dismas and Osmond yanked the water-bloated door shut, while the Vestal clutched her versebook in shaking hands, and Reynauld fumed and swore.
He kept trying, without success, to wipe away the slime coating his armor.
“Snails! Disgusting creatures,” he muttered.
“I think we know now what befell that unfortunate person whose slimy remains we first saw,” Osmond said.

Dismas nodded, edging away from the door—behind which they could now hear muted thumping, and a soft grinding, as of stone moving against wood.
He jumped back with a bitten-off shout when one of them pushed its feeler-stalks under the door. The Vestal stood huddled in one spot, her eyes shut tight and her hands over her ears. She was shaking violently.
Reynauld went to her and gently touched her arms, and spoke to her in a low, quiet voice.

Osmond sighed and abandoned her efforts to clean the slime from her coat.
“I shall have to beat this against a rock to clean it,” she said, shaking her head, and despite himself he smirked a little.

~

Twice more they opened rooms such as the first one—chambers so vast the ceilings were not visible. In one of them was a large chest, battered and missing one handle. It looked as if it had been dragged some distance, before finally its owner had abandoned it.
Farther down the hall, Dismas found blackish stains of dried blood, a messy smear, dragging off down the hall. In it he could see boot-prints.

Osmond produced a rusty, delicate key with a flourish, and opened the chest. The key snapped in the lock with a quiet grinding noise, but the chest opened on rusty, stiff hinges, revealing a treasure-trove inside.
It contained several large crests, some waterlogged portraits, and numerous pouches full of small gems—again, without settings. While they filled the loot pack, Dismas stalked the hall tensely, watching the shadows.
The bloody footprints faltered off, and then came to an end in a corner where there was another, larger puddle of blood, and streaks against the rubble and flotsam piled there. But he found no body, nor any trace of one.
He was not sure if he ought to be relieved or not.

The next hall they entered was more of the same gloomy blue stone room with more ruined reliefs carved onto the walls, these clearly admitting a watery pale-blue light that, when he blinked, left lingering marks behind his eyelids. If he held his eyes closed long enough, he felt he could almost see letters in the shapes—though strange ones.

The thought occurred to him that, had Claville been there, he might have been able to decipher some of it. Being well-traveled and learned, Dismas knew he’d have had something interesting to say. (As it was, Osmond—herself obviously educated about such things—clearly had thoughts about the place and the goings-on that had happened there, but was choosing to keep them to herself; and, not wishing to pester her, he decided he’d have to wait until later to ask.)

Thinking about telling Claville about what he’d seen later filled him with an eagerness, almost happiness, though the happenings were grim.

He realized he did not care what they talked about, so long as he could speak with the other man again.

Knowing the feelings were reciprocated made his stomach flutter in pleased anticipation that the cold only barely dampened.

The hall tilted subtly downwards, the water deepening with each step they took.

“Watch yourselves,” Reynauld said. “There may be traps and pitfalls we cannot see….”

They walked until the water came almost to their knees, until they were all wracked with shivers and Dismas’s teeth chattered like gamblers’ dice in a cup.

“’Tis no use,” Reynauld said, at last. “We can go no further. Either the waters are rising, or the floor has fallen in, but it clearly only gets deeper from here.”

So turning back around, they made to leave. They’d made it all the way back out of the water when something caught his eye beneath a nearby piece of flotsam wreckage.

Dismas instantly recognized the huge, lumpy pack, with another hastily tied to it. But when he bent to rifle through it, he had to pause.

The pack had been thrown aside hastily, and landed in a puddle; but hen the Vestal drew nearer with the torch, he could see the water in the puddle was muddy and red with blood, and the pack itself saturated all along its back.

“Whoever had it last couldn’t’ve gone too much farther, if they was bleedin’ as bad as this,” he muttered. Then Dismas recalled something.

Osmond had knelt beside him and was helping to move things from one pack to the other.

“Thought you said the map showed eight more rooms,” he said.

She nodded, then shrugged. “So it did. Clearly we’ll not be investigating ‘em this time.”

Almost on cue there was a soft, low bubbling from the water; Dismas grabbed the pack and heaved it free, and he and Osmond dragged it further onto the dry part.

The waters rippled faintly, with the suggestion of something hidden in their impenetrable dark depths.

Looking too hard at it made his skin crawl and the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, though he could not say why, nor could he bring himself to move or look away.

Osmond’s hand was suddenly a firm grip braceleting his wrist, a hawk wrenching him out of the hole his mind was being pulled down. He gasped like a swimmer coming up for breath when she shook him.

“Dismas! We’ve got to go. Did you not hear? Your Crusader says there is water coming in beneath the other doors, as well. There is no time!”
Chapter End Notes

I might change this chapter later...
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The Confession. A sickroom scene.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Soaking-wet and exhausted, they staggered from the mouth of the cave, and made the painfully cold slog back to the hamlet with the sky overhead threatening rain: a driving wind was coming in off the sea, bringing with it mounded clouds that fast obscured the sky.

The tide had swallowed up the beach and was battering against the cliffs; they had to skirt the beach by a rutted, wide gravel road, which led them at last to the derelict quays. Looking back towards the beach, Dismas could see the stone steps cut into the cliff, lashed with frothing sea-water: they had no choice but to turn back onto the gravel road and take the long way back into town. They had not gone far when a stinging, cold rain began to fall on them, flattening out even Dismas’s ability and desire to crack jokes.

Half-supporting each other, they stumbled into the barracks-inn, into yellow light and an almost painful warmth.

~

The next morning they debriefed with the Lady, who had spread out the contents of the packs. Among them were some pages, clearly torn from a journal, water-damaged and bloodied along their outermost edge. He did not remember picking them up, but said nothing about them, choosing rather to listen while the others explained what they had seen.

When he closed his eyes, the faint blue lambency of the walls, and the chilly, dripping cave-dark, deeper and more crushing than any dark hall, came rushing back up at him. Something touched the back of his neck and he flinched violently and had his hand on his dirk in a moment; Osmond, sitting next to him, nudged his foot with hers gently, and Reynauld gave him a concerned look.

The Lady looked at him with wide, surprised eyes, before asking, “Are you well, Master Highwayman?”

“What I felt a spider or somethin’ crawlin’ on me,” he lied. He rubbed at the back of his neck, finding nothing but the fur of his coat’s collar, matted into stiffening spikes.

The Lady nodded hesitantly, before looking back at Reynauld. The Crusader took a moment longer to look at Dismas--who now was beginning to feel ashamed of the extra attention--before he turned back to the Lady to continue his debrief.

Finally they finished. He could not get out of the meeting fast enough, halfway out of his chair even as the Lady was thanking them, reaching into the small strongbox and then stacking their coin for them to take.

He pocketed his without counting it, spared a nod at the others, and hurried away.

~
Whatever welcome at the hospital he had been expecting, he did not get it. He met Dr. Guideville in the common room, having said he needed to see her about an urgent matter. She seemed preoccupied, and vaguely annoyed at having been pulled away from her work. Her mood did not seem to improve upon seeing him.

“I was wonderin’ how Claville’s been,” he said. “He on the mend, yet?”

She was silent, regarding him with an unreadable expression on her face. In a moment she sighed and seemed somehow to shift all over.

“He has not been eating,” Dr. Guideville said. “I cannot allow you to see him, as he is very weak. And may not want anyone else to see him so diminished, besides,” she added the last sentence almost under her breath, and while turning away from Dismas.

He heard her nonetheless, her pronouncement striking him like ice-water dashed in his face.

“What do you mean?” he asked. His guts felt like they were full of lead, his scalp prickling suddenly with tension. “Doctor--what--you’ve got to tell me what you mean!”

She sighed, then, and looked back at him; her face bore an expression of wearysadness. For the first time, Dismas realized he had no idea how old she was; while her actions spoke of a certain maturity, at that moment she looked like an exhausted, overworked girl of no more than nine-and-ten.

“I mean to say that he has asked for peace, and quiet. And that, as a physician, I have concluded that those are the most essential things for my patient at this crucial time. I apologize, Dismas, but I must ask you to leave.”

Her blunt way of speaking made it seem all the more unreal. Still, when he hesitated, she drew herself up to her full (if slight) height, and straightened her back.

He did not feel like trying her. Instead, he nodded, gritted his teeth, and turned away.

This would not stand.

Of course he figured it would be simple to get back into the place; immediately after speaking with Dr. Guideville, he went back to Sister Gertrude who ran the laundry, and offered up his services again.

Truth be told, while the work was hard, it felt good having something to do besides sit around staring at the walls and waiting to be sent out to fight monsters or mad cultists; he told himself his dishonesty was mutually beneficial, and therefore harmless.

Even Dr. Fremont, he figured, would not disagree.

It was two days before he could finesse his way onto linen delivery duty, and then three torturously long hours where he hurried from sickroom to sickroom, stripping beds with unmentionable stains--and smells--on their sheets, and replacing them with fresh ones.

He had to wait in an antechamber while some of the Sister-nurses passed, not wanting to answer any questions, and knowing, besides, that there was probably a dedicated person to bring Claville fresh linens, anyway.

Once their voices and footsteps faded off, he wasted no more time. Picking the lock to the quarantine hall gate felt like it took forever--an agony of moments glancing over his shoulder, swearing inwardly, and wiping his sweating hands on his pants, before finally, finally the door swung open.

He hauled the cart inside and pushed the doors closed behind himself, quietly as they would go.

Then, taking a deep breath and reminding himself to keep a cool head, he pushed the cart down the
hall, to the only door with a light in its window.

~

Claville was covered in several blankets to his chin, and the smell of liniment and medicines wafted up at Dismas like a cloying, sharp perfume. The table was covered with bottles of medicines, a half-full cup of water, and a bowl of oat porridge with what looked like only one bite taken of it.

Carefully, quietly, he shut the door behind himself; but Claville stirred restlessly beneath the covers anyway. In a moment his eyes opened slowly, but he looked at Dismas with the hazy, unseeing eyes of a sleepwalker.

Dismas hesitated another moment in the doorway, fighting a ridiculous urge to rush over and kneel beside the man’s bed. Instead he cleared a small place on the table and set the fresh sheets there, and then drew the chair closer to the bed before sinking down into it. Claville watched him slowly, expressionlessly, until Dismas shifted in the chair once and sighed. Then Claville smiled, a small secretive smile, and he raised one hand to tuck it under his cheek.

“Hello,” Dismas said, at last. He felt like an idiot, eagerness and fear and nervousness warring inside him. There must have been a more elegant way to say that, but-- “I’m back.” Claville made a pleased, humming sigh. “I tell you every time, but…this is my favorite dream.” Dismas made a rueful little noise in his throat. “Sorry to burst that particular bubble, my friend, but you’re wide awake an’ I’m right here.”

Claville shook his head against the pillow. “I tell you I am asleep. I must be; for I have fantasized about this particular moment for such long weeks now, but I have resigned myself to never again seeing you in waking life. At least the Light is merciful to me and gives me these illusions to soothe me on my last journey.” He closed his eyes and sighed again, and was so still it made the hairs on the back of Dismas’s neck prickle with unease.

He put his hand on the bed, beside the lump of the other man’s elbow, and at the pressure, Claville’s eyes drifted back open.

Dismas leaned a tiny bit closer. “I’m here. I promise.” Touch me, he wanted to say, but the words stuck in his throat. “I--I hardly know what to say…”

Claville shook his head again, and then blinked; and then, seeming to realize the illusion of Dismas was neither shifting nor fading, he made a feeble, aborted attempt to raise himself upon one elbow. He shook his head again. “You cannot be he. It may be you are an angel of the Light, come to lay me to my final rest and escort my soul to heaven; so be it. But--I beg you--do not taunt me.” he gave Dismas a searching look, and then, in a voice that finally broke, he said, “Why did you have to have his face? His exact countenance, his speech?”

“Because I am here! I am myself, I promise you.” now he could see the man was actually delirious; but after a long, long moment, he took a deep breath and seemed to rally.

“Dismas?”

Half-choked with tears, Dismas said, “You said someone pulled you from the brink of death by the hair. Here I am. Late, yes, and a damn fool, but--please--” Claville blinked twice at Dismas before a weak smile flitted over his lips. “You are here,” he whispered. “Good. Now I may repair my cowardice and tell you--reveal my secret to your face. I--”

“I know,” Dismas said. And then he did kneel beside the man’s bed, forgetting the chair and the cold floor in his haste to be closer to him. Claville’s eyes were still hazy on his face, when he asked, “You do?”
“I—I only just got your message. I wasn’t—I didn’t mean to ignore you.” His voice broke, and he had to stop and swallow hard. “Please. I’ve only just got used to havin’ people around who care whether I live or die. I nearly drowned in the tomb of some forgotten society, an’ all I could think of was you—seeing you again, speaking with you. And I do remember that night, when I was drunk and you found me. I was too ashamed at first to say anything.”

Claville smiled wanly, and put one thin, trembling hand above the counterpane.

Dismas saw with a wrenching jolt that the man was skin and bones; either the sickness, the severity of his treatment, or willful self-starvation had left him so wasted that the bone of his wrist stuck out like a knob.

He reached out and gently took the man’s hand before he could let it fall back onto the coverlet. His hand was cool—his palm with its swordsman’s calluses felt nothing and everything like the hand of a prince, or a poet. Here and there on the back of his hand were pale, smooth patches of old healed lesions, and scars left by small nicks and cuts.

He pressed Claville’s hand gently between both of his, swallowing again around the lump in his throat when Claville’s eyes slipped shut. The same soft smile lingered on his scarred lips.

Then for a long moment he was so still that Dismas began to panic, before he drew a heavy breath and spoke.

“I never thought I should live so long, nor experience so much. There has not passed a single day without feeling grateful that I lived long enough to meet everyone here—most especially you. I must admit…I had hoped of meeting my end on the battlefield, with the earth under my boots and my sword in my hand.” He trailed off, taking a few more deep breaths. “Such heroic…kindnesses are not afforded in life…”

Dismas discreetly wiped his nose and cleared his throat. “Hey,” he said, “The way I look at it, I never thought I’d get to die in a bed—too rich for the likes of me. Always figured there’d be a hard winter an’ I’d freeze in my bedroll in the bushes; either that or I’d catch a bullet or a knife someplace fatal.”

Claville opened his eyes to regard Dismas. He took a shuddering breath before he spoke. “I had not thought on that,” he said. “That one man’s dishonorable death is another’s luxury.”

Dismas shrugged and made a soft, noncommittal noise. “But why talk on such things? You’re still up an’ kickin’, ain’t you? Doc Guideville will have you right as rain, soon enough.”

Claville sighed and shifted slightly. Dismas realized only when his hand went completely slack that Claville had been holding his hand, probably as tightly as he had the strength to.

When the other man was silent for a beat too long, Dismas felt the desperation rise to a breaking point; taking two shaking breaths himself, he blinked hard twice, and wiped his eyes. "Don’t go!" he said, chafing Claville’s cold hand. “Please. Please…I feel we hardly had any time together…”

Claville drew another shaky breath and made as if to reply, but there was the boom of a door, and the sound of a rapidly-approaching step in the corridor outside.

His heart leapt nearly into his throat when there was a knock, and then the door was swinging open.

Drs. Guideville stood there, and looked up from the tray she carried, which was laden with bottles of medicine, and blinked at Dismas in surprise.

A moment later her face clouded over.

“How did you—” then, with a glance between he and Claville, she nodded once. “It may be wise, after all, that you came to speak—even if you must have employed considerable dishonesty to do it. But I must ask you to go. I need to tend to my patient.”

Dismas looked back at Claville, whose eyes were gleaming with unshed tears; but the ill man managed only a tremulous smile and a single nod.

Dismas squeezed his hand again, and got back from Claville the barest sensation of gentle pressure.
Then he gently laid the man’s hand back on the coverlet, and rose slowly.

But he paused at the door and wiped his face. Then, half-turning, he said, “I’ll come back tomorrow. To--to see how you are;” he finished, feeling weak. His usual glibness failed him, and he felt ashamed by it. Leaving the room felt like tearing off his skin: he paused a moment outside the door, and tried without success to get his breath back.

Chapter End Notes

Edit: cleaned it up a bit. I'm working on the next chapter right now, but it's slow going...
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

A conversation. Flirtations after breakfast. This is not an 'ideal' way to start a romance, perhaps; but a way to start one nonetheless.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night and next morning were a blur.
He thought it would calm his nerves to stay a night in his and Reynauld’s room, and was rewarded with actual sleep. The other man knelt at the foot of his bed to say his prayers, and Dismas was asleep two sentences in, clinging to the thread of the other man’s voice like a lifeline through fog.

The next morning he woke when the bells struck nine, and lay blinking and bewildered for a long moment.
Reynauld’s bed was empty; he’d left a pewter jug of water and a cup for Dismas.
He was partway through his second cup, feeling almost absurdly grateful for something so simple, when he heard a clatter of hooves and wheels over the cobblestones outside.

Down in the inn’s carriage yard he saw the Caretaker had returned, from wherever the Lady had sent him; the Bounty Hunter, the Hound Master, and the Man at Arms were down in the yard in their shirtsleeves, apparently unloading crates. Osmond came out a moment later, took one look at the sweating, steaming horses, and began to unhitch them.

The crates, when they cracked them open, cotained nothing but buiding supplies--boxes of nails, hammers, saws, and all manner of carpenters’ planes, and other gewgaws.
Dismas watched from around a corner as the Lady moved between the crates, inspecting tools and talking with the Caretaker.
Dismas had at first taken the man’s eternal grin as some intentional mockery, some sign that the man knew something they did not; but time had shown the man had some sort of palsy, for his face would relax and tighten back up into its rictus grin seemingly independent of whatever he spoke of, or was doing.
Now he was nodding along to whatever the Lady was saying; she was gesturing now, a large shovel held in one hand.

The sky was a searing cold blue overhead, cloudless with wind.
When the Abbey bells struck noon he slouched over to the Abbey, and waited fr Reynauld in the chilly, shadowed nave.

Inside they had decorated the place for Midwintermas; there were old, faded red tapestries hung everywhere, and green wreaths of pine and ivy. They had even changed the plai white candles for deep crimson ones, though these, he noticed, were not lit.
Probably they were too expensive to burn, even only for the holidays, and were kept only for show. He scoffed. The Church always did loce their empty pageantry, he thought.

The brothers had finally finished the repairs, and the new plaster was as white as eggshells.
Still feeling perverse, he wondered how long it would last, before the ever-present sea moisture made
it mold and stain. Finally he heard the sounds of people rising within, before a young monk came and opened the doors; then the crowds began to slowly file out. He waited for Reynauld to show, and then, annoyed when he did not appear, Dismas slipped inside.

The Crusader was having an animated conversation with two of the Brothers, and the younger Crusader Boleyn. Seeing him happy and in the company of friends made the loneliness open up inside Dismas’s chest like a gaping mouth; he felt a faint, fleeting happiness for the other man almost as an afterthought. Now he felt a queasy mix of envy and guilt, without knowing why. He slunk away like a hurt cat, seeking places to nurse his overwrought nerves alone.

~

Dismas remembered getting the bottle of wine—paying for it, even! He remembered the almost casual walk he took, back to the abandoned rich neighborhood. He even remembered finding the derelict park, with its overgrown willow and pine trees, and a pond choked with waterweed and overflowing its stone banks to turn the surrounding soil marshy. The storm that had flooded the caves had, by then, blown through, leaving the night sky cold and glittering with stars.

A fat wafer of moon rode high in the sky, ringed by a halo of ice. The cold bit into his ribs and the backs of his legs, when he sat on the park bench beneath the willow. He flinched when, strangely, the cold sent a twinge straight to the scar on his belly. He sighed and swore a little, flapping his coat tighther around himself.

Beneath and scattered around the bench was evidence that like-minded individuals had used the secluded spot for similar purposes—though probably, he thought, under warmer circumstances. He drank until his face was pleasantly tingly and his head swam a little, and then wished he had thought to bring a lump of soap or a bit of wood to whittle on. With his hands stuffed in his pockets he leaned back comfortably—as comfortably as he could, on a cold, half-rotted wood bench—and as he was wishing he at least had a cigarette, he saw something move through the trees a little ways off.

Immediately his hackles were up; this was no strolling park, not anymore, and this meant that whoever—or whatever—was coming through the trees could not be friendly. He rose to his feel silently, wrapped his hand around the hilt of his knife, and waited a moment longer.

Then there it was again—a hazy phantom, some creature looking like it was made of raveled fog moving alone among the trees. Its movements were uncertain; it seemed to move awkwardly, slanting hard to one side with each forward step. Then there was a soft clattering sound and the phantom stopped and swore, and before Dismas’s eyes, the deadly ghost resumed the form of a stooped, wizened old man, in tattered gray rags. He seemed to be looking for kindling, among the trees’ gnarled black roots.

Dismas felt ridiculous, but the realization did nothing to relax his nerves. With a few backwards glances he bent his steps in the direction of the barracks-inn, and he entered through the servants’ side-entrance when he got there.

~

He remembered nicking a candle from one of the hall lamps, remembered talking himself up to his secluded lounge, where in a fit of fancy he plucked one of the crystal wineglasses from its holder in the cupboard.
He’d wiped the dust away with one end of his muffler, before pouring more of the wine into the cup. He tried to resume his seat in one of the less-ruined armchairs, but could not sit five moments together.

He re-read part of Claville’s letter, with baited breath, scarcely believing the words, now smoothing it out, now pinching the page only at its edges out of fear of somehow messing it up.

Without thinking he swallowed three glasses, as if they were no more than grape juice; and then, feeling chagrined, he set the wineglass back upon the counter and went instead to the balcony doors. From that angle he could not see the moon, but the sky was still flecked with glittering stars. He wondered if they would open the window for Claville—if he was looking up at the same stars. Thinking such thought made him feel like a maudlin old fool; he turned away from the doors with a growl that turned into a groan of despair.

The quiet, normally calming for him, felt like a suffocating shroud. He felt like his skin was too tight, his clothes ill-fitting. Pacing the room twice, with an increasingly unsteady step, did nothing to calm him, either.

The bottle of wine drew him like a smith’s lodestone pulling iron filings. He thought, in the back of his mind, of what Dr. Fremont had said. He thought about her, sitting in her office and giving advice to someone else, while two floors and a handful of corridors away, Claville was laid up--

The image swam to him, coming up behind his eyes even as he tried to turn his mind from it: the man he knew, reduced to a skeleton in scarred skin, his eyes sunken, his hands trembling and all the strength gone from him. Dismas had stopped his pacing, frozen in one spot. He scarcely dared to breathe. Then the fear that he might never see the man alive again rose sharp inside him.

He started for the door. He could go to the hospital, he reasoned; surely they would let him in, under such dire circumstances. Then Dr. Guideville’s stern words came back to him, about the fragility of the other man’s health.

Now in an agony of indecision and nerves, he realized he still had the empty wineglass clutched in one hand. He flung the empty wineglass into a distant corner. Hearing the glassy sound of it shattering only made his nerves worse, and he grabbed the bottle and went to drink directly from it, before finding it empty, as well. With a ragged cry he flung the bottle after the glass, and sank with a groan into the chair.

Now there was a general commotion of noise outside; he heard footsteps on the stairs, and froze: for a terrifying instant was afraid he was discovered at last. But the steps faltered off, as did the voices, until finally he heard doors open, and close again. The suffocating quiet returned.

He didn’t remember when he’d reached up to clasp his head, but he was: his fingers curled hard in the hair just over his temples, hard enough to hurt. The pain came in white-hot waves, then cold, and after awhile his vision blurred with tears. Beyond shame by that point, he wiped his face on his sleeve, then dropped his face into his palms. He cursed gods he didn’t believe in, for giving humans the ability to love, and to die.

~

Come morning, he started awake with a hard twitch, followed immediately by a low moan of pain: his head ached evilly, and his mouth was dry. His eyes felt like they were carved from old, splintered wood, and the inside of his mouth was like he’d been eating chalk.
Standing felt like a mistake, as the entire world seemed to suddenly lurch to the right; he had to grab the chair.
Still, as next-day sicknesses went, this was better than most; he hadn’t been sick all over the place, and--

He had the abrupt jolt of memory of what he’d said the day before, and the pain was almost forgotten in his haste to get back to his room.

~

“You have returned,” Dr. Guidevle said, when she saw him with the laundry cart. She did not sound entirely pleased.
He shrugged a little, gesturing down at himself. “Got a proper job; can’t just shirk ‘cause I’m not wanted in some rooms.”
Inwardly he was practically itching to beg her to tell him of Claville’s condition. Outwardly, he shifted slightly on his feet, and took a fortifying breath through his nose.
She snorted a little, and he knew she saw through his thin pretense. But instead of calling any attention to it, she said only, “You will please restrict your visits to no longer than one hour.”

The tacit approval in her statement finally broke his facade of schooled calm; he grinned, broad and foolish as a kid with a new kite.
“He—he’s doin’ better, then?”
She made a noncommittal noise. “I am forbidden by my oath as a physician to discuss matters of patient health with anyone other than the patient.” then she paused. “But I can allow visits, when the patient is sufficiently stable.”

‘Stable’ was an acceptable word, he thought. To soothe the headache, he’d swallowed three cups of black tea and some gelid oatmeal porridge still left at the table from breakfast, and washed up in water barely warmer than ice to cut the headache further. Now it was an annoying, but bearable, buzz just inside his temples--easily ignored, if he put his mind to it.
He’d promised Claville he would return, and he had made up his mind to keep his word.
He bent his steps in the direction of the man’s room with the happiness unfurling inside him like flowers, fighting down the urge to grin like an idiot the whole way.

~

“You must know this excuse will not hold water forever. Someone came by with fresh linens already,” Claville said, and there was a trace of his usual old wryness there; the same slanting, gently sarcastic words Dismas had come to enjoy hearing so much.
The other man was propped up in bed now, with what looked like half a dozen pillows. Dismas thought he looked like an opium fiend from an etching, but had the sense not to blurt the thought out.
He snorted and shrugged, unfolding a blanket to re-fold it and throw it over Claville’s feet.
“Mustn’t let the patients’ feet get cold,” he said, deadpan. “Doctor’s orders.”
Claville smiled--really smiled--and laughed a little, though Dismas words were silly, and barely a real joke.

Then when he quieted, they both were still, and just regarded one another.
The atmosphere was not harsh or judgemental; but he felt the other man was making a study of him, and he wondered what he was making of him, at that moment.
He wanted to touch him again--to hold his hand, or do something even more ridiculously domestic, like wipe the sweat from his forehead, for the excuse to touch his cheek.

Finally Dismas sank down into the chair. Leaning forward, he said, “To be serious for a moment--
how are you?”

Claville looked away, and Dismas realized the flush that had crept over the other man’s face was an actual blush. Dismas should not have found this charming, and so of course he did.

When finally he looked back, he said, “I hardly know where to start. I thought that entire encounter a dream too perfect to be real. You must imagine my shock…Doctor Guideville told me she very nearly had to have the orderlies remove you from the building.”

Dismas smiled a little, and swiped at his nose with the back of one hand. “Aww. Weren’t as dramatic as all that; I never threatened to chain myself to your door, nor made any declarations that I’d camp beneath your window awaiting your recovery.”

“And have you come to tease me, then?” Claville said at last. He would not meet Dismas’s eyes; his own were fixed somewhere on the coverlet.

Dismas gave him an earnest look. “I couldn’t do that. I meant every word I said.”

When Claville only took a few more hitching breaths, but still refused to look at him, Dismas reached out and tugged at the coverlet near the man’s hand. When he STILL refused to look at him, Dismas slipped his hand up and under the sheet, and slid his hand around carefully until his fingers met Claville’s.

The other man didn’t resist when Dismas meshed their fingers and squeezed gently. “Got to make every moment count, don’t you know; between work an’ the Doc, I’m the one who hasn’t got time.”

Claville did raise his eyes face him, then, something akin to embarrassment flitting over his features. He was entirely composed a moment later, though, the expression there and gone so fast Dismas nearly missed it.

“I…I thought you were disgusted by my advance,” Claville said, after a long moment.

Dismas shook his head. “Never. Awful hard to be disgusted by an advance I was too much of a dunce to notice in the first place.”

Claville shook his head against the pillow, before making an annoyed sound and reaching up to scratch at the side of his neck.

“Got an itch?” Dismas asked.

“My hair is stuck to the back of my neck,” Claville mumbled. “This is…hardly an environment befitting this conversation.”

Dismas raised his eyebrows in surprise that was only partially for show. “You’ve still got hair? Thought the, er, condition made it all fall out.”

Claville gave him another wry look that did not quite reach his eyes. “Another myth.” and then he sighed, and said, “You have heard so many ridiculous THINGS, and yet still--!”

Did he not know?

Dismas hesitated a moment before finally speaking. “You’re--you are a prince. A real one. And a hero--also a real one. Anyone would be lucky to have you, sickness or no. Me, I’m a horse thief who got lucky, an’ got a second shot to go straight this time. But…if you meant what you wrote, about…about standin’ beside you. Aye. I can…’d be honored.”

Was this how you did this? He had no idea. How did one address oneself to a prince--romantically or otherwise?

With an effort Claville pulled their joined hands up from beneath the sheets.

“You are also a poet,” he said.

It was Dismas’s turn to smile a rueful little smile. “Thought you said poets was common as cats, where you’re from.”

“Bad ones, yes, which most courtiers are due to lack of creativity and an overweening desire to be ‘decorous’ in all things.”

“And I’m ‘indecorous’?” Dismas asked.
Claville looked worried a moment. He shook his head. “I--I did not mean it that way. You are…
genuine, in a way I find is rare. I did not once think you were pandering to me, nor--nor working
through some disgust in order to force yourself to spend time with me. And yet when you learned
what I was, WHO I was, you did not change your manners towards me at all, either.”
Dismas wanted to tell him everything, then and there--the same numb, tingling, terrified desire to
blurt out the whole bloody, evil truth then and there, as he had to fight down when he spoke with
Reynauld in the Sanitarium’s courtyard, those long weeks ago.

He could not bring himself to say it. He wanted to be the honest man Claville thought he was.
Instead he was the liar he actually was. The secret stayed where it was, like a bubble of bloody tar
just eneath his lungs.
Instead, gently and carefully, he raised their hands and pressed a kiss o the back of Clavlle’s hand.
Claville goggled at him a moment before his eyes actually sarted to tear up.
Dsmas backpedalled furiously. “Aww. My manners ain’t that bad, are they? Pardon me, not knowin’
which knuckle to kiss on a prince’s hand.”
And then, mercy of mercies, Claville laughed, his real deep rolling laugh, his head thrown back
against the pillows.

“That is another myth,” he said, after he’d coughed a few times and caught his breath. “One never
kisses the sovereign’s fingers, nor even the ring, but the air just above it. You need only perform the
gesture.”

Dismas held his hand still for a beat too long, smiling at him without thinking.
Claville blinked a few times, shifted his legs under the covers, and then glanced away from his face.
With an effort, he said, “I…believe this it the part of the tale where the dashing rogue asks the prince
if he may not kiss him someplace else,” Claville said.
The pink was back in his cheeks, and Dismas smirked a little, affectionately. He leaned in closer,
seeing Claville’s eyes widen with surprise; but at the last moment he turned his head slightly, and
planted a gentle, chaste kiss on his cheek, just to the side of his mouth.
“Later. I’ll kiss you wherever you want.” he whispered into his ear.

Claville, to his surprise, was giddy and embarrassed. “I’m--I was joking! I must smell like an
outhouse, I’m covered in sweat, I--”
“Ahh, pshaw! I wouldn’t be much of a storybook rogue, if I was put off by a little sickroom
business.”
But then he kissed his hand again and laid it back down on the coverlet. “But, much as I regret to
confess, I got meself a day job, and I’ll be missed. Common folk need fresh bed things too, hey?”
The other man laughed, relaxing again against the pillows.

Dismas gave him another considering look; Claville wet his bottom lip between his teeth before
murmuring, “Will you bring the book of myths, when you come back? I hope you can forgive my
inattention, but…I do not recall if we finished.”
Affecting a thoughtful air, Dismas hummed a little. He shifted on his feet and pretended to consider,
as if he would have given any answer other than a yes.
Finally he nodded. “Aye, I can do that. Have to be tomorrow, though, as Doc Guideville has warned
me most strictly against tirin’ you out.”
Clavile bit his lip again. Then, sighing and cozying deeper into the cushions, he said, “I must tell
you, were I in any fit state, I would take offense at the very idea of being ‘tired’ by a conversation.”
But even as he made the joke, Dismas could see there was truth in the words. Claville, though still
smiling faintly in pleasure, did look tired; already Dismas could see he was struggling to stay awake.
He wondered if he ought to go to the kitchens and ask someone to bring something up for him, but
thought the better of it. Perhaps Dr. Guideville had prescribed some special diet, to aid with his
treatment. He did not know.
Aloud, he said, “Aye, well. Doctor’s orders an’ all that. Rest yourself; I’ll bring the book tomorrow.”
then he paused, a spark of an idea flitting through his mind like a small, brilliant bird. “And…a
surprise, to go with it.”

He wanted forever to remember Claville’s relaxed, eager face—drawn and thin though he was—
smiling and pleased, as he waved good-bye to him for the day.

Chapter End Notes

i’m…so sleepy…i hope you have enjoyed this chapter. i will probably come back and
alter it later…
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

More horrifying discoveries. Breaking points are reached. Where is there, after all, to flee to?

When he returned to the barracks-inn, he was surprised to see many of the others gathered in large, grumbling knots in the main lobby. The Hound-Master gave him a quiet, knifelike glance as he passed through the doors, which Dismas chose to ignore; he went instead to the Arbalest, who was speaking in animated tones to the Antiquarian.

“What’s goin’ on?” he asked, once the Antiquarian glanced over the Arbalest’s shoulder at him. “The Lady has learned some things about the swine-folk. Apparently they have nobility--at least, so say some of the notes she’s managed to decipher,” the Arbalest said. “Monsieur Bretel and I both were helping her to make sense of some of the papers found in the ruins. Many of them were quite garbled, to say the least.” the Antiquarian said. “You can imagine my surprise to learn of such things…of course, the work is going much more slowly now, with Monsieur Bretel gone.” Here she hesitated; her hands twitched once over the many charms and trinkets she had stitched to the front of her robes.

Dismas didn’t know how she could stand it; the robe must have weighed much, and it made a soft, metallic chiming and clinking which announced her every step, besides.

Dismas snorted. “Aye, well, why not? Pigs’re already walkin’ like men an’ wearin’ armor like knights, why would they not have a king who sends out his vassals to do war? D’you s’pose they’ve got themselves a whole court down there, as well? Pig dames and pig troubadors? You reckon if we search hard enough, we’ll find ‘em?”

The Antiquarian glanced around uneasily, even as he joked. “The Lady is…most displeased. She has found concrete evidence that her own grand-uncle is the source of the swine-folk.”

Then Dismas sobered; he glanced back towards the stairs, as if merely speaking of the woman would conjure her to appear there. “What d’you mean, the source?”

The Arbalest spoke next. “He was doing something…something with deviltry and summoning.”

The Arbalest nodded. “He must have hit upon the plan to call something forth, with the intent of keeping it here. But of course, like pouring water, you must have a vessel to transfer the liquid to, else it will be lost. So he took it upon himself to construct vessels of flesh, for his summoned beings to inhabit.”

Dismas frowned, at that. “You mean like those corpse-robbers who steal bodies from graves?”

The two women exchanged a long look. “After a fashion, yes,” the Antiquarian said at last.

He mentally juggled for a moment with the idea of bringing up the glance, and finally decided to do so. “And what ‘fashion’ would that be after, then?” he asked.

“He started out with pigs,” the Arbalest said. “But was not satisfied.”

It took only a moment for Dismas to draw a grisly conclusion. “He started taking people.”

The two of them nodded.
Dismas sighed, long and drawn-out, before he spoke next. “No wonder the Lady is so cagey about the fellow; he sounds like a right bastard.” to say so was an understatement, and he knew it.

But it would explain the people’s wariness; the small numbers of remaining townsfolk, as well as Dr. Fremont’s hedging about the late Lord’s doings and habits. When he and Reynauld had first arrived in the Hamlet, after a harrowing coach-ride through an overgrown forest full of more wolves and brigands than healthy trees, he’d been shocked at the state of the place.

The Lady had been living in the falling-down barracks-inn by herself, apparently being unable to find any other lodging. It occurred to him now that the reason for that was no one had been willing to have her under their roof.

The more he learned of her grand-uncle’s doings, the more sense it made. At first, he thought she’d merely hired the two of them as muscle, to oust the brigands from the woods she’d recently inherited. He hadn’t known what to make of her, even then: a strange, sharp, nervous little woman, seemingly impatient and constantly in a flurry of some activity or another. The others had started showing up after them, once the Caretaker had a wagon in serviceable order.

It was only now that the people’s actions began to make sense—their initial habit of making the Sign of the Light and hurrying away when they saw her approach; the way people snatched their few children from their play in the streets when she went out.

That was over a year past, now that he thought on it, and it was only very recently that they seemed to have gotten over their terror of her.

The idea of anyone being afraid of her struck him as laughable; he’d once seen her shriek and flee the room at the sight of a cockroach. Claville had had to go in and dispatch the insect, after which the Lady had devolved into rapturous thanks and praises.

He’d remarked to Reynauld at the time that he wished HE’D been the one to kill the bug; then maybe he would have ended up the Lady’s favorite, ‘escorting’ her everywhere, always a decorous step to her right.

Reynauld had snorted and said, “Had you been gallant enough to volunteer, maybe you would be.” He’d shot back with, “Me! Gallant! Hah! But I didn’t see you jump to be on roach-squashing duty, either.”

Reynauld had only laughed at him, after that.

But the more he learned, the more he was able to understand the townsfolks’ fears. “So she’s sent more folks down there to deal with the pig-men, then,” Dismas said.

Both women nodded. “And speaking of Reynauld, have either of you seen ‘im? I feel I haven’t laid eyes on him in an age.”

“He has gone out with the party,” the Arbalest said. “They are to be gone for two weeks. May the Light guide them,” she added, with a look at the mantel’s massive stone ravens.

The days passed. Dismas went to work, and was surprised one day when Sister Gertrude pulled him aside and handed him a small envelope that clinked and rattled: inside he found a modest, but decent sum of money.

When he looked at her questioningly, she smiled and said, “Your back-pay. You have been working here for quite a few months, but no one ever had any idea how to get this to you! You are a very difficult man to reach, Master Dismas.”

He felt his mouth quirk up at the corners, could feel the laughter swelling his lungs.
“I, er. I thank you, Sister.” the humor behind a convict being paid to wash laundry at a hospital--being paid at all, for an honest job--was not lost on him, though he’d developed good enough manners not to laugh in Sister Gertrude’s face about it.

When she’d gone, he ducked into a storage room to count it, and felt a strange stirring in his chest. The amount was twice what his mother would have made, in that same amount of time. He wasn’t certain if he ought to be proud or what.

The ‘surprise’ for Claville was his continued adding chapters to his already-speculative additions to the legends--more tales he spun out, mingling plots from play he’d seen, to additions he thought would have improved them.

Claville was greatly amused, and seemed in much better spirits.

Dismas was pleased to see, whenever he went back, that the bowls of food were always empty.

So three days passed, a dream of peace too soft and perfect to last.

~

“They are coming back!” the Antiquarian said, from her spot by the window.

“That cannot be right,” the Arbalest said. “They have been gone for barely three days!”

The Antiquarian was silent, but turned away from the window, fingering one of the many charms festooning the front of her robes.

It had been raining all morning, and only seemed now about to let up; it was Dismas’s day off from work at the Sanitarium, and he was merely waiting for it to be dry enough out to cross the town and go see Claville.

He’d been sitting by the fire and--finally--finishing his socks, going over and over other ideas for future chapters.

At hearing their words, he felt a leaden weight drop into his stomach.

The three of them rushed downstairs, into the main hall, where they met the returning warriors.

Almost before he could stop himself, the Highwayman blurted, “Where is Reynauld?”

The Grave-Robber looked away. Her face was smudged with grime, and the grime was streaked with tear-tracks. The Vestal shook her head; her face was ashen, and her habit, the Highwayman could now see, was stiff with blood all down the front. One of her arms had been wrapped with bandages and then bound up in a clumsy sling made of of her torn-off sleeve.

He looked from her back to the Man-at-Arms, who stood a little apart from them, his posture stiff. When the Highwayman met his eyes he straightened his back even further, somehow, but bowed his head. Dismas could see his breastplate was dented in one place, and streaked with blood and filth.

“Reynauld the Crusader was a good man, and a strong fighter. We were overpowered by our foes.”

He paused and drew another breath. “He fought well. Without him we all would have perished.”

The Highwayman said nothing, thought nothing, an felt cold.

“This…he was carrying this. I thought you ought to have it.”

He handed Dismas something heavy, that fit into the palm of his hand, wrapped in a filthy handkerchief.

Dismas stared down at it, then looked back up into the other man’s face as if searching for an explanation.

The sky went out.

Dismas stared, numb and uncomprehending, at the huddle beneat the blood-stained burlap. The Vestal knelt beside it, with difficulty, and he saw her raise her uninjured hand to cover her face as she wept.
He started towards the huddle, half-disbelieving, but the Man-at-Arms gently caught his elbow. His dark eye, when Dismas met it, was wide and sad. He shook his head slowly, only once.
“Better if you remember him as he was...”
“No,” he said. His voice broke like a kid’s; it sounded as if it came from someone else’s mouth. The Man-at-Arms dropped his hand, stepping back with a concerned look upon his face; but he said nothing else.

Dismas strode over, surprising the Vestal, who both cringed and clutched her Versebook tighter. But he could not bring himself to pull back the cloth.
“Reynauld,” he said.

There was no movement; there could have been anything beneath the soiled cloth, or anyone. He knelt, his heart suddenly pounding, the sweat starting in his armpits and down his back. All down the back of his neck he felt his hackles rise up. The Vestal looked up at him with a grimy tear-streaked face, sniffling and shaking her head. She made the Sign of the Light before herself in the air, then again over the remains.

It was not real until he saw the fingertips, just showing from beneath the cloth. Shaking, barely daring, he reached out to uncover the gauntleted hand. “Reynauld,” he said again, this time as a broken whisper. His fingers, though curled loosely, were stiff as wood when he clasped them—the hand feeling like a statue’s, clad in Reynauld’s familiar brown gauntlet.

Still he could not believe, could barely breathe, could not make himself connect the unmoving mass with the Crusader, his best friend.

When the Brothers came down from the Chapel to take him, Dismas struggled to his feet. He followed them meekly, still holding Reynauld’s hand, unable to look away from Reynauld, as if the final touch could reach him, for comfort.

He went with them as far as the Chapel courtyard, where the Brother Abbott stopped him kindly with a hand on his shoulder, and explained there were some things they needed to do for Reynauld. Then he’d blinked and realized he’d been acting a fool; biting his lips, he’d nodded and stopped there, and watched them carry him inside.

~

The Lady was sitting on the floor in the meeting-hall before the fire, weeping. The dusty hearth around her was littered with a detritus of papers—some mottled with dried blood, some crinkled and water-warped. She was covering her face with one hand and beating her leg with the other, sobbing, “Oh my god! Oh, Light! Oh, my god!”

The Arbalest hovered in the doorway, tears in her eyes; the Antiquarian was hurrying from the room even as he entered. Someone was shouting for Dr. Guideville. There was a racket of feet outside in the corridor, doors opening and slamming.

He went past them in a daze, hardly hearing the Lady: the world around him seemed to move in jerking fits and starts. One moment he was downstairs passing through the hall, and in another he was upstairs in their room, holding Reynauld’s parcel in nerveless fingers. His entire body felt benumbed.

He stared at Reynauld’s perfectly-made bed, looking between Reynauld’s and his own, and he felt as
if he was a husk made of paper and skin.
When he went to stuff the little parcel into his pocket, he fumbled, and dropped it; swearing and
panicking, he bent to retrieve it and found a tiny Cross of Light, set with rubies and emeralds and
made of a gold that glimmered and threw back greenish lights.

He looked over again at Reynauld’s bed, heaved three huge breaths, and curled on the floor. His
hands came up to his temples, clutching his hair and pulling it so hard it hurt.

~

He did not remember walking to the tavern, nor yet how much he drank.
The barkeep’s pitying face was like a knife in his guts, but he’d suffered worse indignities for a little
cup of pain-ease.

He’d drunk enough to set the world spinning when heard the door open and glanced up and saw
Osmond there. She handed the tavern-keep some coin and then crossed the floor, headed towards the
purple-curtained staircase.
Their eyes locked for a single burning, guilty moment; then the tavern-keep was gesturing her on.
Dismas watched the patched purple curtains fall behind her, and took another gulp from his drink.

~

Hours he did not recall later, he was in an alley somewhere, puking his guts up.
This time there was no phantom prince to save him--no friends, nor physicians, nor anyone, who he
could bear to see.

He walked on legs as still as wood, bending his steps in the direction of the sea.
The streets were like an endless hallway, lit only dimly by the stars overhead; the moon was sinking
below the horizon when finally he reached the quays.
No boat or ship had launched from there in what looked like decades; the old wood of the piers was
bleached nearly bone-white with sea-spray, the pilings rotted black.
When the low, sea-sharp wind caught him across the face he realized with a strange, knifing stab of
some emotion he could not place, that he was not even weeping.

Dismas felt empty--gutted--and ashamed that he could not even weep for the man who had saved his
life.
He had walked out onto the quays and stood on the weather-beaten stone and stared out at the vast
black emptiness of the night--cold stars glittering overhead like needlepricks letting light through a
shroud, the black sky, the thin ash-colored clouds above the black sea with breakers battering their
heads to gray foam against the quays.

The cold air brought a sudden, vicious clarity to his thoughts--a mocking reminder that he was going
against Dr. Fremont’s advice, that he was wasting Osmond and Dr. Guideville’s, and everyone else’s
friendship, that he was unworthy of Claville’s good regard or affection; that he was, indeed, a
murderer whose hands were for ever soiled with innocent peoples’ blood.
In that instant he felt shame and revulsion at himself for his deceit, certain that, were he to reveal his
most agonizing secret, everyone would recoil from him in fear and disgust.
And he would deserve it.

He took an unsteady step out onto the rotten wood pier, hearing the battered timbers groan faintly,
like a dying thing.

He could not even remember what he had last said to Reynauld.
At the edge he paused, feeling the sea soak the hems of his trousers above his boots when the waves’ foam splashed over the sides of the pier: the tide was high enough that the beach was entirely beneath the waters.

According to the Book of Light, there was a whole separate hell for suicides. He snorted a pathetic, sardonic laugh. Had he believed such things, that would have been the final irony. But the reminder was the sort of thing Reynauld would have said, and thinking on it made his lips quiver and his throat lock up worse.

The black water did not draw him forward--there was instead a sensation of something pushing him, some terrible unseen pressure, that drove him to take the last step.

It was only as he wavered there above the roiling, frothing sea, that he saw the lights.

Dully gleaming, the lovely, poisonous sea-green glow shone up through the black waters; and as he stood, now transfixed and mesmerized, he remembered that in that place, there were fates worse than death.

He drew a shuddering sob of a breath, and went to step back. The wood gave way beneath his feet.
Chapter 23

Dawn rose on Dismas sitting on the Sanitarium steps, smoking a cigarette in shaking, scabbed fingers. He was sitting on the Sanitarium steps, looking towards the Abbey and the cemetery, and trying not to openly weep.

One of the gravestones in the cemetery had been replaced with a new one, this one wreathed with a garland of white roses. He knew there was a spot of freshly-disturbed earth there, where they had buried Reynauld.

He was soaked to the waist and stank of brine and pitch, but he hardly felt it now. He was in the middle of another of his fits of numbness, and he heard and felt and saw things only distantly, as through a dirty window.

The cigarette fell from his numb fingers when he heard the Abbey bells begin to toll the hour; he covered his eyes and half-turned away.

Across the square, the first crowd began to congregate for the early services; a few passed before the Sanitarium, some hesitating and changing their course or hastening their pace when they saw him. He had no energy left to even look up at them.

When at last he glanced up, he saw Osmond. She came round the corner, glanced around like a fox, and then padded over to him. He blinked up at her and tried a smile that came up as a grimace; he could see her eyes were puffy, and the faint scents of incense and musk still clung to her.

“Mind if I sit here, dearie?” she asked. Her voice was like an old woman’s; Dismas shrugged one shoulder and shifted a tiny bit to one side. She perched more than sat beside him, sitting only at the edge of the step. And then she was silent for a long, long moment; he could feel her gaze upon him, with a hot spurt of shame. But he had no tears left to cry.

“Are you…all right, Dismas? You’re dripping wet.”

The shame again, like the pain after picking a scab. He swallowed hard, his dry throat clicking; he could not meet her eyes.

He took the cigarette from the ground and ground it slowly out against the step, moving slowly, as much to steady his nerves as to try to think of something to say. Finally, he mumbled, “Went for a walk down at the docks and slipped in.”

Osmond said nothing, but he knew she must have understood his meaning. She sighed softly and then murmured, “Well, I am QUITE glad you climbed back out again.”
Dismas could say nothing. His lips quivered and his throat closed up again. He’d never sniveled so much before in his life. They sat together in a melancholy silence lightened only by camaraderie; she took out a piece of wood and a knife and whittled at it until it was an ugly, misshapen lump, then threw it overhand down the deserted street. They heard it clatter down somewhere out of sight. Finally he sighed.

“He’d’ve chided you for wasting wood. ‘That could have been used as kindling!’, he’d have said,” Dismas mumbled, his hand covering his mouth. He could not say Reynauld’s name—as if by some sorcery, speaking it aloud would finalize things, would make it true to him at last. The cemetery seemed to pull at him like a lodestone drawing a nail; everything in him wanted to turn his head and look back at his grave. His eyes prickled again and he cleared his throat.

Instead he forced himself to meet Osmond’s gaze, her eyes sad and distant. It seemed she was looking both at and through him, as if hardly seeing him before her. When she spoke, it was in the same dry, creaking voice, so unlike her usual tones that it made something strange twist up inside him.

“He was a good man, that one. An’ he went down swinging, don’t you worry about that. It was quick.” the Grave-Robber dabbed beneath her nose with the handkerchief, and for a second he wondered at the delicacy of the gesture—but it was gone, just like that, along with the square of fine cotton, back into one of her innumerable hidden pockets. “Damn giant pig bastard. Poison didn’t even slow the beast up.”

“My thanks,” he said, after a long moment. “I…in truth it’s been so long since there’ been anyone I’d bother to call a friend. You fight alongside a man for long enough, ou come to know him.”

“That is the truth,” she said, nodding. “Some people you can know for decades and discover nothing of the truth of who they are; others you can know for mere weeks and know them like a favorite book. Or the back of your hand,” she added.

“He--he kept trying to get me to go to a damned church!” the Highwayman said, the sound coming out like a hiccup, a choked laugh. “‘We are all brothers in the light, my friend,’ he’d say, and ‘The Light welcomes all its children with open arms’."

The Highwayman did not miss the open, sad way she looked at him.

“Not religious, are you?” she said.

Dismas coughed once, and wiped at his nose. “For his sake, I wish I was.”

“Then for his sake, believe he went to the Light as a fighter. He was righteous to the last. He might have withdrawn to save himself, but he refused. We could not—we thought we could kill the thing. Oh, it was—it was big as an oak, all quivering, heaving flesh, its guts--its guts were--dragging on the floor--it had a big cleaver, big as--Light, I don’t know, big as a door. I thought…I don’t know what I thought. At first, I thought we could beat it--poison the damned thing and then wear it down. But then the little one…there was a little one, evil little rat-faced thing, with these ratty flags made of--I don’t know…” she wrapped her arms around herself and stared into space, her face slack.

“And it--it hit all of us. Master Claville and your friend were the closest. I dodged the strike, I do not know how. When I got to my feet I saw that Reynauld did not. The Vestal, she--she’d tried to cast a healing spell on Reynauld, but it was no use. We all three of us were wounded severely, by then. There was nothing that could be done. We fled for our lives, with the monstrosity’s roars and squeals chasing us down the halls, ohh, Light, as if it were right on our heels. I do not know how we made it out.”

The Highwayman roughly thumbed his own eyes, his breaths shuddering. The smallest mercy, he told himself, was that at lest his friend had not had to suffer.
His mind must have wandered, after that; he heard the tones of her voice, but his mind could not make sense of whatever she was saying. He stared at his boots, thinking nothing, feeling gutted and scraped out.

When finally he came back to the conversation, Osmond was talking of something completely different, and he had to exert some considerable effort to hold onto what she was saying.

“Oh, I was green as grass,” the Osmond said, smiling sardonically. “And a young heiress, long parent-less, suddenly coming into my full inheritance! I thought I was a princess,” she said. Then her voice grew low and rueful.

“I acted like one, too. Herds of suitors, a gilt-trimmed green phaeton and a pair of fine black horses, enough dresses for an entire theater troupe. Laws, you ought to have seen my hats!” She laughed. “But, as the stories go, every princess needs a prince. And I thought I’d found mine.”

She looked away again, down at the sea as it beat its heads into foamy sheaves against the craggy gray stone below.

“A coming gentleman, from out of town. He rode a high-stepping chestnut-colored mare and was never seen with so much as a hair out of place. He went in all the most popular circles; was seen in all the right places with the right people. I was such a green, empty-headed child, the most intrigue I’d ever come across was in the novels I snuck behind my tutors’ backs, or read by stub-candle-light at school when I should have been abed. Never was one for romance, though, or else I’d have seen the whole disaster coming.”

The Highwayman made a quiet, sympathetic noise. He didn’t know what else to do; but the Grave-Robber was a stalwart companion, and more than once her sticky fingers had saved their lives. If she wanted a listening ear, she’d get one from him, he’d decided.

“He wasn’t cruel to me. Though, by the end, I wish he had been. Oh, he was all cordiality and smiles, with a tongue like a viper’s behind his perfect fucking teeth. I learned too late that all his fashionable clothing were borrowed, and that the horse, fine-blooded though she was, was merely the last thing he’d managed to salvage from his own ruined fortunes. His own family had cut him off entirely, and he was up to his arse in gambling debts. I suppose he’d tried to sell HER as well, if he hadn’t needed her to stay ahead of debt collectors!”

She snorted, then wiped her nose with the back of one wrist in a very calculated, unladylike manner. “The ring went onto my finger and half my money went into his creditors’ pockets. It was noticeable, but not severe, at first; but then, as they say, old habits die hard. We became one of those fashionably detached couples, spending each day going about our own business an spending the evenings together, whenever we could remember. I thought it was great fun, at first. All my girl-friends from school had husbands with Expectations--give me seven sons, give me five daughters, stay at home and be prim as a daisy in the drawing room and never step foot past the gate…I thought I was lucky to have avoided all that. Light knows I haven’t a mothering bone in my body; suppose that’s something I ought to have learned, only my own mother an’ father sent me away to school when I was twelve an’ that was the last I ever saw of them. The influenza, you know.”

She paused a moment, and her quick hands made a sudden motion; he saw a glimmer of something and realized it was a pendant, a little silver locket with a gold rose embossed on one side. It hung around her neck on a simple leather cord, apparently having been hidden; she must have worn it close to her skin.

“At any rate,” she said, toying with the locket without looking at it, “I was mainly alone in the world, and a ripe peach for plucking.”

“You ought to hunt him down and get rid of him, for all that he seems he put you through,” he mumbled, hoping he was being helpful.

She shook her head, and when she looked at him, her face looked very young, and very sad. “There’s no need for all that, dearie; he’s already dead as door-nails. It’s just…he spent up all my
money first!"

She laughed, then, but it came out breathless as choking.
“That was when I learned how much he’d taken from me. My house, my land, my--my black horses, my phaeton, all my dresses, all my s-stupid, silly hats--”
He froze all over, afraid suddenly that she would cry. He had no idea what to do, and stood for an uncomfortable moment that seemed to stretch out forever before she wiped her face with both hands, and continued. Her voice was rough.

“The debtors were at my door constantly, an there I was, hiding in my own house like a squatter. I remember dashing a glass of wine on his side of our wedding portrait, and I stood by the tall windows that looked out over the park an the cemetery; and my eye fell on the family mausoleum, where even his stinking carcass was laid, since he DID marry into the family, an’ his own people didn’t want him back, even in death. In the portrait, he is wearing a ring with my family’s signet on it, as he was no longer permitted to use his own family’s; beside the ring, the buttons on his coat were all gold over brass, and with gilt embroidery all down the waistcoat’s front. All bought with MY money, of course. And I had an ugly, happy little thought: well, HE doesn’t need it anymore.”

She made another little delicate gesture and the locket disappeared, back under the many layers of her tattered clothes. She looked at him again, this time very keenly.

“And look at you, just listening to me prattle on. You’re wondering why I’m spilling my guts.”
Dismas shrugged. “Least I can do is lend an ear, after all you’ve--you’ve done for me.” he hoped she did not take his hesitation as a mark of ungratefulness; he was hardly in a position to be offering anyone else any comforting words.

“I’m spilling my guts because--I--I understand loss. And because I want to say that I’m sorry for your loss. Reynauld,” she said, when he narrowed his eyes in confusion. “I thought you and he--well. I was happy for you. He was a good man. Anyone would have been happy to have him--friend, lover, or otherwise.”
He felt stunned, suddenly, then cold all over.
“‘I’m sorry, dearie, I didn’t mean to upset you.”
“You--you didn’t. He an’ I--we weren’t--”
The realization dawnd on her, and her face went from worried to saddened. “Oh. Oh, dearie, I’m so sorry…”
He covered his eyes with both hands, and for the second time in memory, cried like a child.
Her thin hand rubbed between his shoulders and he was dimly aware that she was talking, making the kinds of consoling speeches people gave bereaved widowers, and the knowledge that he never even had that title cut him to the core.
Later that morning, the square was packed so full of people that the hamlet actually resembled a real city: lamps garlanded with deep crimson sashes, children running everywhere with half-eaten candied apples or candy-canes in their hands. The festivities would have looked meager, compared to some cities he’d been in over the holidays; but for a place like this, even something as small as a holiday bazaar in the town square looked like a grand festival.

Osmond had not seemed to enjoy the look of the crowd, so Dismas suggested they return to the barracks-inn.

They passed a tall, thin elderly man with a big nose, who was sawing away on an old fiddle; he was bracketed on either side by a plump woman, one with white hair and the other with auburn. They were singing some holiday carol, which to Dismas’s surprise he recognized after listening to a few words.

They all wore matched red-and-green tartan waistcoats, clearly threadbare and old; but the young woman had a single white gillyflower tucked into her bonnet, above her ear.

A half-circle of people had stopped to listen, and clapped when they finished the song.

From somewhere there was a warm, spicy smell coming; the air was full of eager, loud chatter and laughter.

All of it felt unreal to Dismas, and he moved through it like a sleepwalker.

They passed market stalls selling everything from rag dolls to popcorn balls, one of which Osmond actually paid for.

When Dismas gave her a curious look, she shrugged. Her smile was still slightly melancholy when she spoke, “It’s the holidays. Charitable spirit, honesty, fellowship an’ all that.”

She broke off a piece--still steaming-hot and smelling of sugar and sweet corn--and offered it to him, but he declined; he had no appetite, though his stomach was empty.

While she stood snacking on her treat, his eye wandered out over the stalls and tables set up. A woman was selling little gingerbread cakes; an elderly man was selling carved wooden bowls and cups. Two young men in ash-streaked clothes--likely kids no older than eight-and-ten--were busily shaking dented pans full of chestnuts over a small fire.

To their other side, a dark-skinned woman in a bottle-green poke bonnet was frying meat pies in a cauldron propped upon some bricks.
With another spark of recognition he saw the old woman who sold him the yarn for his socks; it was so long ago, now, that he’d all but forgotten it, and her.

Now she was sitting at a spinning wheel with a bit of yarn, smiling and chatting with two other elderly ladies. Their knitting needles flashed in the sun, now and again, when the light caught them at the right angle.

Past all of them, though, he could see the other side of the square, where the Arbalest and her girls were doing an archery demonstration—a lot of little amazons and Valkyries in beribboned holiday bonnets and shawls—nailing arrows into the bull’s-eye at thirty paces.

The families broke into applause and cheers, and the Arbalest was striding up and down the line of girls, shaking hands with relatives and clapping her students on the shoulders in pride.

Just at the foot of the Abbey steps, on the market’s other side, some of the Brothers were gathered, singing hymns and handing out roasted potatoes. Dismas recognized the young Crusader Boleyn among the choir, in a tabard over his gambeson.

The sight of him made something in him jump—and then curl up in misery again.

He turned back to Osmond as if stung.

“What’s all this, then?” he asked. If his voice was suddenly rough again, Osmond said nothing of it.

Osmond’s gaze was steady, and still sad.

“’Tis the Saint’s-Day Feast. Midwintermas is at the end of the week.”

Dismas felt a flicker of embarrassment, but it was fleeting; why bother to keep a calendar or attend to the date, when merely staying alive was a struggle?

He forced a lopsided smile, but could not meet her eyes.

“Sorry I ain’t the best company at the moment,” he mumbled.

She shrugged and made a soft, noncommittal noise. “Not much in the mood for cheer myself, friend. Besides, I find you’re fine company anytime.”

His smile turned genuine, then, even if he ducked his head to hide it.

~

He slinked into he and Reynauld’s room, and felt as if he was trespassing.

Of course nothing had changed—everything in Reynauld’s side in his usual perfect, strict order.

The sound of footsteps in he hallway startled him; and for a beautiful, terrible moment he imagined Reynauld throwing open the door and then looking down at him questioningly.

The dream-Reynauld drew a breath to speak—and then the sound of voices in the corridor shattered the reverie.

He took his knapsack and hastily stuffed into it some clothing, the small book Osmond had given him, and the other books, and hurried from the room. He could not bring himself to look back.

~

Claville started upright in bed when Dismas opened the door.

For a long moment they stared at each other—Claville in shock rapidly turning into joy, and Dismas with mingled guilt and furtive pleasure.

He as reaching for Dismas even as he strode across the floor, and folded his hands around Claville’s like an embrace.

“You did not come yesterday,” Claville murmured. “I feared the Lady had sent you out again…”

Dismas sank into his chair and pressed a kiss to the back of one of Claville’s hand without a thought.

“I’d’ve found a way to send word,” he mumbled.

Even as he could feel the happiness blooming inside him, the dread lingered like a coiled viper.

Of course Claville noticed.
“Your hands,” he said—and his eyes went to Dismas’s, with a searching look. Dismas looked away, the guilt like cold water dashed across his face. He wanted both to cling to Claville’s rough, warm grip, and pull away from it.

“A--my friend died. Reynauld. Nothing else would have kept me away. I was...”

“Men do many strange, terrible things, while in the throes of grief. Reynauld was an excellent man, a loyal friend, and an upstanding Crusader. I am sure he was valorous, and you honor him with your depth of feeling. I am…deeply sorry for your loss.” Claville said.

Before he could even start in with the lie about falling in, Claville had drawn him in closer, into an embrace, his grassy, herbal smell rising into Dismas’s nose. Hardly daring, he raised his hands, skating them up, over the broad planes of the other man’s back; his eyes drifted closed for a long moment.

Even at the strange angle, Claville was warm in his arms, and solid, and Claville mirrored his gesture on his own back.

The first embrace felt like picking a lock and all the tumblers falling perfectly into place, the mechanism clicking neatly. They did not kiss—but they held on all the longer for it. It was Dismas who felt like he was rising and falling on a swelling tide.

“Oh,” Claville said again, pulling away to look at him. “How long--?”

“I--I don’t know,” Dismas confessed. Then, “Yes, I do. The Weald, our second mission, when you saved Reynauld’s fool ass from those wolves.”

Claville laughed, breathless and low. “That was it?”

“Well, the first. I thought, anyone willing to risk life n limb for a friend is a friend of mine.”

Though he spoke quietly, they were pressed close enough that Dismas could feel the vibrations of the other man’s speech in his ribcage, a soothing buzz.

In another moment he noticed what seemed to be a heavy, hot rope hanging between the other man’s shoulders, which when he investigated it with his fingertips caused Claville to draw in a shuddering breath and turn his head.

Dismas smiled against the cloth against the side of his neck, and made a little huff of breath.

“How long is your hair? Thought lepers were s’posed to have their hair dropping out in patches, an’ here you’ve got--”

Claville separated from him with a laugh.

“I have told you, that is a myth!”

Dismas bit his lips and tried to keep a straight face; but his quiet laugh was interrupted by the Abbey bells striking the hour. He left regretfully, and stood a moment in the empty hall adjusting his clothes and feeling warm all over.

He turned up his shirt’s collar as he walked, and took a deep breath there, where Claville’s scent lingered between the warm fabric and the crook of his neck.

~

So passed two more days. Dismas still saw Dr. Fremont in the afternoons, as before, and continued his work at the laundry. He saw Claville in the evenings, usually choosing to eat dinner with him, and breakfast and lunch with the Sisters from the laundry. His remaining free time—of which he had a worrying amount, time in which his mind could run away with him if allowed—he either read or tried to write. But those scribblings felt wooden and forced, and often he found putting pencil to paper a struggle.

Abandoning it gave him pangs of guilt, but he realized he was wasting paper—which Osmond had given him—and so he put it aside, for the time being, at least.
He could not, at first, bring himself to confess the whole shameful truth of his actions following Reynauld’s death, to Dr. Fremont; but the woman had nearly glacial patience, and eventually he worked up the nerve and spat it out.

He was surprised when she responded with her usual mild sympathy, and no overblown hysterics or contempt.

He accepted her words with a gratitude as deep as it was humbling; the last time he had felt so forgive, and his plight so thoroughly understood, was when he’d misbehaved as a child and his mother had only gently chided him for it.

The last secret gnawed his mind like rats; but he told himself at last that he had resolved to repent--and in Reynauld’s honor and memory, he would hold himself to that resolution.

When he told Dr. Fremont this, she smiled and said, “I am pleased you are able to find strength, even in your grief. It shows a marked growth of your character and fortitude.”

He sagged a little, at that. “Can’t take any credit for it. I did get slobbering drunk twice, since first I was in here for it.”

Dr. Fremont’s smile remained gentle. “The road to recovery is a long and wending one, Master Dismas. Some may tread it their entire lives; still, every step upon the path is one closer to recovery. The only thing you must not do is stop.”

~

“You are too late to get up to any sauciness,” Claville said, with a laugh. “I have already finished bathing.”

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, in a pair of coarse woolen trousers, a shapeless brown hospital robe, and a rough, much-washed linen shirt. They’d finally opened the shutters, and late-morning light was streaming in behind him, silhouetting him in a pale, watery gold.

Dismas blurted out a laugh in spite of himself, and felt a small lessening of his sadness.

“Well, well. I s’pose I ought to have reserved tickets to the show.”

Claville chuckled. “There are courts where such things can be viewed.”

Dismas goggled at him a moment, certain he was being made the butt of a joke; but when Claville did not laugh, he snickered, himself. “You royals are a mad bunch, to be sure.”

“Indeed. A king, technically a cousin of mine, often holds important meetings while relieving himself in the morning. I am told that the honor of wiping his august backside is reserved for the highest-ranking courtier in the room.”

“Now, that is bullshit,” Dismas said, with a laugh.

Claville gave him an innocent look, complete with fluttered eyelashes, and said, “I must contradict you, my dear friend; not bull’s shit, but king’s shit. And I believe his chosen blazon animal is actually a cock…”

Dismas blinked twice and then roared with laughter so hard he nearly fell over. When he had got his breath back, he said, “Your, er. Your veil is wet.” he said, making a gesture at the side of his own head.

Claville made a quiet noise, and shrugged a little.

“‘Tis linen, and will be dry soon enough,” then, when Dismas did not look away from the fabric, which clung slightly to his neck and shoulders, he smirked a bit.

“Oughtn’t sleep with a wet head,” Dismas said. “Doc’ll have your guts for garters if you catch cold, after all her work.”

Something occurred to him, almost as soon as he finished speaking.

He closed the door and pulled the little chair from the desk, turning to sit backwards in it, his arms
draped over the back comfortably.
“D’you know, I’ve just realized, we’ve been sharing grass and wine, and I don’t even know what
color your hair is.”
“Brown,” the Leper said, drily. The room was warm, and the linen shirt he was wearing was rolled
back over his forearms; he’d been eating properly again, and gained back much of his weight.
Watching the muscle shifting under his scar-mottled flesh, Dismas realized he was as close to bare-
skinned as he’d ever seen the man; the thought made his skin warm and tight in ways no plunging
neckline or skin-tight trousers ever had before.

“That’s it? Thought you said you were a poet,” the Highwayman teased. “Come on, now, can you
not give me more than that?”
“Dark brown,” the Leper said, in the same dry, amused tone, and the Highwayman threw up his
hands in feigned exasperation.
“Very dark.”
“Curly or straight?”
“Neither.”

The Highwayman chewed on that a moment, then nodded. “Long or short?”
“Oh, for pity’s sake, man,” Claville laughed.
Then, quickly, the Leper reached up an carefully untucked one edge of the cloth; a moment later he
pulled it loose, unwinding the cloth beneath.
His skin was very pale, beneath the bindings--the right side of his neck unmarred, but the left with a
wide swath of healing pink lesions. Even these, though, already showed evidence of Dr. Guideville’s
cure, for they were no longer raised or lumpy, as they had been in the past.

His hair was the color of black coffee, the brown showing faintly only at the edges; he had it pulled
back in a sensible braid, with the braid doubled back on itself and held fast with a leather cord.
Dismas could see where the comb had left each dark wave distinct against the others; wisps of more
delicate hair clung to his forehead around his temples. With the veil removed, a steamy smell of
cloves and the grass came over Dismas like a heady breath.

“Have I satisfied this foxish curiosity? Or must I let you run your claws through it, as well?” Claville
asked. He sounded as if he were both asking a question and issuing some sort of challenge.

Dismas shifted in his seat, biting his lower lip. A low, banked pleasure spread through him, and he
found himself smirking a bit.

“And are you sure that’s not a wig--?”
Claville gave him a dirty look, but a moment later his eyes glimmered in merriment.
“You are not the first man to accuse me of that. Though fortunately you are wearing many fewer
rings than the first fellow, whose hand I felt tempted to remove out of annoyance alone when he got
it tangled,” then he paused, and sobered slightly. “No. My hair is--my one vanity. The disease took
much from me, but this…” he shook his head. “I kept it long because maintaining it is good practice
for maintaining the dexterity of my hands, as well.”
Dismas flicked his eyes between the top of Claville’s head and his lap.
He licked his lips and, as they said, ‘went for it’.

“Not the only ‘manual dexterity’ exercise you get up to, I hope,” he said.
Claville followed Dismas’s gaze--down to his own lap, and then looked back up at him and laughed
so hard he had to lie down.

“What if I say I am infirm, and need of aid, in that department?”
Dismas straightened cheerfully in his seat. “Well, I only work at the laundry here, but there’s no
sayin’ I can’t help you off with your drawers. And if I happen to help you with whatever you’ve got
in ‘em, I won’t tell if you won’t.”
Claville laughed until he had a small coughing fit, and Dismas poured him a cup of water, and felt
lighter and warmer and *better* than he had in years.

Chapter End Notes

So here we are, with Osmond eating candy and the boys flirting like the pair of overgrown teenage literature/theater nerds they are. This is what they've been doing in my head for months, and I've been trying to cushion it with plot, btw. Really they're endearingly affectionate and flirtatious, and I'm just. kind of here, with them making out in the backseat of the car i'm driving. and the fic is the car.

The 'what color is your hair' scene is brought to you, courtesy of the movie 'Girl With a Pearl Earring', which is a fantastic film i suggest, if you like period pieces in uncommon settings.

And did you think i WOULDN'T give my beloved Leper long, flowing hair? Why would you think that? omg have you SEEN portraits of some kings and princes from the middle ages, up to the ~1700s? i know it was usually wigs, but damn, the long flowy hair cascading down over your gleaming, flawless armor is a Look, one which i was not about to deprive Claville of. Incidentally, leprosy doesn't often cause scalp baldness irl, at least not according to the research i did. And--oh god--i did SO much research. Like, for example, did you know that physicians in India had a treatment/cure for leprosy as far back as the early 1800s? Making at least some of this totally plausible?

...also this was supposed to be published before Christmas, but uh. no. no, that didn't happen. i hope you enjoy it just the same. :)}
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

A Cure. Dr. Guideville as a Hero. Gratitude and Affection.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dismas left the dining hall after breakfast one morning, and was surprised to see Dr. Guideville in the hall. She carried a sheaf of papers in one hand, and was finishing a conversation with another doctor as he came up beside her.

“Master Dismas! I am pleased to see you. You are doing better?” she asked, and gave him another of her quick, bird-like looks; her dark eyes were shrewd and clever and though she was nearly two heads shorter than he was, he nearly wanted to squirm before her sharp, appraising gaze.

“Aye. Fell off the wagon,” he said, by way of explanation. “I, er. Took me old place back at the laundry, too…”

Her eyes softened, even as she sighed. “I see. Well. It is best that you have returned for aid in getting the issue under control.” then, a moment later, she straightened her white coat and said, “Will you accompany me to my offices? I have a task that needs doing, and I believe your assistance will be most beneficial.”

He had nothing else to do, and nearly an hour yet before he would be wanted at the laundry; so saying, he agreed to accompany her on her errand.

She led him through a mazelike warren of hallways, through several locked doors he’d seen but never had cause to want to open, and at last they came to a part of the hospital which seemed to be the offices of all the various doctors who worked there.

Her own office was scarcely bigger than a closet, with the right wall occupied by a tall shelf divided into many small square compartments. Each of these contained a dizzying variety of strange things: an entire row of compartments contained animals preserved in some pale amber-yellow liquid, another with several dark glass jars of pills and phials of medicines. Beneath that row was another row, containing small, neatly-labelled wooden boxes, apparently containing medicinal plants and other materials.

Upon the walls were anatomical drawings and diagrams, one of which he recognized as a very lifelike rendering of Claville’s face, his eyes closed.

The drawings were surrounded with notes, the margins packed, and here and there were arrows and lines pointing to some of the lesions on his face.

His drawing was one of many; to his other side was a drawing of the side of a boy’s face, which had been overtaken by what looked like several large blisters. One of them bloated out his eyelid, swelling the eye shut completely. Beneath both of them was another drawing, of a young woman’s back, with large patches of flat, scaly skin stretching across her lower back. Each was numbered and dated neatly, but he could not understand whatever system she had to organize them by.

He winced, looking at them, and wondered what diseased they’d had and if, perhaps, Dr. Guideville had treated them, as well.

“Are these all your patients?” he asked.
She straightened the papers against the desktop before she spoke. “Yes, actually. I was able to successfully treat all but one of the cases.”

He whistled, impressed. “You got nerves of steel, Doc. I’ve seen my share of sights, but this sort of thing, day in, day out…” he shook his head. Again he was impressed by her level of skill, and felt a growing sense of respect and admiration of her for it. “Dunno how you do it. But I thank you for it, just the same.”

She was smiling almost beatifically when he turned around.

“You are most welcome.” She set the papers down and stepped up beside him, looking a moment at the drawings; then finally she spoke, “I studied infectious disease at university. And yet, ironically, I find my skill here is needed more as a field surgeon. Of course I have also undertaken those studies; they form the basis of much of the education a physician receives. What actually drove me here, however, was talk of some rare fungal disease. Lurid rumors of people staggering down the Old Road, their bodies overgrown with mushrooms, their flesh sloughing from the bones…” she made an impatient noise and shook her head. “Of course I have found evidence of no such thing. Though there does appear to be a severe infestation of some unknown fungus in the forest.”

“Aye, there is. The trees’re all full of it, an’ the ones that ain’t infested are already dead.”

She looked at him with a shrewd curiosity while he spoke.

“The next time her ladyship sends you to the Weald, would you contact me? I would very much appreciate a sample of whatever fungus this is, which is apparently capable of infesting so many different species of trees. I understand the forest is not all broad-leaf trees?” she asked.

“Aye, sure, I’ll get you some of them nasty mushrooms. And no, the forest looks like it’s all sorts of trees--firs as well as broadleaf trees.”

She nodded, making a thoughtful noise, and her eyes drifted away, across her shelves full of samples.

He wondered what she was thinking of, but had no time to ask.

Several other doctors appeared momentarily, and Dr. Guideville hurried to usher them inside.

Once done, she closed and locked the door behind the last woman.

“Doctors, I wish to show you proof of my cure for leprosy!” she declared. So saying, she picked up the sheaf of the papers upon the table, and began expounding upon something in terms beyond Dismas’s education or understanding.

He stood in a corner, rather wishing he could lean against a wall and not daring to, for fear of disturbing something.

Standing among them, she looked for all the world like an initiate explaining herself to a coven of older sorceresses.

He caught Claville’s name a few times, along with other words such as ‘decreased size of lesions’ and ‘greatly lessened bacterial load’, which he took to understand that her treatment was working--and very well.

The excitement made his heart jump in his chest, and his guts tense up, but pleasantly.

He tried to listen more attentivey, after that, though he could understand but parts of the conversation as a whole.

He saw the other doctors watching her with faces ranging from shock to awe to disbelief; when she finished speaking, one of them shook her head and said, simply, “I cannot believe this. To be sure, you may have hit upon a good method of palliative care, but you must not dangle the hope of an impossible cure in the face of a patient so severely afflicted as he is.”

Dr. Guideville’s rebuff was quick. “I posit that my cure is both possible and reproducible. With the help of--of one Professor Bretel, from an university overseas, as well as my good friend Madamoiselle Neotha, a historian of some high repute, I have taken two existing methods of treatment and combined them into a new drug therapy regimen. My results are undeniable.” then she
paused a moment, drew a breath--and absolutely skewered the old woman with her following remark.

“Had any of you any integrity as doctors, and had you gone to check upon my patient yourselves, you would see his condition is already quite improved, despite his body not being entirely free of the infection as of yet.”

“You will please speak to us respectfully, Dr. Guideville! Do not forget that you are borrowing space in our hospital to conduct this ‘research!’” Someone else murmured in agreement, “We have not have the luxury of devoting so much time and energy and cost to treating one patient, nobleman though he may be.” “Yes,” she said, but then when she rolled her eyes, she caught Dismas’s gaze a moment, as if to say ‘Do you see what I must put up with?’ “But perhaps more care may be put towards finding cures for diseases, rather than ways to simply stave off the patients’ deaths for a bit longer.”

One of them had followed Dr. Guideville’s glance over at Dismas where he stood in the dim corner, and was now looking at him with the kind of white-faced shock usually reserved for the faces of rich housewives seeing a rat for the first time.

“Ladies, please. There appears to be a...patient present,” she said. Then all the eyes in the room fell on him, and he straightened slightly and tried not to look ill-favored. “What is he doing here?” another of the doctors asked. A worried glance ran between all of them, and then, before Dismas had to speak, Dr. Guideville coughed politely and spoke.

“This is Master Dismas, one of my first patients here, upon whom I proved my theory of silver being an anti-microbial material.” Dismas nodded in belated greeting. “You will recall he was suffering from a severely infected abdominal laceration, the typical treatment having failed; and it was only my new, ‘wasteful’ methods which saved his life.” she paused again, smiling at him. Dismas didn’t even know what he was meant to do with that type of attention, so he looked around at the doctors and nodded once again.

“Your ability to treat one flesh wound does not mean you have a magical cure for an incurable illness,” the same doctor said, with a scoffing laugh. “It was not merely one flesh wound,” Dr. Guideville said. “Again, I can prove my physic’s results are successful, and reproducible.” She looked around at the circle of women, drew a fortifying breath, and spoke again, “Doctors, I ask you to accompany me to visit my patient, Master Claville, soon to be a former leper.”

Before the eyes of all the other doctors--who hung well back--Dr. Guideville rolled up Claville’s sleeves with gloved hands and explained her treatment regimen, pointing now and again to healing lesions on his arms. Then, in a moment that Dismas was sure he would remember for the rest of his life, she removed one of her gloves, and with a flourish that made the other doctors start backwards with gasps, she shook his hand.

“Master Claville, I thank you for your patience, and I proclaim you on the road to being cured!” Claville looked as though he did not truly believe her for a moment; then, looking again at the crowd of other doctors, he looked back up at her and tried to speak.
The other doctors were staring at Dr. Guideville, aghast that she dared touch a leper’s bare skin with her own.

Joy, confusion, and disbelief warred for their place upon Claville’s face; he looked into Dismas’s eyes in surprise, but neither of them could speak.

But he was overcome with emotion a moment later, covering first his mouth, and then his eyes. Dismas went to him and settled again in the little chair by the bed, and chafed his arm reassuringly while the doctors exploded into excited speech and questions.

What felt like hours passed before they left.

“That was an…interesting stunt, Doctor,” Claville murmured. His hand had found Dismas’s, and they were exchanging slow, secretive smiles; Dr. Guideville was busy at the little table, arranging some of the papers she’d brought.

“It was hardly so dramatic as all that,” she said. “You are no longer infectious. The infection is well under control, and I believe that by the end of the next year, you will be entirely cured.”

She straightened back up and came over to them, radiating pride and pleasure.

Dr. Guideville read Claville his clean bill of health, and when he covered his eyes and wept in joy and disbelief, Dismas rubbed his shoulders—his right shoulder, the one he figured was unmarred by lesions, as he was worried he might bruise or rupture something and slow his healing.

Finally the doctor, smiling and very pleased herself, handed him the discharge papers.

Claville took the papers and her hand, shaking it and thanking her in a profusion of praises.

“Now, you understand, you must still return for regular examinations, and you must continue taking the medicines as directed. You must not, for any reason, stop taking the medicines. Failure to complete the full regimen will result in the infection returning, but strengthened.” She paused, long enough that Claville nodded, drew a handkerchief from somewhere, and blew his nose.

“There may be some symptoms which cannot be reversed; the scarring, for one, which the treatment will have no effect upon. But I am confident that the treatment will eradicate the infection completely, and with it arrest the process of physical deterioration.” she continued.

“I have--I cannot--I have no way to thank you, Doctor. You have given me the rest of my life,” he said, “I will remember you with gratefulness until my dying breath.”

She smiled again, and nodded, but affected her usual brusqueness. “Yes, yes. You being a soldier, I am certain I shall see you again sooner rather than later, but in future for some non-medical intervention.”

He laughed twice, and dissolved halfway through into quiet, sighing sobs of relief.

“Master Dismas,” Dr. Guideville said at last, “Would you please help your companion out of bed? For we are much in need of this room, for a person who is actually ill.”

Chapter End Notes

Dr. Guideville is brilliant, but everyone endlessly underestimates or unappreciates her.

Here she is fiery brilliant! :D

I literally did enough research to write a long, detailed essay on the history of leprosy and various treatment methods down through the ages. But i told you i would save Claville, and i did!
End Notes

Please excuse any spelling errors--my keyboard is on its last legs and sometimes does not cooperate with me.

As always, I hope you enjoy reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!