Pride and Other Poisons

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Summary

A Victorian Rumbelle AU. This is a tale set in the Victorian Era, employing more than a few Victorian tropes. Gold is haunted by the First Carlist War, and Belle embodies everything he hates from his past. Expectations will crumble like the foundations of an old house, and it will be up to them to build something new on the rubble. Rated M for violence and substance abuse.

This story will feature a large cast of supporting characters from the show.

COMPLETE!
Chapter 1

I. Dens of Iniquity

Sir Maurice knew the bitter taste of defeat, it was only a lack of gumption and common sense which kept him standing perpetually in line for a second helping.

The gambling halls and gentlemen's clubs of of London were a fool's respite, one strong drink and a coach-and-four away from debtor's prison. But perhaps Lady Luck might grace him for an hour or two; he wanted only enough blunt to settle his most pressing accounts in town, hire a post horse, and perhaps purchase some small trinket for his ward.

Instead, he found himself offering up his vowels to the an ill-tempered Scotsman who more than dabbled in trade and had contrived to be elevated to the peerage from the wrong side of the sheets. The story of a Lord's seed planted in the weaver's daughter was as well known among the gossips as it was the rakes, and if half of it were true... It didn't merit consideration.

Sonnachdubh bore the gaunt look of an opium-eater, and though his well-fitted frock and cravat added to his air of consequence, he stood not more than half-a-head taller than a lady in her slippers. The Viscount was also lame in one leg, a war wound from the early rebellions in Spain, and his cane's bite was feared up and down the Thames, by street urchins and businessmen alike.

Maurice thought the Viscount looked more like he belonged in the Penal Colonies than a Highland estate, Scotsman or no. The man was known to be poisonous, violent, proud, and fond of cards. No one else would extend him any credit, nor the courtesy of a game, and so he'd taken a seat at the Viscount's table. Then, plied by a bit of early luck and persisting drink, he'd lost everything.

Sonnachdubh poured them each another measure of absinthe, green and swirling with the scent of fennel and herbs, as they prepared to settle their accounts. He would have to make his excuses; there was not a single pound in his pocket, nor in his accounts. The Scotsman added four steady drops of saffron-red laudanum to his own glass, from a small hip flask, leaving the tincture to hang like blood in the louche. As Maurice did his best to explain himself, the Viscount downed his drink in one swift gulp.

"I'm not a man who likes to trade in credit," growled Sonnachdubh, a small cluster of golden teeth along his bottom jaw showing through the hard grimace. "As it happens, I've bought up quite a few of your notes. I'd like arrangements made before you return home."

He slid a piece of paper from his palm, passing it to Maurice; the figure written on it was astronomical, more than his estate could make in half a decade if all other expenses were ignored. A cold sweat broke out on the portly man's brow — the Viscount had not simply collected his notes, he'd collected all of them. The value of his house and lands did not even begin to cover the amount. To his shame, the figure was perhaps a tad low; the butcher, the tailor... small, household accounts that wouldn't have come to much more than twenty pounds each, but might have tacked on another hundred in collusion, but had been of no consequence to the Viscount. Sir Maurice was ruined. He'd never allowed himself to face it before now.

All his life he'd struggled to persevere without descending to the ranks of working poor thronging in the streets and clamoring for alms. He'd failed; he'd failed his ancestors, his title, his land, himself, and his girl.

"There… there must be something else?" he offered, struggling to maintain his composure. He
could not pay, and Sonnachdubh was within his rights to clap him in irons or — if rumors were to be believed — to beat him with his gold-topped cane. They said he was the devil incarnate, as likely to shoot a man as look at him, and — in the Reign of Her Majesty, 1857— Sir Maurice did not want to die, broken by a stick of gold and ebony.

"I'd like my money," glowered the man, adjusting his collar and donning his hat. "Have your banker's cheque tomorrow, during the regular calling hours."

"There isn't any money," moaned Maurice. "I haven't got it. If you'll take my note, I'll… I'll…"

It killed him to say it so plainly, but that was the truth of it. For the Viscount to have bought up his vowels in the first place, he must have known the extent of Maurice's follies. Whatever he wanted, he would have it — his estate was heavily mortgaged, but the Viscount might take it as a settlement in lieu of involving the constabulary. Or perhaps he could speak to the rail men again; Maurice had refused them access to his lands several years ago, but the dratted trains found a way around. He and his girl wouldn't need much, just a dower cottage and a little income — at least until she and the Judge's son could be married.

Lord, the Judge! The Right Honorable George Frontland III did not like that his heir, George IV, was engaged to marry the penniless ward of a penniless squire. But he'd agreed to the match. Surely, as a fellow gentleman, he'd honor that promise. But would the son still have her? Anything could happen to his Belle, and a jilt would not be the worst of it....

"So offer me something else," glowered the Viscount, his smile as deadly as the cane. They kept their voices low so as not to make a scene..

"I have some books left in the library that might be sold. Latin and Greek masters, all very neatly bound. I've a small trust, not much, but a little that I could take out in capital and invest. Or there's the interest, if you'd take the sum paid out over time. Belle and I don't need—"

"Belle?" asked the man, pulling his kid-gloves slowly onto his long, lean hands.

The look on Sonnachdubh's face made Maurice ill. He knew. The bastard knew all about her, and before the words even formed, Sir Maurice could see how their negotiations would end. The Viscount would demand his ward in exchange for the lien on his properties, and that darling girl would be taken from him! Lord above, he'd never even told her...

"She is engaged…" he stammered, trying to un-say his mistake.

"I'm not looking to marry the girl," snapped Sonnachdubh. "I'll take her to serve me in my country house."

"Never," Maurice swore, his blood raging. The penalty for murder couldn't be much worse than a lifetime in the poor house; surely he could throttle the slender cripple with his own cane before the constable came? It would keep Belle safe from the lecherous beast, at least for a few more weeks.

"Then what? Is she to play at Dickens and support the pair of you on her sewing? I will claim your lands, your estate, your property — everything you hold dear, I will take by right of law, and I will sell it to the first climber who makes me a lucrative offer. What of your girl then? Will the genteel folk hire the bastard daughter of a French harlot for a governess, hn?"

"How do you know—"

"Never mind how I know. Do we have a deal, or shall I have them take you away in chains?" The Viscount's coarse brogue thickened with every syllable. He was no gentleman, of that Maurice was
"Chains," vowed Maurice. "You won't have her, not so long as I can prevent you."

Less than an hour later, after the Viscount had drunk another heady glass of absinthe and laudanum, the bailiff came to take Maurice away. Sonnachdubh looked to be in his own world, barely pausing to acknowledge Maurice in parting.

All was lost, and he'd never even told her...

II. The Midnight Ride

Belle French, so-named for her French mother and lack of any other proper parentage, was shocked when she found the Viscount of Sonnachdubh waiting for her in Judge Frontland's drawing room. She had been at rest in the Judge's library, her one pleasure in staying with her fiance's household. When the footman summoned her, she'd expected to see her father — not this impish man, clothed only in his waistcoat and shirtsleeves.

Sir Maurice had raised her, almost from infancy, and she'd expected him home from London two days prior. The lack of news made her restless, and when she was restless she liked to read. The library was her only comfort for the two nights of waiting, and it contained more volumes than she'd ever imagined. George disliked sitting with her when she struggled through her Latin and Greek; it was hard enough upon him that he'd never mastered the languages, barely scraping through the dons of Oxford, but to see her work through it for pleasure sent him into doldrums that lasted well past supper.

Maurice had taught Belle at his knee, yet he refused to let her advertise for a post as a tutor or governess. They needed the money, and she'd enough accomplishments to shock most polite company, just not the right ones. In these matters, as in all others, she also lacked pedigree. Instead of music, they learned arithmetic; instead of drawing, her father taught her the constellations; in place of dance, the new discoveries of the natural sciences took shape. He did not know what knowledge best befitted a Lady (or the bastard ward of a Squire), so he simply taught her the same impractical wonders that had rendered him incapable of finding an occupation. Neither of them knew he'd been doing her a greater disservice than help in the end, but it was too late for a finishing school now — and they had no money to pay for one, at any rate.

She knew things, things that progressives and liberals bandied about, and it was all together better if she didn't speak much in the Judge's house. The Judge had a peculiar way of looking at her when she and George sat side by side, usually with her reading aloud to him in English while he tolerated it all good-heartedly; his eyes would darken, and his scowl deepen. Ever since a strange encounter when she was barely turned fourteen, she'd endeavored to stay away from him, and was careful to visit only with George in accompaniment. The invitation to join the Judge in his study set Belle immediately on edge. Even if her father was returned from his business, the Judge could not have any honorable reason to ask for her company so late in the evening.

"Miss French," the Judge said, ushering her in. His eyes lingered overly-long on her uncovered arms. "Welcome, please allow me to present Lord Rumford Gold, Viscount of Sonnachdubh."

"My Lord," Belle replied, doing her best to dip into a curtsy. The Judge often mocked her clumsy attempts, so she focused on performing properly; George didn't seem to mind that she couldn't demure on demand, but — then again — for all that he was sweet, loyal, and kind, George didn't mind much of anything, except Greek and Latin texts.

Despite the Viscount's state of undress, Belle felt herself equally ill-met. She wore one of her
mother's old dresses, fitted up under the long shadow of the Reign of Terror and Napoleon's armies in cold indifference to the Jacobin agenda. It was, as all of her wardrobe, refitted to suit as best it could; the neck line was immodest, the ruffles out of style, and the lace beginning to yellow, but it was the best dress she owned. Her others were all similar, equally out of style, and none of her simpler frocks would do to sit at the Judge's table.

"Miss French," the Viscount intoned, his voice cold and severe, "I am afraid I have some unpleasant news. Your patron, Sir Maurice, has been taken to prison until he can repay his debts. I am now the sole holder of his notes."

Belle knew the shock and pain of it all must have been written on her face, and she did her best to school her features. If he spoke truthfully, then her father needed her. He was a good gentleman from an old family, the new ways of industry did not suit him — but failure to adapt was not a crime. Prison would kill her father, he barely knew the world, aside from Paris, London and the fire-side of his own study.

"Naturally," added the Judge, adjusting his white wig, "this will change the nature of the understanding between yourself and my son."

He was looking at her so meaningfully, and — for a moment — Belle thought he meant to reach for her hand with his own, but Sonnachdubh interrupted.

"No, there will be no more weddings," he said ominously.

Belle agreed. She didn't have it in her to fight for a marriage of warming friendship, when her father needed her. He was a good gentleman from an old family, the new ways of industry did not suit him — but failure to adapt was not a crime. Prison would kill her father, he barely knew the world, aside from Paris, London and the fire-side of his own study.

"Yes, yes," the Judge whispered, looking pale, "You shall have use of the carriage to take you on the morrow. And tonight…"

"Sir?"

"You will marry me," said the Judge. "It will be only a matter of weeks before the paperwork can be obtained. You could consider it my wedding gift to you."

Belle looked aghast. To wed the Judge, not his son? A plume of bile blossomed in her chest. He'd always been horrible to her, and the plan would crush poor George. How could she marry where neither warmth nor friendship lingered, to a man who haunted and terrified her?

"You would save my father?" she managed, despite the thickness of her tongue. If the elder Frontland could be prevailed upon to buy out Sonnachdubh, then perhaps...

"I would have you," he replied, and the words left little to the imagination.

Belle looked, helpless, between the two fierce men who'd claimed her.

"There is another way," Sonnachdubh cut in, levering himself to his feet with his ebony cane.

"Wh… what is it?" Belle asked, terrified by her choices as much as the strange Viscount's eerie air.

"I have an indenturement contract in my hand, Miss French. If you agree to come and work for me, I will see to it that Sir Maurice is released, and restore his lands to him post haste."
"Now see here!" objected the Judge, slamming his port glass down on the mantle. "The girl is mine, and no scribble of paper from a jumped-up Scot--"

"You will find it's all done-up very neat," Sonnachdubh spat at him, voice dripping with contempt. "All legal and notarized; the woman need only sign her name. You can write your own name, can't you, dearie?"

"Well of course I—"

"Then please do," he continued, handing the contract to her.

"And I needn't marry?"

"In truth, I vow that you never will."

Belle wasn't sure whether to take that as a kind comfort or a veiled threat, and she nearly collapsed into the nearest chair to read his terms of indent. The Judge was at her arm, instantly, snatching at the contract.

"Belle, do not be absurd. Surely I am a better alternative than this... this slavery."

"Let her decide for herself, Frontland," snarled the Viscount, taking a long pull from the flask he kept tucked into the breast of his waistcoat. He brandished his cane at the Judge and the man stepped back quickly, giving her the space she needed to think clearly.

Belle looked at the Judge, and her skin crawled over her bones at the thought him touching her. All was lost — her home, her father, her humble hopes. She had to be strong. In trembling hands, she picked up Sonnachdubh's contract and began to sift through. He would, indeed, restore Sir Maurice's property, but in exchange....

"What are you doing?" demanded the Viscount, leering down at her as the Judge glared daggers into the pair of them from across the room.

"Reading your offer?" Belle whispered, unsure of whether or not he would like that answer. If he was to be her new master, she would have to learn quickly what he expected of her.

He seemed startled by that, so she returned to the document. He would restore Sir Maurice's lands, but he wanted her in service to him for the rest of her life. Basic provisions were made: she was to be clothed and fed, but all she had would come from his generosity alone. Once installed, she was never to stray from his estate, or Sir Maurice would be asked once more to repay his debts — of which, it seemed, there were plenty.

"May I have a day? I'd like a lawyer to advise —"

"No," the Scotsman half-shouted, his accent thick. "You're out of time, dearie."

"Refuse him outright or I'll have none of you," threatened Frontland. "Not to wife, anyway."

"I... Alright. May I have a pen, please?" Belle's hand shook as she signed, but she swallowed down her fear like a bitter medicine and rooted it to her gut. She would be brave, purely and simply brave, until her inner feelings mirrored her outer demeanor. Lord Sonnachdubh may be a bully and a scoundrel, but she knew all that she needed to: the choices were a life time of indenturement to this stranger would be preferable to marrying Frontland. At least he wanted her for the work she could do, not to warm his bed and boss around in the bedroom.
Upon seeing the cold, calculating look in his eye turn to one of cruel delight, Belle began to doubt her resolve. Still, it was decided, and her papa, his lands, their household... all that would be spared. She screwed down her fear again, and vowed not to faint, not to shed a tear.

After that, Belle felt as though she were moving numb through a dream, as though her life was playing out before her on some London stage, and she was only one member of an audience filled with spies. The servants fetched her trunk, but the Viscount insisted that she leave it behind. Wearing only her nearly threadbare evening gown and hearing the town clock tower striking midnight somewhere in the distance, Belle lifted herself into the Viscount's landau. She'd never entered a carriage unassisted before, and was sure she'd made a debacle of herself, but the Viscount joined her a moment later without commentary.

The driver whipped their set of four back to life, and they took off down the Judge's gravely drive at a quick pace. The Viscount did not speak, and — frightfully aware of her rapidly changing circumstances — Belle dared not break the silence with her own shaking voice. He drank from a small flask, told the footman to shoot her if she caused a fuss or tried to escape, and somehow managed to sleep.

Potholes and the damp, cold night kept Belle awake. She feared this man, though he looked common enough with his eyes shut. They were the Devil's own eyes, when he opened them: steely, intense, and full of hate. Finally, after hours on the road, her body and mind ached equally; Belle forced herself to stay upright, and bit back the urge to weep.

**III. A Dram of Laudanum**

Gold could see the girl shaking like a leaf in the seat across from him. He had nothing to say to her, and no one of her lineage had anything to say to him. Not ever. The selfish, privileged child dressed up like a Parisian harlot — like mother like daughter — would learn soon enough what it meant to lose the trappings of an over-spending, spoiling father and serve like a common field-hand. She should have stayed with the monster she knew rather than run off with the one she did not. Her body in the lecherous old villain's embrace would have been a small burden compared to his own unflinching hatred.

The girl continued to shiver, and Gold couldn't stand the sight of her. His leg ached from days on the road, and his head throbbed — the sway of the landau made him feel almost ill. He fingered the small vial of medicinal opium in his pocket, but satisfied himself with another drag of the alcoholic, spiced laudanum. Poets sweated and wept up and down China Towne for a snifter of his personal supplies, but he had to remain alert lest the little bitch decide she liked to bite.

Slowly the poppy began to work its magic and he felt himself begin to float above the padded seats and his head began to swim. Gold knocked three times against the coachman's seat and gave the order to shoot her if she tried to leave. Then he tipped his top hat over his eyes and drifted off into a laudanum-fueled state of semi-lucid sleep.

Spain, 1838, and of places he wished never to see danced in front of his eyes, maddening his brain. As a thin veil of sweat formed against his skin, he saw the thin, pale French girl brandishing a rifle in her Carlist blues. She was bashing an Englishman's skull in with a heavy shillelagh, the blood and skull blooming like opium fields on the green grass beneath her victims. She was moving down the row to the next man, each one erupting in a splash of petals and blood-smear. They were all prisoners, all as good as dead; Spaniards took no captives, they were savages, like the French girl.

A world away, men were dying in Crimea; in Gold's mind, the same old atrocities looped through in a spiraling tempest that refused to let go of him. He was next. She was going to bash his head in.
Gold knew he had to save himself, even if he couldn't save his men, and he slashed violently at the girl with a make-shift blade fashioned from a broken bayonet. The happy songs of Italian Carnivale drifted in, and he stood with blood-stained hands in front of an army of jaunty Harlequins. No matter how he slashed, he could not discover the true culprit. It was always her doubles, uncanny doppelgangers, mocking and circling him.

Finally the masques dissolved, revealing the coal-black eyes of his newest acquisition. Then another followed suit, and it was the same — he stood alone against an army of her, grinning cold and cruel as his panic settled in. Gold attacked them, shocked to see his bayonet shard had been reduced to a white feather. The white feather of the coward.

He was not a coward. He was not a coward. He was not a coward.

Gold tore the limbs from the Harlequins, one by one, bashing in the girls' face with heavy rocks. She would stop smiling so smugly; she would repay her debt. As her blood dripped and pooled, it began flaking away like pieces of ash or butterfly wings into wafting, red poppy petals on the warm summer winds.

A canon fired, felling the last jester, and Gold woke with a start. Brow slick with sweat, he heard the tell-tale trotting of a team of horses on cobbled streets. They must have crossed into London in the night, and from there back to the Sonnachdubh estate.

He opened his eyes. The girl was leaning over him, a look he did not recognize plastered to her face. Gold pushed her away, shaking her, and shouting.

"Never touch me, do you hear me? Dinnae, ever, ever touch me!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she begged, looking terrified. Good. She should be afraid. "I thought you were having a fit, I just wanted to help—"

"No one can help me," Gold snarled, throwing her back into her own seat, "least of all you." And, with that, he took another long pull from his flask and dropped off into the realm of memory and regret.
Chapter 2

IV. Cerberus at the Gates

Their carriage ride dragged on for three days without stopping. When fresh horses were required, the landau exchanged cattle at a village post-house and a new set-of-four was strapped into the yoke. As the stable-attendants hurried about, the panting, lathered beasts (whipped half-mad by the indefatigable coachman) were unhooked and the carriage checked for signs of an impending breakdown. All of it happened in the space of an hour, and Belle was not permitted more than the use of a chamber pot and a basin of water. The men at work in the stables were good enough to pass her lemonade and small cakes through the windows, and that was their only sustenance.

Lord Sonnachdubh took none of it. He drank only from his flask and left her alone in the carriage for the duration of the change-over. Whether he ate and drank or consorted with money-lenders and whores, Belle never knew. He would only return when the team was ready, discard his frock-coat and resume ignoring her in little more than his shirt-sleeves despite the encroaching, Northern cold.

Sonnachdubh did little more than sleep in fits and scowl at her. She had dared to comfort the wretched man when his dreams became violent on that first night, and had found herself unwelcome. He had moved to strike her but stopped himself, and - she supposed - being scolded and ignored was a kinder fate than she could have known. Belle was a servant now, indentured by contract to a man who would not speak a single syllable to calm her nerves. She was alone.

They stopped for nothing, save fresh horses, and Belle feared that she had been carried away by the very dogs of hell.

What must Sir Maurice think? To be freed from prison, only to return home and find his debts forgiven and his ward gone. Belle was not permitted to leave a letter or bid her fiancé farewell; the Judge's testimony would be all that Maurice could ever know. He would be raised up high in unknown victory, only to be dashed on the rocks below. Sir Maurice loved her as a daughter, and she loved him as a father. In her whole life, riddled with doubt and unconventional though it was, she never doubted that she was Sir Maurice's most valued treasure.

Belle feared she could not have hurt him more had she eloped in the night with a common criminal. At least the small comfort of knowing his I.O.U.s were not hanging over the estate anymore, waiting to fall as a blade through sinew at the least provocation, comforted her. Her father deserved a good life, and he might have one if he put his mind to it. He was young - young enough still to have a son - and it would have killed him to see his ancestral home divided up among the banks and charlatans. She could give him that, at least. He'd given her her life, when she ought to have been in an orphanage or workhouse as the unwanted bastard of nobody; she owed him all that her life was worth, and she loved him. Sometimes, to be brave, love was enough.

If only Lord Sonnachdubh would say something - anything - to show that he had not forgotten her. He looked worlds away, lost in another time perhaps, and did not spare her a single syllable. The driver, Mr. Dovey, escorted her when needs-must that she leave the carriage, and he escorted her back just as somberly. It was all so unfeeling that she felt like a living painting, being hauled back to hang at the master's estate.

They had not paused for several hours when the carriage finally turned down a roughly-graveled country road, and Belle knew they would not stop again until they reached the Viscount's home. Her body ached with every passing pot-hole and jostle, weary from three days of unparalleled, wickedly fast travel. It was a mercy they had not eaten since Edinburgh: she was not sure she could
have kept the contents of her stomach down had it been more than a little long-forgotten tea with bread and butter.

When they arrived at his estate, every joint in her body ached. She had neither bathed properly nor dressed her hair since leaving the Judge's house, and every bump in the gravedale drive made her fear that she shatter before they arrived. Such a sorry state. Belle did her level-best to give the furious villain his space when the driver roused him, and - once the scowling gentleman exited the carriage - Mr. Dovey turned to help her down, an after-thought.

Sonnachdubh still wore only his waistcoat and shirtsleeves, frock coat forgotten on the rich upholstered seat, and he cut a sharp contrast to the hulking coachman in a black greatcoat bundled up beside them. Belle clutched her own threadbare shawl tighter; the dress she wore was a double-curse, almost an antique despite her efforts to alter it and completely useless to keep out the cutting Scottish breeze. In their cold nights in the landau, she'd pulled the thin woollen shawl around her arms, rugged her bonnet down, and tucked her legs up onto the seat and let her skirts act as blankets. Propriety was a luxury she could not afford if she did not want to freeze, she’d seen that immediately, and - at any rate - her escorts didn't make any notice of her.

Used to Maurice's country home along the Channel, with its warm summers and mild winters, Belle had never dreamed such a surreal place could exist just beyond her own borders. It was a silly notion. Of course the world was so much bigger than England, but - in early autumn - it amazed her what the span of only a few days' restless travel to Scotland could change. The highland mountains, rife with eerie mist, and the distant sound of wind over the lochs haunted Belle in her sleep-deprived state. For a very grounded, un-superstitious girl, so much of the unknown all forced together in one place sent a shiver of doubt and fear to her very center.

Of course she'd worried herself half-sick in the first day, but when her captor - her employer, she corrected - ripped her away from friends and family for reasons he had yet to articulate, what was she meant to think? He could mean to install her in his household, dress her in livery, and never speak to her again for the rest of his life. He might beat her with his cane and hold her hand to the hot oven for failing to curtsey properly. The reality of her predicament was not forgotten, only... there was nothing she could do about it, other than try to not to buckle under the burden. Worrying could not make her contract any less binding, so she spent the ride trying to think of something else. Now that she was here, at a dark house with sagging eaves and hounds baying in the background, the enormity of it threatened to swallow her up.

The second the Viscount's hand met her arm, Belle felt the weakness of her body. Her legs trembled to support her, a stiff breeze would have crushed her utterly.

"Mr. Dovey," Sonnachdubh said, ushering her gently toward the massive coachman who seemed neither to sleep nor speak. "Escort Miss French to Mrs. Hopper. She's to start immediately."

Tears pricked at the corners of Belle's eyes. She was in no fit state for introductions, exhausted and sore as she was; she'd known that signing her life over to this man would not be easy, but to save Sir Maurice - the only father she'd ever known - had seemed worth any cost. She had to be brave, and do the brave thing until she felt equal to it. And then... And then nothing. Survival, that was as far ahead as she could think.

"Sir, I-" Belle started, stumbling as Dovey's firm arm began to lead her away. She hadn't meant to object, not really, only she desperately needed a moment to collect herself before her legs gave out and she collapsed.

With reflexes faster than a serpent, the Viscount snatched her bonnet from her head and tossed it to
the shabbily-dressed, slightly portly man holding the horses.

"Hopper," Sonnachdubh bit out, cutting off her own speech. "If the girl tries to run, I want you to set the dogs on her."

The older man, whose hair hung lank and gray at the side of his face, grinned wickedly as he caught the thing. He pressed her little straw and cotton hat to his face, taking the scent in a way that made Belle queasy.

"A hound never forgets a scent once he's got it, Miss," grinned Hopper. "Least not one of my beasts."

Belle's hair fell half-loose around her face before catching in the breeze, obscuring her face. No other words were spoken. Sonnachdubh turned his back to her and began a quick-limp up the drive to his slack, uninviting estate.

"Come along, Miss," instructed Dovey, leading her once more toward the back of the house. The servants' entrance, she realized.

For a man of means like the Viscount, his home's shabbiness and general air of depravity took Belle by surprise. He kept only the finest things on his person: his clothes, trinkets, and carriage were all of the first order, yet his ancestral home was left to sag. Too exhausted to give any of it more than a passing glance, Belle nearly collapsed upon finding herself ushered into the unexpectedly warm reprieve of the kitchen.

The room extended out before her: to the right stood the sinks and ovens, to the left hung pots, pans, kettles and a door to what looked to be the pantry. Directly in front of her, Belle could see that the kitchen opened up into an adjacent chamber - the servants' dining room, probably - and, as expected, the entire affair looked to be the pulsating heart of Sonnachdubh's property.

A small boy of maybe ten years leaped to his feet from his seat by the oven, and Belle caught the quick flash of a kitchen maid - another child, similarly aged - running back and forth from the pantry.

"Sit down," sneered a sharp voice from behind her. Belle turned to see a thin woman with messily-piled curls and a plum shawl address the boy from the other side of the room.

"Bae says we have to stand when a Lady comes in, Momma," replied the child, blushing red to match his ginger locks as he stole another furtive glance at Belle. Her dress may have been out of history, but - she supposed - it still spoke of a certain position.

"Master Baelfire's not at home, Archibald, and this ent a Lady if I ever saw one, is it Mr. Dovey? Look at her, hair half blown away and pale as a corpse."

"Is this a new maid, then, Mrs. Hopper?" asked another. The newcomer was an old woman, leaning out of the pantry, with the little brown-haired girl clinging to her skirts.

"I ent hired any new maids, Mrs. Lucas. Vera and Margie get on fine, don't they?" Mrs. Hopper bellowed back. She turned to face Belle, and Mr. Dovey walked back out the door - abandoning her.

"I'm Lord Sonnachdubh's new servant," offered Belle, hoping to clear the air in the room. Mrs. Lucas - the cook, she surmised - and the young kitchen maid went back to their work. The young boy, Archibald, seemed to lose interest as well, leaving her entirely at the mercy of his mother, the house keeper.
"Oh, listen to you. 'Lord Sonnachdubh,' indeed. We don't stand on no ceremony here, girl. You'll call him Mr. Gold or Sir, like the rest of us, and you'll call me Ma'am, or there'll be hell to pay."

In the distance, Belle could hear the sound of hunting dogs howling and horses braying. This was it then: she'd been brought to this strange, new place, a labyrinth of possibilities, and there was no escape. Ariadne was brave when she had to tend to the Minotaur's maze, and she brought down the beast with her little ball of twine. She could be clever, that was her only real accomplishment - everybody said so. Even if no Theseus ever came to set her free, Belle was determined not to falter. Somehow, she would succeed.

V. Suited for Trade

This new girl of Gold's was a sow's ear dressed in a silk purse lucky to have escaped the guillotine. Thirty years ago, Gidge might have sold her off to the Jacobins, dressed up in her French frills and silk slippers like a painting. They'd have paid handsomely, too; Gidge always had an eye for such things.

First of all, she started in on Lord Sonnachdubh, like she was society. And her hands were pale and small, no good for scrubbing. Then she'd asked after tea and the wash-room, as though the rest of the staff didn't have quite enough to be getting along with now that Mr. Gold had returned.

Of course Mrs. Lucas obliged her, the cow, with a cup of tea and a seat by the fire. Mrs. Lucas thought she was entitled, last of the house's old-guard too stubborn to move on when Mr. Gold brought in his own people. If she didn't make a passing gruel, the Master would have chased her out with a coal shovel. And that granddaughter... everyone knew Ruby Lucas' mother was a destitute London whore. She didn't belong in service, she belonged in the poor house, in the factories, or on a thin mattress in China Town. The girl was nearly twelve, high time she got out of the kitchens and did something with herself.

Gold was a cur. He'd locked himself in his study and issued no instructions. Dovey was useless, as usual, and a bully. Her husband would certainly have an idea or two about what to do with the new girl, and she was inclined to let him have her as a stable-hand. Shoveling shit was as good an employment as any for a little mushroom who liked to put on airs and play at being a Lady.

"What are your qualifications, girl?" snapped Gidge, already sizing the girl up for a scullery maid.

"My name is Belle," the young brunette replied, brushing back her curls from her face. Her eyes were red-rimmed, as though she meant to cry, and dark circles lingered under her sallow eyes.

That hair would be the first thing to go; they didn't tolerate maids wearing false-fronts in this household, and if the little vagabond didn't own a bonnet then it was hardly the house's responsibility to lend her one. Vera and Margie got on just infe in their own calico dresses, the laundress handled the aprons, and that was as far as it needed to go. If this new piglet thought she ought to wash pans in a ball gown or muck stables in a powdered wig, Gigde was more than happy to let the silly thing try.

"I can sew a little, and cut a pen. I speak French and a little Italian. I.. I can lay a table, if the company's not too formal. I know how to set a fireplace, and budget a pantry."

"Lord above, next you'll be telling me that you read and write!"

"I do read and write," the girl confessed, looking puzzled.

That made Gidge's stomach turn sour. Housekeepers needed to read and write and handle figures,
not scullery maids and stable hands. What was she ever going to need to write down? Nobody was
every going to tell her anything important enough for writing. No wonder she was full of herself,
the poor little thing; she was useless, only suited for trade like a middle-class factory worker.

"We'll not have reading and putting on airs in this house," Mrs. Hopper snapped back in reply.
"You'll not need those skills to empty chamber pots. You're more suited to a shipping yard, and I
shall tell Mr. Gold first-thing tomorrow that there's simply no space for you at Sonnachdubh."

"But Bae knows how to read, Momma," her son piped up. When would he get through his skull
that he was not to be talking non-stop about his betters?

"Aye, and for the last time Master Baelfire's been sent away! He weren't your friend, Archibald
Hopper, you were his employee. You don't need to know letters and things, you're going to take
over for Papa in a few years, when you're ready to move on from being a gillie."

"Yes, Momma."

He was a good boy, her Archie. As long as Gold kept him on, he'd be more than able to support
Mr. Hopper and herself when they retired from service in another ten years or so.

"But I signed a contract..." the girl started again, face uncomprehending.

She was probably a street-walker, thought Gidge. Sworn not to talk about the true father of her
bastard in exchange for a warm place to stay. An actress, maybe, if the costumed dress was any
sort of proof. If the girl was in a family way, then it would be dealt with. She'd have the thing, and
they could toss it out into the garden or send it off to work chasing bobbins for all she cared - she'd
be rid of the pair of them, and if the ledger showed that she ordered a few extra supplies
immediately after so be it. It was her right as housekeeper to make the best of it, and she'd the right
to profit by her master's disinterest. It was her right, especially, when he foisted off his leavings on
her.

Well, if Mr. Gold wanted the girl kept in any sort of comfort, he'd see to that himself. He damn
well didn't have any trouble making his orders known, snarling at them all like a stuck beast when
the mood took him. With any luck, he'd be passed out asleep in his study for the next two days.
After a long trip, they rarely saw him until he'd rested.

Imagine being duff-up with that old boar's spawn - the shame of it all! Gidge would take her plain,
honest John Hopper any day. He knew what was what, and how to make a living for the family.

Hell spawn: that's what girls like Belle got for rutting around with crippled scoundrels, digging for
the odd pound; if the girl thought she'd have money, she was sorely mistaken. Gold spent money
on two things; his own comforts, and his son Bae. They didn't stand on ceremony in this house,
and when Gold was satisfied he'd run his father's ancestral home into the ground he'd probably sell
it all off anyway. There was no room for the cozy aristocracy in Sonnachdubh House. That's why
he'd hired her to keep house for him, so she could do things up properly and drive out any notions
to the contrary.

And this girl... the shape of her nose displeased Gidge tremendously.

"Are you in trouble?" she demanded.

"Pardon me?"

"Are ye in trouble, girl. Are ye up the duff?"
"No!"

"And, supposing I call ye a liar, what then, hn?"

"I'm not, though."

"You better not be. We'll not feed two of you on the expense of the house just because you couldn't keep free of the sheets. I'll not be responsible for bringing a sneak-thief into this house. Archie, come away. We don't need you getting ideas from this... this..."

"Ma'am," said Belle, standing. Had the poppet taken offense? Well, they'd drown that out of her soon enough. Gidge turned to look at her, glaring. Let her speak out of turn one more time and she'd definitely be on the wrong end of a beating.

"I signed an indenturement contract with Mr. Gold to serve the estate. I'm not allowed to leave the property."

Ah, there it was then. She wasn't even a real servant, not much more than a slave. No qualifications, no recommendations, and no wages to boot. Gidge could work with that, happily. It looked as though the whore-child Ruby was no longer the easiest dog to kick in the house.

"Well, that changes things..." Gidge started, bustling up her skirts and grabbing the girl's head, yanking her into position. The new one was short and skinny, it was easy to drag her into place.

Gidge felt the girl's head all over for lumps, looking for signs of bad temperament and breeding. The girl struggled a bit, initially, but gave up when Gidge pulled her hair, hard, to keep her in place for inspection.

"Are ye clean?"

"Well, I haven't bathed..."

"I mean do ye have bugs?" Gidge snapped, feeling the base of the skull and ears.

"No, of course not!" she answered hastily.

"I can tell by the look of you that you're going to be no end of trouble to me. It will always out in the skull, Mr. Hopper's a great fan of free-nee-ology, and you've got the makings of a bitch who bites the hand what feeds."

"I-"

"Don't interrupt me!" Gidge demanded, tugging hard on the girl's hair again.

"You'll have a bed in the attic, away from the other servants, I'll not have you corrupting Vera and Margie with this reading nonsense. Mrs. Lucas, she is not to take her meals with the civilized folk - you'll see to it as she's fed in the evenings on whatever's to be found. I don't want you putting us out of house for nothing."

The girl gulped down some response and Mrs. Lucas tutted away in protest, but it was done. This house ran on her rules, not theirs, and she was not about to see it all fall to pieces for the sake of some prissy chamber maid.

VI. Oriamendi

Gold sank into the plush cushions of his wing-backed chair, scowling as one of the faceless hands
still lurking in the house banked his fire and settled a tray beside him. He'd touch none of it until the laudanum left him cold and sweaty, food in his stomach would make the impending nausea untenable. It was always the same: a dram for sleep, a dram for pain in his leg, and - most recently - a dram to calm his nerves in the face of this unflinching slip of a girl. Then, when he'd dulled himself to the point of euphoria, the long crash of re-awakening would claim him and they would start it all anew.

He craved the tincture of poppy, or even the stronger vial of pure evil nestled in his writing desk, but would not break under the force of his need. The girl would require his attention, eventually. All of it, undivided from the pain her ancestry created.

Now that they'd come to maw of hell that was his father's crumbling estate, he could set himself free, raze the place, and leave. Bae would inherit everything, enough gold from the sale of the Sonnachdubh lands to fund his own army and enough properties to live like a king in any country. Gold's hands had not been idle all these years, haunted by the memory of a traitor's and his haughty daughter.

Bae was the best of him, a good boy. He would inherit all of his father's wealth and none of his misery, Gold was seeing to that with the acquisition of the girl, and then the world would be as it should be. He could slink off into his flask, bury himself in some corner of the world, and wait to die. Bae would have all the advantages of the aristocracy with none of their pretense. He would value hard work and industry over stuffy tradition and the kind of honor that looked on blindly while another wretched soul was killed. It would all stop. Everything, spiraling out of control as it had been since 1837, would simply cease.

The girl was a problem. Cowardice ran in her blood, and pride too. She looked little enough like her father, except for the coal-black eyes, but...

Gold had waited half his lifetime to find the single survivor, salvaged from her French mother's death-bed by a savior unknown. Who would have thought it could be her father's old school-mate, a bumbling gentleman ill-adapted to the new economy and never once mentioned while Gold was in her father's company? Still, Sir Maurice was a goodly man not to sell his ward for his own security. Had the father been more like his friend, things would never have come to such desperation. Good men, even if they were debt-ridden fools, were hard to find.

Gold learned that lesson the hard way, he thought, and winced as the memory flared up the pain in his leg.

He'd never wanted an officer's position. That was all his father's doing, when he'd realized his legitimate sons were useless. That was what they did with bastards who posed a threat - sent them off to die in foreign lands with a letter of recommendation and just enough coin to mend a pair of boots. He'd had a choice: bring honor to the Empire or be shot by a firing squad. Not knowing what it would cost him, he chose life.

He would dream tonight: all the memories the opium and alcohol usually dulled lurked in every shadow and crackle of the fire.

When the logs burned through and settled loudly, he heard the distant sound of a Baker rifle echoing in the hills outside San Sebastián, and let the past drag him away. That was the price he paid for reclaiming control of his body from the poppy: he remembered everything.

The 8th Highlanders under Fitzgerald lay in shambles, splashes of tartan amid the corpses of a predominantly English infantry. He stood next to the Captain, not understanding the chaos surrounding them, but feeling the soft flesh of enlisted men under his boots as they pushed back to
retreat. A stunning loss. It was said the Carlists scalped their prisoners like Indians - Spanish savages in 1837, men so despicable it nearly broke him.

They had to retreat. It wasn't abandonment when Evans had already fled the field and some 1500 bodies lie dead or dying under their feet, it was tactics. They were doing the right thing. If not for the canons cutting off the Carlist charge, they would not have made it to the city. It was a blessing that a few good men did not abandon their guns. Not all men were cowards.

It wasn't the Captain's fault that day - a veteran of Napoleon, pulled out of his commission in France and delegated a contingent of press-ganged green men like Gold, the Captain saved lives. And those he couldn't save, he spared the Carlist torture-camps. It was not enough, never enough, but it was more than Gold had done. He'd thought the Captain a hero for bashing in a dying man's skull. He'd been wrong.

The girl's eyes judged him from her father's face, mocking his attempts to escape the blood bath. Then she was beside him as he'd first known her, barely one year old, wearing the same christening gown that she wore in her father's photograph, and splashing in the blood like Bae played in rain.

As the little drops of red stained her pale, chubby cheeks, Gold leaned over and spewed the meager contents of his stomach into an antique vase without waking properly. He drifted off again, lost on the sea, clinging to the knowledge that he was done waiting. He'd found her, and the world would become as it ought to be
Chapter 3

VII. Ariadne's Thread

Navigating Sonnachdubh House's twisting, moldering corridors took considerably less effort than navigating the sharp personalities that peopled them. Belle spent her first night scrubbing pans by gaslight, elbow deep in cold water over a stone basin with the aged silk of her dress completely ruined. Mrs. Hopper hovered over her shoulder, never satisfied with the speed or quality of the work, until she nearly collapsed from exhaustion and had to be carried up to her room. Mr. Dovey had done the deed, and despite his general absence and reluctance to speak, Belle had ascertained that he passed for both a steward and butler in the estate. She was thankful for it, he seemed a reasonably decent man, and the idea of the groundskeeper, Mr. Hopper, carrying her anywhere was even more distasteful than the thought of sleeping on the scullery floor.

All she knew before being pulled from bed was the dull throbbing in her limbs and the sound of the dogs howling in the wind.

Her second day was not much improved. Belle could hardly manage to place one foot in front of the other when her chores began at 5 AM. Thankfully, Mrs. Hopper had her own duties and tasks to complete, along with a staff of chamber maids to supervise, leaving Belle in the care of the cook. Mrs. Lucas was a demanding but kind woman, and she kept the kitchen with an almost militant fervor. Ruby, the little girl she'd met in passing on her first night, could complete any task her grandmother assigned her in half the time it took Belle, and usually the child did it more neatly. Even little Archie, who still kept his distance but seemed to like her despite his mother's warnings, was better suited to Belle's chores than she was.

It was all so pitiful that she wanted to fall to her knees and weep, but Belle was certain the only thing that could make her time in Sonnachdubh worse would be giving in to despair and self-pity in the face of everything.

Unfortunately, for all her learning, Belle didn't know the first thing about working in a large kitchen (or even about scrubbing the laundry). The children showed her the best way to fill the large copper pot with water, and how to always keep a pot boiling at the stove so she would not have to wait between batches of washing. Ruby gave her little clues in pantomime, helping her to scour the pans with salt in the big stone basins and the china with lye soap in a smaller tin tub. Archie even showed her how to scale a fish properly, though she wagered Mrs. Lucas had not actually served the wretched creature she'd been assigned to clean - probably the children's fishes made it to the dining room while hers was calmly set aside for Mr. Dovey.

"You have to do it like this," the young red-head instructed her. He ran the back of Mrs. Lucas' smallest knife down the side of a large, brown trout his father had dropped off at the house.

"Wrong!" Ruby challenged, snatching both knife and trout away. "You have to gut it first, Archie."

"You don't know anything, Ruby. I'm the gillie and you're just a kitchen maid."

"I know more about being a gillie than you do!" the little girl shot back, slicing a clean line down the fish's belly and scooping the entrails out.

The two pushed back and forth, leaving Belle in a momentary panic over the slippery fish and sharp blade, but they calmed soon enough and presented her with a pair of very nice fillets.
"Now you try," Archie said, handing her the knife. He looked so expectant, and Belle knew he must take some pride in his father's work, no matter her own opinion of the man. As gillie, it was Archie's job to carry the fishing rods, rifles, or any other supplies a hunter might need afield; because his father was Mr. Gold's groundskeeper, it was expected that he would one day inherit the post.

She really did try to mimic the children, but Belle had a shower of scales and guts strewn half way across the kitchen, and she was fairly certain that there was more meat left on the carcass than on the fillet. Her trout was a mess, but she'd managed it - in a fashion. And she would get better, as long as she kept practicing. Ruby, the wild little girl who ran through the hills the second her grandmother wasn't looking, even showed her how to skin and hang a rabbit without the use of any knife at all.

The scullery stood far enough from the ovens that she could smell the food cooking but could not profit by the heat it produced, creating a maddening sort of double-edged sword. Mrs. Hopper left strict instructions that Belle was not to become a burden on the House, and so her rations consisted of a morning tea in the Servant's Hall, an evening slice of bread with cheese, and whatever Mrs. Lucas and Ruby could sneak her under the housekeeper's nose throughout the day. Wearing still-damp silks and fed on tepid porridge, Belle could do little more than shiver her way through the harsh smell of laundry soap as the wooden tub and mangle kept her company. Ruby was kind enough to give her a few pointers on removing the more common stains, and Belle was enough herself to take the child's help graciously. At least with the help of Mrs. Lucas, Ruby, and - even on occasion Archie - Mrs. Hopper had to allow that she was learning, and Belle was free to return to her secluded attic chamber by 10 o'clock that evening. From the brief glimpse she caught of the man, Mr. Dovey looked pleased that he would not have to carry anyone.

With no nightdress and no fresh change of clothes, Belle slept simply in her chemise, pulling the thin blankets up tight to her chin while she curled into a ball on the lumpy mattress. It was not, in all honesty, so much worse than the mattress she'd used as Sir Maurice's ward. The blankets, too, were not so badly worn as they might have been. No, it was the lack of fire and persistent draft that kept her awake in the dark - being permitted neither books nor candles, she was kept company only by her memories.

In another life, she'd been happy. Belle had never felt herself the spoiled daughter of luxury, but she was quickly learning that even the poorest gentleman's ward knew nothing about real poverty. People worked hard because the alternative was starving, and theirs was not the difficult labor of memorizing ancient Greek but the bodily struggle of carrying bath water up six flights of stairs unseen.

Belle was unused to feeling incompetent, and even though she understood both poverty and household economy, the work itself did not come naturally. She was clumsy, for a start, and half-exhausted to boot. The wealthy landowners she'd known in her old life used to behave as though the poor were all unskilled laborers, too stupid for any meaningful employment. Even the factory workers were demeaned and derided, though some of them possessed every bit as much talent as the cottage industries they'd replaced. Belle had never felt it right to treat a servant or employee like anything less than a fellow human being, and even though Sir Maurice's house had employed only one cook who doubled as a housekeeper and maid, he had instilled in her the simple dignity of progressive thinking. Any peer in the red book who thought that scrubbing an old porridge pot took neither skill nor art had clearly never attempted the Thesean task himself. Despite all her lessons at home, none of her father's Greek and Latin alphabets could be recombined in any way that made her a less terrible scullery maid.

The days crept by, until - after nearly two weeks - Belle had found some semblance of balance in
the routine.

The rest of the staff treated her with mild curiosity, but - upon discovering that Gold held her in contract - shunned her almost entirely from their lives. If not for Mrs. Lucas' generosity, Belle was not certain she would have had even a bed to sleep in; the Servant's Hall was not barred to her, despite Mrs. Hopper's threats, but the dormitories and Housekeeper's sitting room where she might have found someone older than 8 or 9 to talk to were strictly off limits.

The full-time maids, Vera Quail and Margie Flinch, lived in the servant's quarters along with Mrs. Lucas and Ruby. Mrs. Hopper and her husband stayed in one of the houses adjacent to the big house, and Mr. Dovey lurked in chambers as yet unseen. That left the half-dozen or so assorted staff to fill the remainder of the servants' dormitories, and Belle was relegated to a little attic room with no fireplace and very few furnishings.

Even after living for ten days in Sonnachdubh House, Belle had no concept of how many people inhabited it. She knew only Mr. Gold, from the carriage, and the handful of servants she saw running errands all day. Her tasks did not take her above-stairs, nor was she required in the furnished rooms. The rooms of the house she did see all looked boarded up, with furnishings covered in dusty sheets. It baffled her to think where all the food and drink could go all day, and even the children seemed in agreement that none of it was for Mr. Gold who had yet to venture out of his study for more than a few minutes at a time.

Too tired even to ponder the mystery of it all, Belle simply trudged through her chores - trying to stay in good spirits. A maid might make 20 pounds a year, if she were very lucky. Even adjusted to include the cost of lodging and meals, the annual income of a servant could not be expected to exceed 70 pounds. If she worked all her life for Mr. Gold and died at the ripe old age of 80, she would still never even come close to paying off the interest Sir Maurice had owed. It was too bad a deal on his part, so Belle chose to see it as a mercy and refused to give up hope. Hard work couldn't hurt her, but it certainly made a good impression of it when her muscles buckled in protest as she climbed the stairs for bed.

Being clever and quick enough to avoid Mrs. Hopper's willow-switch was certainly an improvement, but - even after ten days - she still wore only her own ragged clothes, had to wash it half-naked if she wanted her dress clean, and was not permitted to write or to read.

Still, she'd given her word. Belle had only her wits and the Lucases' mercy, so it would have to suffice. If nothing else, she had learned from her limited exposure to Society to trust her own instincts and keep her head down.

Whoever stalked the twisting halls of Sonnachdubh, kept the house in shambles, and ordered full-course meals every night, Belle hoped to stay far away from him (or her, if perhaps Gold had a wife?) for the rest of her life.

VIII. The Worcester Set

The new girl, Miss French, was an absolute wreck. Ruby could scrub a floor faster, and she wasn't yet thirteen. It wouldn't be so bad if Gidge could pull her head out of the privy for a minute and see to it that girl was properly clothed and fed. As the house cook and the most senior member of Mr. Gold's staff, Ginny Lucas held a fair bit of power in the Servants' Hall. Unfortunately, so did Gidge Hopper, by right of being the Housekeeper. As usual, Mr. Dovey couldn't be bothered to intervene for matters not directly related to the day-to-day miseries of the Viscount.

In Mrs. Lucas' estimation, the new scullery maid would not be quite so disastrous if the Housekeeper would simply leave her be. The other woman railed at the girl for wearing false-fronts
if a single curl escaped her hairpins, and threatened her with the kitchen shears. In the same breath that she denied the girl fresh clothes, she declared her slovenly when the tell-tale silk dress showed water marks. That dress... she couldn't go on with only one piece of clothing, least of all a fraying ball gown.

At first Mrs. Lucas assumed the girl was simply too proud to dress like a servant, but catching her shivering and half-naked while the silk dress was thoroughly ruined in the washing tub convinced her to think differently. Poor, pitiful thing. She bore it all well, really, and Gold was a wicked thing. Who knew what had possessed him to bring her home. All that mattered was that she came, and now that she was here she must earn her keep. Ginny couldn't imagine anyone scrubbing the harsh, cold floors of Sonnachdubh in a ball gown, but there was Miss French - every day - doing an almost passing job. Ruby covered for her at first, to the point of shirking her own duties, and Archie too. She doubted Miss French knew how much the children pitied her, but the girl was always kind to them so - then again - perhaps she did know.

After ten days, Ginny had never seen Miss French utter so much as a single hard word to anybody, and she took it upon herself to do something for her in the spirit of charity. It took all of the cook’s considerable cunning to secure an old charcoal grey livery and floppy bonnet for the girl, and Gidge had still not consented to allow Miss French the privileged of wearing it. So, in the ball gown she remained.

It was becoming something of a running joke in the town: the fancy dish-washer girl everyone talked about but almost none had seen. Most of that was, as expected, the result of the ever-gossiping Housekeeper, but her husband was not an innocent either. They spoke entirely too much of the private affairs of Sonnachdubh House for Ginny's liking, and old John Hopper was always threatening to feed the little maid to the hounds.

The Old Lord, the current Viscount's father, wouldn't have tolerated it. But then again, Gold was his last surviving bastard and had been a long-shot to inherit even then. Some said he'd paid the other heirs off simply for the joy of watching the Old Lord's house turn to rubble over the years.

The man kept an extravagant number of homes in both the islands and on the continent, yet Sonnachdubh - the ancestral seat of his forefathers - was left with a skeleton staff of criminals and miscreants to rot.

Mr. Gold hadn't made so much as a peep in the two weeks he'd been at home, but they sent up his tea tray regularly and the world moved on. He'd bellow soon enough, she knew from experience, and then the servants would walk around in a frenzy for a few fortnights before his moods took him and he descended into the cloistered silence of the study again. That was the way of it with Gold, unless his son was at home, and Master Baelfire was away at school in some unfathomable corner of Brussels.

Archie missed the lad, and Ruby too. The three of them used to get on very well, even though it was considered improper to mix so openly, but - if Master Baelfire ever did return - Ginny doubted there would be much to say between them. With every passing year the gaps between master and servant, rich and poor, lettered and ignorant grew. She knew her own business well enough, but Ruby ought to know something other than the Sonnachdubh lands and skinning game all her life.

Just then, Ginny heard the sound of porcelain hitting the flat stone of the kitchen floor.

"Oh no!" shouted Ruby from somewhere outside the pantry.

"What have you done now?" screeched Gidge.
Lovely, thought Ginny. She would be hovering like a vulture at just that moment, naturally. Ginny heard the crack of the willow-branch switch the Housekeeper favored and rounded the corner of the scullery just in time to see Miss French take the brunt of the blow across her chest.

"It wasn't her fault, Mrs. Hopper," the maid tried to explain. "I dropped the cup, I'm sorry." She bent low to pick it up, offering it to the older woman with a shaking hand.

"It's chipped!" Gidge roared. "This is Royal Worcester bone china, do you have any idea what a single piece costs?"

"You can barely see it..." the girl tried, pushing Ruby further behind her as the switch descended again, clipping her shoulder. She raised the switch to strike again, Ginny had seen quite enough.

"Now listen here," the cook interjected, storming into the room. "You leave these girls alone!"

"It isn't your right to tell me my business," Mrs. Hopper screeched back. "I am the mistress of this house!"

"The hell you are, you miserable old shrew! You are hired help, same as the rest of us."

"How DARE you-"

"Enough," said a deadly soft voice from the door way, silencing the tumult.

Both women and the rest of the staff who'd come to see the commotion turned to find Mr. Gold propped up on his cane, freshly shaved, and wearing all his best. The assembled parties immediately snapped to attention, save for Ruby, who clung violently to Belle's water-stained skirts.

"Mr. Gold, sir..." started Gidge, to Ginny's utter delight. She looked bashful, and she ought to be. One did not declare herself mistress of a Great House lightly. "Mr. Dovey didn't tell me you were well today, if you like I-"

"I would like," Gold retorted, cutting her off, "if you would kindly tell me why you've taken to switching my new valet."

"New valet? You can't mean her?"

"Can't I? Last I checked, Rumford Gold was Lord of this house and master of his own staff. I will ask once more: what is the commotion about?"

"She chipped one of the Royal Worcester set," Gidge announced gleefully, pushing the chipped cup with its delicate blue and gold decorations out for him to inspect.

"What do you think, Miss French, shall we smash the whole set?" His eyes were unreadable and dark.

"I... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. Surely it's still alright?"

Ginny wasn't sure what to make of his reaction to that. He looked somewhat surprised, and then intense.

"Do you find this cup satisfactory for the master of the house, Miss French?"

"I... it's just a cup. You can still drink from it. It would be a shame to waste it over a little chip."
Gold looked down at the cup in his hands. There was significantly more missing from the porcelain than just 'a little chip,' but it would certainly hold water - that much was true.

"You heard the girl, Mrs. Hopper. It's just a cup. I'll expect to see it on my tea tray in half an hour."

"But Sir!" Leave it to Gidge Hopper to contradict her employer in matters that ought not to concern her a bit.

"Mrs. Hopper, I will smash every plate and dish in this room and purchase the replacements with your wages if I hear one more complaint this afternoon, is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good. Come with me, Miss French."

If Ginny didn't know better, she'd have said he meant to murder the girl. The man had his eccentricities, and it was no secret that he ate opium and drank heavily in odd intervals, but to take a woman as a valet? If Belle French was not ruined before she arrived at Sonnachdubh, she would certainly be lost beyond all salvation within three hours alone with that brute.

It was past unspeakable that he should expect an unmarried woman to accompany him into his dressing room and wait on him in his private chambers; Ginny wondered if it was not criminal. If she called for a constable... if she called for a constable, there would be nothing to show for it. Men of Gold's stature were beyond reproach. All the same, Ginny remembered the lashes that Belle took to spare Ruby, and vowed she would poison the monster's food if she caught so much as a whisper of him treating that girl ungentlemanly.

For Belle French, there could be no worse fate than the Viscount's renown temper and cruelty.

**IX. The Absent Tantrum**

Gold hadn't been well enough to visit his newest acquisition for two weeks as he sweat out the laudanum in his study and suffered visions of the Captain at Oriamendi. They'd retreated when the left flank fell, fleeing back toward Madrid, smashing in skulls as they went. It was better than leaving the men to wallow in mud, screaming like horses, and suffer the interrogations of a savage Carlist. That's what he'd believed at the time, and he wondered what the girl would have to say to that. He could see her, coal-black eyes and all, killing her countrymen with a rifle butt as soon as look at them.

But then, they weren't her countrymen. She was the daughter of a French light-skirt conceived in the early years after Waterloo, and her father was nothing but a traitor who would do or say anything to spare his own life.

It sent a sick bolt of pleasure through his body to see her trembling and looking so unsure, as though a stiff breeze might utterly wreck her. Her eyes sought his, but Gold denied her. Let her fret and wonder, let her have her little indignant tantrums.

She was exactly her father's child: coal-black eyes, too proud to dress in a maid's livery, and defiant to the last. In truth, he'd only asked her opinion in the kitchen to needle Gidge. The woman was useless, to the verge of incompetent, which was exactly what he wanted as the house crumbled and his own father rotted in the family crypt. Nothing would please him more than to see it all fall to waste, and then to sell it off piece by piece as a gift for Bae. The boy already had half a dozen estates in his own name, which he would inherit at his majority, and the rest would come when Gold died. Only now, for the first time in decades, he thought that he might die satisfied.
Revenge, they said, could drive a man to the brink of insanity. In his case, betrayal had driven him there already. Baelfire was the one good thing in his life, and he'd had to send him away or risk polluting him with demons of drink and poppy. The boy was better off at school, where he could learn real skills like figures and law instead of heraldry and pomp.

Now, with the thing he'd sought half his life locked away in his study, he scarcely knew where to begin. She looked awful: rubbed raw, ill-kept, and under-fed. He'd thought to slowly work her to death, until her back bent and eyes faded. He'd wanted to break her. But seeing her half-ragged already, having missed the descent from pampered daughter to dish-washer, yet still defiant, it seemed more fitting that he should break her pride first. The rest could come in time.

"Are you under the impression, Miss French, that it is acceptable for the servants in this house to parade around in immodest, tarnished ball gowns?"

"Sir?"

"Answer the question."

"You haven't given me anything else to wear, sir. I wasn't allowed to bring anything when we left Judge Frontland's home."

"Is it my responsibility to clothe you, then?"

"I... I'm not sure. I think so; I believe it was in my contract."

Gold looked at her then, eyes sharp; she was smarter than she looked, he'd give her that. But clever meant cunning, and cunning meant treachery when it came to that family. Bad blood will always out. He supposed it was in her contract, the amendments to the usual indenturment agreement were only in regards to the time and scope of the bargain, the portions about clothing, room, and board probably remained intact; he'd been too hasty to snatch at the prize, and she'd nearly slipped away again.

"And if it suits me to let you go naked?" he asked.

The girl paled visibly, nearly knocking over a small single-stem vase in her attempts to back away from him.

"It's only a quip!" Gold sighed, rubbing his temple. She looked pale as a sheet and twice as likely to crumple on the wind. Good. He liked her scared, it made him feel less as though she were about to bash in his skull the first time he nodded off in her presence.

The French girl nodded, and Gold steeled himself. He was not afraid of this proud, prissy little thing, no more than he feared the Captain's ghost would come back to haunt him. No, the firing squad that put a bullet in her father's chest was the same responsible for the bullet lodged above his knee. The bastards had missed, and they'd left him to rot in the damn camp trench. It was a miracle Gold was alive, a miracle he'd found the girl who embodied everything he hated, and a miracle he'd managed somehow to accomplish all of that without irrevocably involving Bae in it. He was so close...

"You will do as I say, when I say it. You will be responsible for ordering my trays, keeping the primary rooms in order, and helping me with any other necessaries. You are to deport yourself demurely in my company and never to speak unless spoken to, do you understand me?"

"I... yes, sir." The girl looked confused.
"Good. Mrs. Hopper will be instructed to outfit you with a uniform tomorrow. In the mean time, I believe my tea is here. You may collect it from Margie and serve me at my writing desk."

To his surprise, Belle neither grimaced nor shouted at him; she served him his tea as though it were the most natural thing in the world, and fidgeted in the corner while he tried to ignore her. What was she up to? He'd played the scene a hundred times in his head, and always the girl-child threw tantrums and collapsed under the burden of justice. Here he found none of that, only a confused, half-starved girl serving him tea in a chipped cup he'd almost forgotten in the adrenaline rush of finally having her.

This was the same little girl in the Captain's photograph, the one for whom he sold out the entire battalion and most likely others. She was supposed to hate him, and in turn be easy to hate. Instead, she looked almost thankful.

For the first time since his son's birth, Gold began to fear he'd miscalculated. No, he hadn't miscalculated. She was raised by a man so far in debt that their lives must have been the very lap of luxury, given every indulgence and denied nothing. He had every right to hate her.
Chapter 4

X. Indigo and Pigeon Blood

On her second day as Mr. Gold's new chambermaid and valet, Mr. Dovey took Belle to purchase a new livery. Belle learned from the few scraps of gossip Miss Flinch and Miss Quail let slip that Mrs. Hopper had flatly refused to allow Belle the somber black and white uniform of a traditional house-maid. She would not risk that the master's guests might mistake her for one of the "approved" staff, for fear it would reflect badly on her when Belle's peculiar circumstances came to light. As it happened, Gidge Hopper instructed her to purchase five dresses of the cheapest cloth available, in any other color. The seamstresses pulled two whole bolts of unwanted blue fabric from their storage-salvage, the flawed indigo a shade nearer teal than cerulean, and fit her up with a set of clothes.

Belle didn't mind the strangeness of the color: it came cheap, the heiress who commissioned it did not like the final results - leaving it to be burnt or sold at a loss, and any dress at all was entirely more suitable than the wretched ball-gown that kept her ribs captive and left her limbs to freeze. The new ensemble buttoned high on her throat, with a small white lace collar, puffed up like a little pastry at the shoulder, and tapered down to her wrists where it finished with two very plain shell buttons. The bodice stood equally plain, with a small row of brown buttons down the front (she supposed that was a concession when one lacked dressing maids), and the skirts hung full - unadorned with ruffles or a bustle, to just above her ankles. Not even a glimpse of the fragile linen corsets or stockings peeked out from the petticoats, and a pair of simple, black, ankle-high boots hid whatever skin might have been visible for the slightly raised, albeit functional hem.

Aided by their foot-propelled sewing machines, the small army of women completed one dress that same afternoon and arranged to ship the rest to the house on the morrow. Their speed astounded her, but then again she had an inkling that when Lord Sonnachdubh demanded something the stars themselves must move to accommodate him. He'd obtained her, without much trouble at all by what Belle recollected - though she had no idea why or how he'd come to hold so many of Sir Maurice's notes in town. But any man who could whisk her away so casually must merit every syllable that she'd heard of his dreadful reputation on the few occasions that Vera and Margie took to bandying it about.

When she and Mr. Dovey returned to Sonnachdubh, they were greeted once again by the tell-tale howling of Mr. Hopper's kennels. Belle had no opportunity to see more than the drive and gardens adjacent to the house before the enormous manservant whisked her back into the house. Once clear of the kitchens, Mr. Dovey topped her off with a set of ruffled white aprons with little, embroidered eyelets and small, matching caps from Mrs. Hopper's linen closet, and left her with the Viscount; she had not seen her escort again.

Belle could not say that her lot had improved dramatically for being bound to serve as Mr. Gold's personal maid and valet. In truth, she'd felt exhausted and exasperated in the kitchens, but at least she'd kept decent company. Unsure what Mr. Gold could possibly be thinking as he glared at the floor in front of her feet for whole hours at a time, Belle felt she could have scrubbed any porridge pot or hearth for a single smile from the Lucases or Archie.

Mr. Gold's days shifted from the shuffle of paperwork accumulated in the management of his rather larger estate to the relatively still periods when he seemingly lost himself in thought. Always he glared at her, but said nothing. He made no demands, save that she serve him tea, bank the fire, and clear his work space. No invitation or instruction to sit was offered, so she stood as still as she
could and attempted to disappear into the scenery.

Then the staring would begin.

Belle felt certain he was waiting for her to do something, but she hadn't an inkling of what it could be. She looked anywhere but at the man who'd taken her meager abilities in exchange for Sir Maurice's estate: the drapes were drawn as he liked them, at least ten fine wax candles - one of his many extravagances - stood lit and trimmed properly, the same Royal Worcester set in blue and gold - chipped cup and all - steamed untouched on an inlaid tray, and the fire crackled nicely. He used wood, not coal, but each room was stocked with a bucket and coal shovel anyway, and Belle had spent a great deal of time that morning wiping the inevitable grime from the bronze thing until it gleamed. Not a speck of dust marred the jewel-toned and leather bound spines of his books, an assortment of oddities that Belle frankly envied, and the ranks of crystal decanters and small medicine bottles which she was not permitted to touch stood sentinel over the proceedings, bearing witness to Gold's stilted silence. She absorbed every detail in the room, down to the fine silk brocade of his furniture and the gleaming marble relief of the fireplace. When there was nothing else in the entire room which Belle had not examined at length, she looked back at the Viscount.

He was still staring. His eyes burned twin holes into the Turkish carpet beneath her feet, never quite rising to meet her face.

Well, thought Belle, prudence is a blessing, but sometimes you have to do the brave thing. Besides, he'd spared her a beating over the chipped cup presently standing empty not a stone's throw away. Whatever kind of man he was - the kind who carried young women away in the night - he was not, she hoped, the violent kind.

"Sir," Belle started, voice barely a whisper trembling on the heavy fog of silence clouding the room. "Have I displeased you?"

His eyes snapped to her face, still glaring. This was the man who'd spared her a beating when she'd broken something quite dear to Mrs. Hopper and the staff downstairs. He'd spared her for reasons she could not fathom, but it spoke well of him. She hoped he would not take a sudden liking to beatings as a result of her speaking out of turn.

"It's only, I want to be useful. And... if there's something I ought to do, I will. I can't help feeling you're very cross when you glare at me, and I've no idea why. So, please, if there's anything-"

"Are your eyes blue?" He spoke as though she were at the Old Bailey on trial for crimes unknown.

"Yes, they are," Belle replied evenly, hoping that simple honesty would appease him. Gold only glared.

"Do my eyes displease you?" she asked, unable to stop herself.

"And if they do?" He looked as though he meant to rise and put them out of her head.

Belle drew in a deep breath, measuring her words before replying. "I don't feel much like playing Jocasta, but... if it comes to that, you might ask someone else to pour for you, so I don't burn you with the kettle by mistake."

"Don't talk a lot of nonsense at me," he said, leaning back into his seat. She'd been half afraid he really meant to blind her for a moment, and Belle's knees began to shake.

"Oedipus isn't nonsense-" she started, not sure whether she was brave, foolish, or some unlucky combination of the two. Sir Maurice had lectured her at length on the classical Greeks, and the
words came unbidden to the defense of Sophocles.

"Good night, Miss French," Gold deadpanned, turning away.

"Sir?" Belle questioned. She could never tell when he meant to dismiss her and when he wanted her to simply stop whatever she'd been doing, but she dared not try for the door unless he clarified himself.

Gold wordlessly waved her toward the heavy, wooden door, not turning to face her again. He meant for her to leave him.

Belle excused herself quietly, careful not to jar the door, and breathed a sigh of relief as she slackened her shoulders and leaned against the wall in the corridor. Standing very still most of her afternoon, trying to show some semblance of professionalism, was nowhere near as physical as scrubbing out pans, but - underfed as she felt - it still took its toll.

"Go to your room."

The maid felt her heart leap in her chest, and she yelped despite herself. Belle spun around to see who had spoke, and came face to face with Mrs. Hopper. The darkness of the corridor bore down on them, a sharp contrast to the lavishly lit study, and the Housekeeper pushed her sharp, lean finger into Belle's chest.

"Go to your room," she said again, enunciating each word like a blade.

"I thought I might ask Mrs. Lucas about some supper..."

"You are Mr. Gold's little extravagance, not a part of this household. If he wants you to eat, he'll feed you. Now go to your room," the older woman sneered, stabbing at Belle with each syllable.

She wanted to scream at the unfair ridiculousness of it all. Surely they didn't mean to starve her while Gold stared holes into his carpet all day? Belle bit her tongue, swallowing down the stream of harsh words she had for the Housekeeper. She was alone in Sonnachdubh. If these people did not see that she meant them no harm, that she was not the kind of woman they all assumed... if they did not accept her, then she would truly die with no books and no one but her taciturn employer to talk to.

Tears stung at the corners of Belle's eyes, but she nodded and retreated toward the servants' quarters. Up another flight of bare-board stairs, she found her own, isolated attic room. Somewhere in the distance Mr. Hopper's hounds bayed at the moon, and Belle collapsed onto her bed without undressing. She thought she'd born it all so well, the first days blending into a single ache that spanned from her feet to the nearly sobbing lump in her throat.

Belle wanted to go home.

It was a wicked thought. She'd chosen this, and she would rise to meet the challenge; leaving was not an option. The Viscount was good to give her a home and clothes, he would be good enough to provide her with food if she asked him. He must, or she would not last the remainder of the fortnight, and what a poor investment that would turn out to be.

Wherever Sir Maurice was, Belle felt certain he would understand why she had acted so brashly. He'd taken her in, a little French bastard, and raised her at his knee in the library. The distinctions of 'ward' and 'guardian' need not apply, he was - in all but blood - Belle's family, and she missed him badly. Mr. Gold was not unkind. Surely she'd chosen the lesser of two evils between him and the Judge? No matter what her friendship and lukewarm sentiments for George the younger had
been, contemplating herself as the Judge's bride brought the meager contents of her stomach into the back of her throat. Lava and bile would not be enough to forget the man.

The days she'd spent in Sonnachdubh blended together into a single, all-encompassing ache. It spanned from her feet to the nearly-sobbing lump in her throat, congregated at the temples of her head and plummeted straight through her heart. Wicked or not, she desperately, direly wanted nothing more than to go home.

The sound of soft footsteps on the creaky attic stairs drew Belle from her lament, and she looked up to see Ruby, barefoot, holding a small basket.

"I snuck you some supper," said the girl, coming to sit on the edge of Belle's mattress and petting her trembling shoulders.

Belle drew the girl into a sobbing hug, and the child burrowed her face into the older girl's torso. For a few moments, they just sat quietly, each expressing the things that words could not encompass. Hopelessness, loneliness, friendship. Belle's heart broke for the little girl. She was so clever, so free... she should be in a school, not starving her mind scaling fish and scrubbing pans all day. And so should Archie, the poor boy. They were both adults by some people's thinking, and it hurt her to think of them growing up to nothing more than the hope of shelter and food securities.

"Belle?" Ruby asked quietly.

"What is it, Ruby?" Belle replied, nearly overcome with ennui.

"Will you comb out my hair for me?"

Belle though immediately of Margie cornering the girl in the pantry, calling her a wildling, a whore-child, and a disheveled strumpet. Bad blood will out, as Vera liked to say. It wasn't the child's fault she looked the part, Mrs. Lucas' budding rheumatism kept her from setting the tresses straight and Belle suspected no one had ever bothered to instruct the girl in how she could manage it herself. How badly the little girl - nearly a woman, whether or not she was ready - must be hurting.

"Of course, darling," Belle told her, reaching for the simple comb that rested on her nightstand. The small room had, probably at the insistence of Mr. Dovey, been fitted with a single oil lamp. Belle and Ruby sat in the orange, flickering light and talked of everything and nothing while the older girl ran the comb's fine teeth through Ruby's dark mane.

It didn't matter that her bosom friend - her only friend - in this house was not yet thirteen, she was strong and brave. Ruby never showed anyone her pain, how it stung to be ostracized, not even Belle before tonight. They each munched on a little bread and cheese until Belle finished the child's hair in a braid. She fixed the end with a crimson ribbon, one of the few extravagances Mrs. Lucas could afford - a Christmas gift, and made a point of telling her to come up if she ever needed anything.

If Ruby could bear this wretched place, then Belle could endure anything; her friend was the one strand of hope and reason that she carried with her through the elaborate maze of people and personalities at Sonnachdubh. Ruby left as quietly as she came, and - whatever the morning had in store for them - they'd found a new strength in the simple act of combing and crying.

When she finally lie down to sleep, hounds still baying somewhere in the night, Belle had the stirring sensation that she was beginning to understand what it meant to feel brave.
XI. Andouin

Gold stared into the dying fire for a long time, weighing the temptation of poppy against the onslaught of memory unleashed by his hastily-acquired maid. The writing desk ensconced in bright candle light held no end of the pure, medicinal quality that genteel doctors liked to prescribe; the small line of decanters and tinctures - still dusty from where he'd stopped the girl's attempts to clean them - beckoned like familiar lovers. His body ached and sweated for the relief of it all, the safe harbor where he floated on soft waves and left nary a ripple in his wake, but the saner, more rational part persisted. He needed to remember, to remember all of it, and to make the girl suffer. The impotent rage he felt staring at her, waiting, drove him half crazy.

For the past two days he'd waited for the brat to complain, to cry, to do anything. Reaction was easy. Reaction would release the pent up rage in a flood of fury until she broke and begged to be set free. Instead, all he got was a quiet, almost competent maid, dressed in the most ludicrous shade of flawed indigo he'd ever seen, who fidgeted but endured his gaze. A single spoonful of poppy, and he would forget everything.

Gold's mind wandered to red-petals awash in wide fields under the bright Afghan skies, nearly 4,000 miles away from Spain. The air hung heavy with the scent of flowers, and men killed one another for the right to a single field of poppy. It was the Second of the Opium Wars, but Gold knew from his own life that no amount of bloodshed could make the sky any less blue.

Her eyes were blue.

That thought alone made him quake for whiskey and laudanum, his leg and brain burned for it, but if he could not force himself to remember the worst of the Carlists then he would never make his point. She had to know the truth some day, to bear the burden that was too heavy, to take it all away. And she'd deserve the pain. Every time he'd considered the girl, spared her a glance (or, as was more likely the case, a long stare) he'd seen the coal-black, dark eyes of her father staring back. But Belle's eyes were not black.

The Captain was an easy man to hate, as was the dark-haired mistress for whom he'd betrayed everything. When Gold had finally tracked the woman to her hide-away, she was already dying. The child had been taken away by a benefactor unknown, and he'd stayed abroad long enough to watch the painted homage to King Louis die in a fit. Finding Sir Maurice and the girl so many years later had been nothing short of a miracle.

Images of Belle's mother danced through his head. Academically, he knew she'd died in her own bed, but all Gold could see in his mind's eye was the woman lying dead in the mud of some nameless road in Spain, clothed in her ruffled, fancy things. For the briefest of seconds, his mental stage replaced the mother's body with that of his new maid. She was dead, her new dress muddy.

She should have died as a babe. Even 15 years prior, when she was still a child, he might have beat her half to death himself, or found some pretense to condemn her to serve aboard a prison ship. Bae changed all of that, the boy had saved him and the girl - in a way.

He wouldn't kill her, not knowing how the discovery of such an act would shake Baelfire's faith in him, but Gold still demanded justice and revenge for the wrongs of the past.

He wanted to watch the inner light dim and suffocate whatever blood of her treacherous father still remained, and when she no longer posed a threat to anyone he'd send her away. Let some sanitarium lock her up while he retired and left all his worldly possessions to his son. Gold considered again the little bottle of distilled spirits and poppy mocking him: if she would only give him an opening, he could begin; if he downed the contents of the bottle, he could forget everything
and try again in a few days.

Bae: thankfully the boy was safe, stowed at school. He didn't need to see his father broken, struggling to keep his wits and stay away from the vile substance. And, at any rate, he didn't trust the girl to be within thirty feet of his son. With an almost inhuman inner strength, Gold set the vial of opium aside. He would find it in him to bring the girl to her knees, even if it meant reliving all of his old memories and aches this evening.

After Oriamendi, they'd hailed the Captain as a hero. He'd led the retreat after the Liberal army was defeated, and he spared dying men the gruesome death of a Carlist prison camp - if it could be called that, most did not live long enough to be considered "camping" nor "prisoners" by civilized definitions. After they were interrogated, if they wore the mark of an officer, the men were run through with bayonets, set on pikes, scalped - if the stories were to be believed. And for the enlisted men? Their throats were simply slit to avoid wasting ammunition unnecessarily.

Even Gold had admired him, despite the pain of slaying his fellow countrymen.

Captain Killian Jones, veteran of Waterloo, lover to an eccentric French ingenue, and father to the smiling, chubby little girl whose likeness he kept in the breast pocket of his regimental reds. Brash, charming, proven and brave: where Gold knew only scorn and mockery from his own family, Captain Jones' family was equally unconventional - yet he was proud. Proud, and a good soldier, with loved ones to fight for.

But that was March of 1837, almost a full year before he faced the firing squad in ’38, and by September of that year things were changing between the men. Irish and British troops alike refused to advance from Madrid over discrepancies in their pay, leaving the scattered remnants of the Liberal army not dead or recalled to England to scrape together some semblance of an offensive for the war-torn country. Gold and Captain Jones were among the men who Jochmus led down the road to Andouin, and they’d barely cut the trail through Santa Cruz' men at Hernani before making one last push for the town. And a damned waste of a road it was, too: the artillery and Royal Marines were still several days’ march away when all hell broke loose in the foothills around the city.

So many pieces of the machine jammed and clogged, yet Gold had thought nothing of it at the time. He'd known only the numbness of clawing through mud, pulling soldiers up by their tartan and pushing rifles into their trembling hands again. He should have paid more attention to Killian, then he might have been able to stop him. It was all silent in his head, though the room spun and he remembered the boom of enemy guns. It felt to him as though he existed outside of his own body, not really the same man who fought his way to Andouin alongside a trusted friend, and not really the creature that had crawled from a ditch meant to serve as a grave with a bullet lodged in his knee. So much history, so many bodies. And all of them - every one, down to the bugle boy - stood as a testament to what Captain Killian Jones had done.

How had he not seen what was happening?

Instead, the pressed on toward Andouin. Everything was fine. Nothing hurt. All he had to do was keep fighting.

O'Donnell and the Legion razed more than a hundred homes in Andouin by the time the city was taken, and they'd been at a stand-still for nearly five days when, on the morning of September 14, the Carlists surrounded the city and opened fire on the Liberal army. He and Killian had been afield, deployed with two battalions of Scotch infantry and sundry other officers, caught unawares by the sudden fighting. The Captain showed him his precious photograph again - he was always showing it to officers and the enlisted men - and it was the last time he'd seen the little girl who
now served him his tea before finding her again in her mid-twenties.

The hills turned red quickly, piss and blood combining with trampled sod to suck him in, making each step a burden of sloshing stink. Andouin stood crippled in the valley, the rebels picking off their countrymen in the village from a perfect vantage; the Scotch did not need to be ordered to intercede, they charged - in no small part due to Killian's quick thinking and leadership. How? How had that young, unwilling officer that he'd been not seen then what was happening? They took out the riflemen, but it was too late to retreat. He, Killian, and the rest of the two battalions in tartan stood surrounded by foot soldiers and Spanish cavalry.

Every man fought tooth and nail to get back to the village's relative safety. A few even succeeded, but most were cut-down in the hills. The Carlists did not take prisoners. And when they did, it was an inevitable truth of the war against savagery: all prisoners would be executed eventually.

They'd taken him and Killian, though, despite everything conventional wisdom told him to the contrary. After that, it was just a matter of time. He watched Andouin burn as O'Donnell retreated, hoping to move fast enough that he could intercept the heavy artillery that was still too far away from everything. It was one of the single worst losses of life since Oriamendi, and a stunning Carlist victory.

Gold dashed off a quick note at his writing desk and left it on the tray for Dovey. With trembling hands, he downed a small bottle of Chlorodyne he kept hidden there for nights like this. It was all too much, the memory pressed in on him like a shrinking box that he could not escape. He had to get away, and the pure medicine ran clear and bitter past his lips. Chloroform. Opium. Cannabis.

He did not want to dream.

He would start over with the French girl in a few more days, when the rest of his ghosts lie buried once again. Now that he'd seen the faces of so many dying soldiers, knowing what came next, he would spare her nothing. As for what transpired in that Carlist prison camp, Gold only wished that the poppy would act quickly, and spare him the bulk of it while sweet oblivion welcomed him home again.

XII. True Apothecary

Very little truly astounded Mr. Jefferson any more, including a courier from the north bearing a badly-written, poorly blotted note from the Viscount. He'd seen much, perhaps too much, and lost as much again.

His potions and remedies kept him in house, but it was the more experimental compounds that made Jefferson rich. Sonnachdubh wanted him again, which meant leaving his apprentices to peddle arsenic-creams and opium cold-tonics while he retreated to his patron's home. They might hunt again, or sample the new powders Jefferson had obtained - he knew the Italians were working closely with the cocoa leaf, but his man in New Orleans had already perfected a rudimentary cocaine, sure to cure any ailment or pain. He'd be richer than a king before the invigorating stuff gained a following, and then the rest of his competitors could run themselves ragged fighting over market shares and labeling.

Jefferson liked the new mixtures very well, but none quite so much as his own specialty: a secret he kept even from the journeymen, his own combination of minerals and chemicals, dissolved in drink, to render the patient comatose at only a sip.

It was good to forget, not to dream; he and the Viscount shared that trait. Jefferson needed a rest, an escape, from the ceaseless clack of pill-rollers, from the glare of a hundred tinctures spanning
the brilliant purple in the window's carboys to the vile green of zincate, from the herbalists and hedge-witches, from the stink of the Manchester factories.

He packed it all into the carriage Gold had sent, showed Mr. Dovey his trunk, and donned his favorite top hat. The Pharmacopoeia he left; notes on herbs and other men's potions never helped him much anyway. The white rabbit and small hand mirror, though, joined his lavishly eccentric clothing in the trunk. He hated to look at them, hated to touch them, but found himself unable to stop.

It drove Jefferson mad to think too much about the past, of sitting at sick-bed and making tonic after tonic for nothing. One had died, and the other was taken away. Asylum: they meant it as a safe place, but the truth of it was so much worse than he could contemplate. Jefferson chose oblivion rather than his own company, and when he woke it was only to eat, piss and drink at the odd tavern and post-house. He was not truly aware of anything until the carriage turned down the ill-kept lane to Sonnachdubh, where his next mad adventure or accidental death awaited him. Jefferson didn't much care which, so long as it was distracting.

Perhaps he'd suggest a hunt, if Gold's leg wasn't too dodgy to carry him.
Chapter 5

XIII. Naxos

The bell-pulls in Sonnachdubh were, perhaps, the only inner workings of the house kept in precisely the pristine condition that the previous Viscount had left them. Mr. Dovey hired carpenters to update the pulleys, and - like all the work Mr. Gold commanded - it was both begun and finished with such marvelous speed that Belle wondered if any amount of money could have motivated the workmen to do the deed so thoroughly as their fear of over-staying, or being cornered by the house's namesake. Now, in all of Mr. Gold's principal rooms, a sky-blue tassel hanged from a golden brocade panel, adjacent to the more commonly-colored crimson and silver tugs. Mr. Gold could, on a whim, summon Belle from her chambers, from the kitchen, or the Servants' Hall to any room of the house, presuming he ever let her leave him long enough to miss her.

The central bell panel, housed in the Servants' Hall, still operated the main doors and the majority of the sheet-covered studies, and along-side the well-kept, patined staples of Mrs. Hopper's existence hung a row of new, gleaming installments meant only for Belle. They rung high and clear, unmistakable to anyone familiar with the lower clang of the common bells, and the additional panel repeated itself in her small, attic chamber.

On her third morning as Mr. Gold's unconventional, and frankly alarming valet, none of the bells called. She'd risen as was the staff's custom, at nearly half five in the morning, dressed, and made her way to the Hall for breakfast. Mrs. Lucas was good enough to serve her a hot porridge with a little honey before Mrs. Hopper's countenance soured the day, and she and Ruby indulged in a little frivolous small-talk before the child was whisked away to bank fires and begin the day.

The rest of the servants went about their business, all of them tasked with the day-to-day management of Sonnachdubh House, and no one commented on Belle's lack of occupation. She found a place to keep busy in the kitchens, not the scullery - that would have ruined her livery if Gold did call for her, and contented herself by helping Ruby.

"Are you sure I'm doing this correctly?" Belle asked her friend, looking down at the lump of dough nowhere near as smooth and uniform as that one Ruby was kneading.

"Granny says it's impossible to ruin a loaf. All it takes is yeast, flour and time," Ruby assured her, shaping her own dough into an even ball to leaven under a cheesecloth near the stoves.

Belle looked at her own dough skeptically, peeling it off her fingers in long, sticky strands. "Maybe it just needs more flour?" she asked, sure it should not be so runny at this crucial phase.

"What that needs," said Mrs. Lucas, peering out from the pantry where she was taking inventory and nodding accusingly at Belle's bread-making attempt, "is to be dumped down the privy before Mrs. Hopper comes in."

The cook went back to her duties, and Ruby whispered with Belle conspiratorially. "I'll fix it, don't worry."

Ruby worked the dough in several quick steps, hands deftly folding in the flour until it almost matched her first loaf. Belle offered her friend a secret smile of thanks; she would be truly lost without Ruby, whose hair still hung neatly in the pretty plait they'd made. She was almost old enough that she needed hair pins and a bonnet, and Belle thought she might be able to secure a few
for her if she was careful not to lose or mangle her own. Mr. Dovey was very obliging in acquiring anything she required to make her presentable, and surely a half-dozen hairpins would not be missed much?

"Granny!" shouted Ruby, scrubbing the dough from her fingers. "I've finished my chores, can Belle and I go outside today?"

"You finished everything?" the cook asked incredulously.

"Belle helped me."

"Well... just be back before tea, do you hear me? And wear your red cape, you never know who's poaching out there! Running around like a hare all day, some day someone's going to think you are one."

"Yes, Gran!" Without pausing or breaking gait, Ruby seized Belle's hand and dragged her bodily toward the door.

"Ruby, I don't think I'm allowed..." Belle started, glancing nervously up at the row of bells that had yet to call.

"Quite right," snapped Mrs. Hopper, descending on them like a vulture. Belle hadn't even seen the housekeeper lurking in the area.

"You are to wait upon Mr. Gold in his chambers," Mrs. Hopper continued, pointedly. It was no secret to Belle that young Archie's mother thought her a woman of no morals, suited for (or possibly salvaged from) the brothel. That Mr. Gold did not use her poorly was of no consequence, the truth had very little bearing on belief - as Belle was learning. "We will be opening up the house for guests three days hence, and I expect no difficulties or lapses in character, is that very clear Miss French?"

Belle nodded, releasing Ruby's hand, and the girl gave her a quick, apologetic smile before dashing out the door. At the very least, Belle felt glad that Ruby had escaped before Mrs. Hopper could assign her more chores. The days in which she would be permitted to run and play among the streams and glens of the highlands like a fierce, wild explorer were quickly drawing to a close; she would be expected to serve as a full-time member of the staff soon, or to marry into one of the cottagers' households.

"I'll go up immediately," said Belle, hoping to keep Mrs. Hopper distracted until Ruby was, at least arguably, out of ear-shot from the house. "I'm sorry you had to come looking for me, I didn't hear the bell ring."

"That's because it didn't," Mrs. Hopper snapped. "Mr. Gold is quite indisposed. Bring up a pitcher of warm water and see to it that he's comfortable. Mr. Dovey left orders to open the house for company before he left, and I've no intention of disrupting his Lordship for further instruction. That's your job."

The housekeeper's all-too-sincere smile and air of general malevolence told Belle that she was not going to enjoy the task awaiting her in Mr. Gold's chambers, whatever it may be, and she quaked at the thought that perhaps he did intend to use her badly. It was shocking, even to a woman of her limited exposure to society, that a man would call an unwed woman to his bedchamber - valet or no - without a chaperon. Even with a chaperon, the intrusion constituted such an abnormal breach of protocol, that Belle felt quite sure her father would have shot Gold rather than let it go on.
But she was not in her father's house, and Mr. Gold had never indicated that he wanted that from her before.

With shaking hands, Belle prepared a pitcher of hot water and a tray of all the common medicines: vinegar, mint, and a little charcoal for indigestion. She added a few hand towels and little dish of honey, recalling that it was quite useful in matters of the throat and nose, before ascending the stairs to do her duty. If it came to it, she thought she could strike him with the tray and run; even unladen, it was sturdy and heavy.

Belle knew only generally where in the house Mr. Gold's chambers were located, but she found them easily enough after only a little searching. Opening the door and stepping through the threshold was another matter entirely, though.

That would be the end: the point of no return, from which her reputation and character must be forever marred as a woman who attended men in their boudoirs, without supervision, and she would no longer feel herself so securely, indignantly above Mrs. Hopper's uncharitable suspicions. Sir Maurice would have throttled her for even considering such a thing, but then... she was to stay with Mr. Gold forever. The only option which could have saved both herself and her father from destruction had, at the time, been the overly-generous offer presented by the intense Scottish gentleman.

Well, he wasn't much of a gentleman. But she'd had the option to marry Judge Frontland, and could not contemplate such a future. She'd have rather died in those few moments of miserable uncertainty, and - though she hadn't thought of it at the time - the Judge's sitting room was her last opportunity for marriage. What would she be if not a wife and daughter? A servant needed neither family nor society. Forcing back a sob, Belle realized that she'd crossed the threshold the moment she signed her life away.

In the whir and newness of it all, she'd barely had time to process all that her indenturement implied. It entailed this, though, and it always had. No matter what the wide, wicked world said of her, whether she entered Mr. Gold's quarters or not they would say the same things: prodigal, paramour, prostitute. She knew in her heart that she'd done right by her father, saved the estate, and spared herself the yoke of Judge Frontland's lust for her.

Remembering what it was to be brave, Belle pushed open the door and entered into Mr. Gold's darkened, musky lair. It smelled of tobacco, whiskey and spice - much as she imagined the gambling halls of London, with perhaps a tad less soot on the air - and a thin veil of dust hung in the atmosphere.

From behind the curtains surrounding the bed, Belle could hear a low growl with a keening, almost crying edge. It sounded like an animal, somehow both ferocious and sad. Trembling, Belle set her tray on Mr. Gold's dressing table and pulled back the four-poster's drapes. The room's light came only from the few beams of sunlight able to pierce the gaps in the window hangings, and a lone beam fell squarely upon the source of the awful noise. It was Mr. Gold, dressed only in his shirt and trousers, with one arm pillowed under his face and the other thrown back over his head at an almost painful angle.

No great care had been taken to arrange him, as evidenced by his lack of blanket and pillow, and Belle imagined that Mr. Dovey must have carried him in before sunrise, then left for his errand.

When speaking his name failed to elicit any response, Belle prodded his shoulder, and then - sensing no change - pressed the back of her hand to his face. He felt clammy and cool against her skin, his ragged breath coming shallowly, and his inner torments plainly written over his face. The line of Gold's brow knotted in pain, dragging forth another of the loud groans Belle had mistaken
for a growl, and she was suddenly struck by the previously unthinkable possibility of escape.

Mrs. Hopper would believe her occupied in Mr. Gold's service until supper, at least, and Mr. Gold - indisposed as he was - would not know to miss her for perhaps a few days. How far could she run before Mr. Hopper's foxhounds were sent for? Would a kindly stranger, perhaps, spare her the money for a stage coach home? The absurdity of a single woman, traveling alone, did little to calm her frantic thoughts: this might be her only opportunity.

She could even ask if Ruby... No, Belle realized, sobered by the thought. She would never see Ruby again if she ran away, not even to say goodbye. But surely the girl would understand why? She would understand the impossibly large burden of it all, because service was her life too. It wasn't fair, Belle decided. It was not fair that Ruby had to stay and waste her spirit and mind scaling fish in the scullery instead of writing poetry or shooting game or whatever other form of employment suited her fancy.

If Belle left now, it would un-make the only brave thing she'd ever done, the only real choice she'd had in her entire life. She'd volunteered to stay with Mr. Gold, for her father and for his dependents - the men whose farms dotted his lands, the few members of staff he'd been able to retain... And now, free of debt and with one less mouth to feed, he might put his troubles behind him and usher their little town toward brighter fortunes.

Gold groaned in torpor on the bed, clenching his fists and tensing in some sort of fit, and Belle resolved to stay. He had not been unkind since the incident with the Worcester set, and she owed him much. If not loyalty, exactly, then certainly she owed him her work: whatever he deemed that should be.

Belle poured a bit of vinegar and warm water into Gold's basin, and set to work dabbing the sweat from his brow. He stilled when she hummed, a dulcet little tune she could not recall learning, and eventually quieted into a more restful slumber. When Belle finally left him, it was past the time for supper. She had missed her chance at escape from Sonnachdubh, but then Belle was not about to forget her friend and duties the same way Theseus abandoned the sleeping Ariadne. Being brave, being her own heroine, was about more than slaying beasts and making a name. The Ancient Greeks were always pushing forward, looking for the next conquest to take; they didn't think about what it was they left behind, or how many people mourned their leaving, and Belle suspected that their habit of always running was, perhaps, the most cowardly and most telling trait, stretching from Aeneas in the Greek Heroes all the way to modern Britain.

XIV. Raising Spirits

"Hold up your end, Vera!" sighed an exasperated Margie Flinch. Miss Flinch gestured wildly, shaking loose dust from the white sheet stretched between the two maids. Moments ago, the sheet had stood as a silent ghost, covering up the furniture and accoutrements of entertaining that Mr. Gold left forgotten and vacant.

They'd been assigned the unmitigated disasters that were the Sonnachdubh drawing rooms and State Parlor, in anticipation of the guests Mr. Gold had invited to join him. That meant no end of cleaning and polishing for the two women, and as few as three days to see all the work done.

"I am holding it up," insisted Miss Quail, her usually pristine black uniform and white apron tarnished by grey dust. Both women stood short of stature, with few remarkable features, save for the almost perfectly-matched shade of their Highland-red hair. To look at them from afar, one might mistake them for twins.

"No, you're not. you're letting it sag! I'll have to scrub that carpet with brush and leaves instead of
"just hanging it out for one of the laundresses to beat if you're not careful where you let that dust fall."

"Tosh on you and your dust, Margie."

"Don't let Mrs. Hopper hear you say that."

"Don't let Mrs. Hopper hear what?" asked the housekeeper, archly. She stood in the doorway, flanked on both sides by ghostly figures as yet unrevealed by cleaning.

"Vera's getting the carpets dusty," accused Margie.

"I'm not ma'am. Honestly."

"And which of you two simpletons thought it'd be good to take up the papers from over the carpets in the first place? They're to stay on till last, it's common sense, if you'd just stop to think."

Vera and Margie exchanged conspiratorial glances. They'd peeled back the pages of newsprint covering the carpets as soon as they set foot in the drawing room, to avoid the disconcerting sound of it rustling under foot. The crinkle of paper under a maid's foot always made them feel as though they were not completely alone in the room.

"It was Vera," said Margie at the same time Vera said: "It was Margie."

"Well then you can both lay down damp tea leaves tonight and scrub the rugs in the morning," sneered Mrs. Hopper, waving dismissively at the maids. "We'll have a full house, possibly even Earl Spencer; these rooms need to pass muster!"

With that, the older woman swooped out of the room, several curls spilling rebelliously from her high-piled hair. The mussed pile on her head was the only indication that she'd also had a day of heavy duties preparing for Mr. Gold's guests. Usually content to let the maids sort the place out while she lorded over them from a high seat in the kitchen, Mrs. Hopper rarely looked anything but untroubled and smugly satisfied with herself.

"Do you think he'll have that woman in again?" whispered Vera as soon as Mrs. Hopper left the vicinity.

"I'm certain it's none of your business," replied Margie. "Besides, Americans are all ghastly. I'm sure she's no worse than the rest."

They resumed the work of opening the room, kicking at the tufts of dust on the carpet as they moved. It wouldn't do any good now to bicker over the rugs. Mrs. Hopper demanded they be scrubbed, and so they must.

"Well I heard from the stable boy, who had it from Mr. Dovey this morning, that his Lordship's invited Mr. Jefferson to come up again," said Vera, sharing a secret grin with the other woman.

"I'm not sure I care," yawned Margie, feigning disinterest. "I'm much more fond of that young Doctor from the village. What's Mr. Gold need with a Manchester quack when he's got a perfectly good physician not a stone's throw from here?"

"It won't make a speck of difference to either of you, anyway," snapped Mrs Hopper - returned again. "The party will be attended by Mr. Dovey and his footmen."

They were used to the woman's ploys: pretending to leave a room, only to double-back and hear
what was being said. Neither Vera nor Margie took any joy in their dealings with Mrs. Hopper, but
- at least in this - they were guilty of no sin, save that of idle gossip. They did, however, share a
collective groan of dread. Mr. Dovey rarely called in footmen, most of them had other jobs around
the property and some only just passed for civilized company. No good would come of objecting,
though; they wouldn't have been permitted to wait on a group of men including the Earl anyway, it
was above their station.

"Now hurry up," ordered the housekeeper. "We're due to start the guest bedrooms in a minute, and
I don't need the pair of you dawdling while the rest of the house is working."

"Can't Belle do some of it?" asked Vera, flicking at the nearest sheet with boredom spelled out on
her face. "We're up to our necks in this mess, and we haven't even started the State Room yet."

Mrs. Hopper's visage immediately turned grim. "Now listen to me, Miss Quail, you are not to be
consorting with that product of charlatans and harlotry. Belle French is a Jezebel, she consorts too
freely with men, and she reads. If not for Mr. Gold's say-so, she'd be out on the next train. As far as
the pair of you are concerned, Belle French is suited only for trade and she is not employed by this
house. You will ignore her, and carry on as you're told, do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," they replied.

"Good," answered Gidge, her tone firm.

Vera gave Margie a doubtful look as soon as Mrs. Hopper's back was turned, and no further words
were said.

Of course Mrs. Hopper wasn't really shocked by anything that blue-clad mouse could do. Why, she
herself was nothing more than a Tinker's daughter with aspirations of grandeur She'd married
beneath her, by all accounts, and - somehow - she and Mr. Hopper found employment in
Sonnachdubh at precisely the same moment Mr. Gold arrived and let his late-father's staff go.

Who was Gidge Hopper to boss them? Everyone knew she ate too good a supper in her cottage
with that husband of hers, away from the prying eyes of the Servants' Hall, and helped herself to
provisions whenever it suited. They'd heard the whole truth from Mrs. Lucas on more than one
occasion, but righteous indignation was Mrs. Hopper's trademark way of dealing with any
difficulty or problem, and so they braced themselves, turned, and continued dusting.

As the ghosts were slowly cleared from the room, Margie turned to Vera and whispered: "D'ya
think Mrs. Lucas would notice if we knicked a bottle of wine from the cupboard after the delivery
kart comes in?"

Vera only grinned, already thinking of the best way to accomplish their ends.

XV. Top Hat and Cane

Gold awoke feeling woolly-mouthed, yet rested. He'd only wanted to forget, to dull the throbbing
in his leg and find happy oblivion on the banks of a stream, surrounded by red poppies and a warm
breeze. Instead, his mind swam with visions of sky-blue eyes and the hint of a melody he did not
recognize.

His chambers were vacant, save for himself, and as he threw off the blankets to slowly shamble to
his feet, Gold had the sick sense of foreboding that he'd done something important before going to
sleep. He tugged the blue-tasseled panel to summon his valet, and looked forward to shocking the
girl. How would she react to him here, in this place, and how would she endure being asked to help
him dress for the day? If nothing else, Gold thought he had a decent chance of seeing her finally scream and stomp her feet.

Little rich girls were all the same, from the daughters of little lordlings whom he knew in his youth to the effigies of purity currently scheming away in every London ball room, the outlook of society girls seldom differed. Occasionally, one could pass for clever, but only if she shirked her mother's apron-strings and took up a book from her father. The meek little ingenues of popular novels, as clever in deed as in accomplishments and manners, did not exist outside of circulating libraries and pretentious opera houses.

Half a minute later, Belle bustled into his room, rapping twice on the door before throwing it open and marching in like she'd done it a hundred times before.

"Are you well, Sir?" she asked him, feigning concern.

The timber and lilt of her voice felt strangely comforting, and he couldn't help the wave of disappointment that washed over him. So much for the first step in shocking the girl.

"I require assistance dressing. How long did I sleep?"

"Two and a half days," she answered, hands clenching at her skirts. "You guests should be arriving tomorrow evening. Mr. Jefferson is already in the study."

"Party?"

"Card game?" Belle tried, sounding unsure. "Mrs. Lucas said you sent Mr. Dovey to invite a lot of..."

"Go on," he urged, when she clapped a hand over her mouth.

"...to invite a lot of gambling lackeys," Belle finished, gauging his reaction.

Gold was careful to keep his face stony. He supposed he had ordered Duffy to round up a party; nothing to dull the senses like easy money and good drinking company. Though he wished he had not consumed the entire bottle of Chlorodyne so quickly; he would have liked nothing more than a few quiet days alone to test his maid's mettle.

"Very well," he growled, turning on his heel and limping toward his bureau. "Then I shall dress for company and meet Mr. Jefferson presently."

"I made your apologies," said the girl, still not moving to join him in dressing.

"A pity," smirked the Viscount, choosing another of his gold-topped canes from a large collection standing in the corner. "And now, my shirtsleeves."

"I'm afraid you'll have to help me," Belle told him, finally moving to stand beside him at the bureau. "I know as little as I ought about men's clothing, but I do learn quickly."

"Do you know how to do anything useful?" he asked derisively.

"I know how to give a shave, and a little about the scullery. My father used to have me do his barbering, to save a few pennies. He was not always so in debt," she blushed.

The thought of Jones' daughter holding a shaving razor to his face stopped Gold's heart in his chest.

"Get out, then. I'll dress myself," he said in a broken, flat voice.
"But I can-"

"Out!" he roared, visions of red spilling out around him, clouding his vision.

The girl made a small noise, like a half-swallowed yelp, and left him to dress himself for the evening. He'd scared her. Good. She should be afraid. With a shaking hand, Gold pulled the bell for his regular service staff. He needed time to breathe.

Gold emerged two hours later, bathed and looking decidedly less wolfish thanks to a string of water-bearing chamber maids and the quick work of Mr. Dovey. He wore a burgundy waistcoat, half unbuttoned, a comfortable shirt, and wide cravat, foregoing the frock coat and frippery. Jefferson was not quite a friend, but the man had his own idiosyncrasies that negated any need for propriety. Not that Gold made much effort on anyone's account to be proper, but he did - when necessary - present himself in the best fashions, made by the finest tailors.

It was all part of the faced, but then - he did owe Bae a certain credibility of lineage, and his business often called him to sooty London for weeks at a time.

As Gold approached his customary drawing room, he heard voices from within the chamber.

"...and then Amy Dorrit inherits her uncle's fortune, but Miss Dorrit declines to mention it and is passed by..."

"Well, well," murmured Gold, pushing in to the room and cutting the conversation short.

Jefferson sat sprawled back and lazy across the settee, narrating the plot of a whimsical story, while Belle stood from her seat at the table as her employer entered the chamber.

"Shall I take you on to entertain the help, Jefferson?" he asked, moving to pour himself a drink without looking at the startled girl clad in the peculiarly colored livery. "I doubt Mrs. Hopper would like it much, but that's more a reason in favor than against these days."

Jefferson only sent him the usual, cocky grin, and extended his hand for a drink. Gold passed him a snifter of whiskey, then poured again for himself.

"I'm sorry, Sir," Belle started. "He was only telling me how Mr. Dickens' last serial went. I hadn't the money to buy a copy, and it wasn't in the libraries before..."

"That is quite enough," Gold snapped.

"Oh, be nice to her, Rum," chided Jefferson, pulling himself flamboyantly to his feet. "You're the one who left her to entertain me, and we both know how challenging that can be. Besides, Miss French has some rather interesting notions about debtor's prisons. Isn't that funny?"

Gold soured immediately, glaring at the other man to shut his mouth. As was his custom, Jefferson had neglected to remove his over-coat and top hat before entering the study. The coat still clung to his frame, fitted perfectly - a symphony in black brocade - and the hat sat on the cushioned sofa opposite the druggist, as though he'd half-expected a bit of haberdashery to keep him company.

Belle moved to take over the pouring, offering each of them cigars after a little unspoken prompting, and returned to her position standing ready.

"He's an old beast, isn't he Miss French?" asked Jefferson, deciding to ignore Gold's warnings and carry on with the girl despite it all.
"Mr. Gold's been very good to me," she replied.

It didn't stink of lying quite so much as it should have done, and Gold took stock of her sharply. She wore the same frilly apron with unnecessary ruffles over the same simply cut dress in a shade of blue that bordered on the offensive; she did not fidget as badly as she had on her first night; and she was smiling - in that small, secretive way of women - at the chemist who had apparently lost all control of his tongue and the speech-making parts of the body.

"Well, you should come to work in my shop!" Jefferson declared, tossing back his drink in one quick gulp. "It'd be much more exciting than waiting on this old curmudgeon."

"We have excitement aplenty," Gold replied, in spite of himself. It would not do to have Jefferson flirting with the Captain's daughter all night. The man didn't have enough sense to leave well enough alone, and he was filling his valet's head with notions of trade and, in all likelihood romance. The sooner she was reminded that there was no escape, no future for her outside of his home, the sooner she would shout, stomp her feet, and give him the satisfaction that he craved.

"Go to bed, Miss French," Gold ordered. "Your services are no longer needed this evening."

"But it's not half-seven..."

"I'll ring if I need anything." He could have sworn he saw a hungry look in her eyes, but she left quietly without the opportunity to satisfy her curiosity.

"You didn't have to send her away," pouted Jefferson. "Where ever did you find that one? She's lovely, a bit like a girl I once knew..."

"She's none of your concern," Gold growled back at him. "And as long as she remains mine, I'll thank you not to speak to her so freely."

"Well aren't you in a mood tonight," grinned Jefferson, already moving on to the next topic that caught his fancy. Gold slid his cane under the rim of Jefferson's hat, spinning it around with a flick of the wrist before flinging it across the room and into its owner's lap. The Manchester man caught it with a flourish, and placed it back atop his head.

Gold seated himself across from the chemist, and Jefferson grinned like a mad-man. Yes, thought Gold. Maybe an orgy of drunken, gambling house guests was exactly the right drug to cure his ills.
Chapter 6

XVI. Asterion

An incessant ringing tugged at Belle's waking mind, followed by the heavy clang of clock-chimes declaring it three hours past midnight.

In Belle's first fortnight at Sonnachdubh, the clocks received little enough notice from the house's inhabitants. The tall, severe grandfather clocks remained unbalanced and dusty. The clamoring cuckoos locked themselves tight in their nests, granting audiences to none. The motionless, conflicting clock faces looking out over the house added to the place's eerie, misty timelessness Belle felt as though she might have been set adrift at sea sometimes, despite the firm floorboards beneath her feet, as the house carried on independent of society. Only Mr. Dovey kept the time, using a golden pocket watch, which he set fastidiously to the railway time.

A stout, brown mantle clock in the study kept the hour silently for the Viscount, should he care to consult it, and the rest of the house remained hopelessly asynchronous. It was only with the advent of company that the remainder of the cog-work army came grinding to life, wound and dusted under Mrs. Hopper's calculating eye. Now, the clocks called out the time dutifully, day and night. Even after Mr. Hopper's hounds settled for the evening - always the last living creatures to still on the estate, long after the moon dipped below the horizon - the clocks continued ticking.

When the Viscount's guests left again, Belle supposed the clocks would eventually cease to tick and the house would slip back into its aimless drift.

But it was not the house's clockwork which woke Belle from sleep in the dead of night. Each clash of metal conveyed vital information: the clocks echoing in the attic told her that it was late - indecently late, but the high, demanding summons of Mr. Gold's bell-pull told her that she was wanted urgently in his study.

Belle's body craved the seductive embrace of the bed, yet her mind screamed that she must move quickly and wake. To call her so late, so incessantly, something must certainly be amiss. She'd sworn to work for the value of Sir Maurice's estate, and she meant to keep that promise, if only she could force open her eyes. She only wanted a few more moments of dreamy warmth...

The bell rang again, five times in quick succession, as Belle slid from her blankets and stepped shivering onto the floor. She considered, for a moment, her corset and livery, before simply reaching for her dressing gown and stockings. The bell paused and then began anew - stacatto, accelerando - and Belle groped blindly for something with which to light her little lamp.

The packet of beeswax matches evaded her, and the bell continued to dog her every breath. If Mr. Gold fell ill again and she came too late, he might wretch and convulse and break his neck. The fear of what awaited her at the other end of the bell-pull frightened her nearly as much as the long, dark corridors that lay between herself and Mr. Gold. She would not think the darkness of Sonnachdubh so terrible then, in light of ignoring the pleas of a dying man. Bravery, or a facsimile of it; bravery was key. Decided, Belle turned toward the stair and descended into the house with only memories to guide her.

Clad in her night dress, dressing gown, cap and woolly stockings, she found faint starlight trickling in through the closed drapes. It was not enough to see by, but it kept her from walking off the edge of any forgotten landing. The labyrinthine halls of the old manor twisted and turned, and the floors creaked under her weight as though some invisible figure stalked the shadows behind her. Belle
padded through the corridors barefoot and worried, hyper-aware of her surroundings. Before she had time to think herself silly, Belle found herself running, wincing away from the darkest shadows, attempting to flee a multitude airy nothings.

Panting and lost, Belle rounded a corner and suddenly found herself in front of a door with light coming out from under it. She did not pause to knock before entering, bursting suddenly into the blinding light. Candles illuminated the entire chamber, and Belle shaded her eyes from the sudden brilliance of it all. She could smell the subtle hint of dust and bitter perfume drink that filled the air, and knew she'd been delivered from a blind panic by sheer, dumb luck into the room to which she'd been summoned.

"Sir, are you unwell?" Belle asked, squinting into the study as she slowly started to see again.

"When I call, I expect you to come promptly," Gold snarled, taking her by surprise. She jumped and stifled a small scream when she saw him standing, quite well, by the blue-tasseled bell-pull. The reality was not as horrid as she'd imagined, and now she felt silly - wearing only her night clothes - and panting like some wild woman of the streets. Against the alarming brightness of the room, she attempted to calm her nerves and viewed Mr. Gold in silhouette - dark and sharp-shaped by a fitted waistcoat and loose shirtsleeves. The dancing shadows, fueled by licking, flickering flames, exaggerated the shape of his head into something ghastly, but Belle blinked away the illusion and called once more upon her bravery. As her eyes adjusted, she saw that he wore his cravat half-tied and leaned heavily against his cane: perfectly humdrum and mundane.

"I came as soon as I heard the bell," she vowed, drawing her dressing gown around herself as she awaited his instruction. He must want something desperately to rouse her, even if he was not dying. She supposed she'd feel annoyed if it weren't such a relief to see that he hadn't returned to that wretched, sweating, frothing state she'd discovered when she tended him in his bedroom.

"And you did not care to dress?" he asked, releasing the brocade panel. Gold's eyes ran up and down her in a rapid glance before settling on her face. His glare, always severe, looked entirely furious.

"It's three in the morning... I thought you must have taken ill. It was so awful last time, but Mr. Dovey insisted you wouldn't want a physician..."

Gold cocked his eyebrow at her, lips pressed into a thin line, and a thought passed behind his eyes. He looked to her as though he'd forgotten or wanted to remember something, like a school child being quizzed.

"Have you been overindulging again, Rum?" asked a second voice, centered on the settee.

"I'm sorry!" she blurted out, backing into the doorway toward the relative safety of the night. "I forgot the company."

"Nonsense, it's rare to see a sensible lady as comely in her cap and braid as she is in her corset and hairpins," cheered Jefferson, sitting up to look at her fully.

Belle gasped, jumping to hug her arms across her chest. Mr. Jefferson sat precisely where she'd left him, still clad in his long, black coat and slouched back limply on the cushions. He'd been so kind to her before, but now that she'd made a fool of herself she supposed it was right for him to treat her with derision and ridicule.

At a loss for words, Belle simply said the first words to enter her mind: "Please don't speak so casually about such things!"
The chemist burst out into a hearty laughter, practically doubling over with mirth, and Belle pushed back deeper into the darkness. Gold still stared silently, eyes clouded with something like frustration, before rounding on Jefferson.

"Enough," he snarled at Jefferson, stepping directly in front of her and cutting the chemist from her line of sight.

Belle felt herself blush scarlet, and clenched her fists to keep from screaming. She was such a fool, exposing herself in this way. And of course he hadn't taken ill again, because if he had he would almost certainly have asked for Mr. Dovey. Belle had no idea how a maid or valet ought to behave at three in the morning, she'd barely the wherewithal to endure a simple Ladies' Tea, and the Judge always scowled at her clumsy curtsy. Blunders of a social nature could be overcome, but nothing would repair appearing before two unmarried men, neither of whom was family, in a state of relative nudity.

"Miss French," Gold continued, stumbling over her name as though it felt foreign against his lips, "a pot of tea, if you please." In the space between starlight and candlelight, he looked almost bestial again, and the heat of embarrassment switched suddenly to the cold sweat of doubt.

"Yes, sir. I'll just change, and..."

"There's no need," Gold sighed, slouching back into the mercurial posture she'd come to recognize. "Just the tea. Quickly, dearie."

Relieved to be dismissed, Belle snatched up a small, silver chamber stick and turned to leave. She'd behaved brashly, and had only herself to blame. It was foolhardy to fear the darkness of familiar hallways, and to imagine her master warping into some shaggy, hulking, horned thing. He was just a man. An ill-mannered, demanding man, but he'd treated her fairly, almost kindly in the matter of the Worcester tea cup incident, and he'd given her the opportunity to save her only family. A pot of tea past midnight was not too much to ask in exchange for all of that.

**XVII. A Cure for all Ills**

Finally seeing something like fear in the girl's eyes, Gold watched with mixed feelings as his little maid scampered away toward the kitchens, no doubt dribbling wax on the floorboards from her poorly-trimmed, purloined candle. She was not truly afraid of him, not yet; what frightened the girl was Mr. Jefferson's loose tongue and nonchalance at her state of undress. The chemist was too forward with his property, any lesser creature would have fainted directly or simply ignored the bell.

If he didn't need the mad genius of the man, he'd throttle him and send him straight back to Manchester. But he did need Jefferson; the subtle art and exact science of the new, chemical apothecary lie beyond Gold's realm of expertise. He had a keen intellect, a cunning instinct for business, and managed his properties and contracts with an exacting sense for trade, but he could not brew a tincture of poppy any sooner than Jefferson could obtain a special dispensation from the Queen. It was a necessary allegiance, sometimes a pleasant one, but an allegiance of necessity all the same.

If the chemist had come to over-estimate his own worth, Gold would be only too happy to remind him who held the real power in their mutually beneficial relationship.

Rumford did not like Jefferson's attention to the girl. She was his prize, his to protect or break as he chose, and no scoundrel in an over-sized top hat (the origins of which had something to do with drumming up sales among the illiterates) had any right to impose. Belle may have been her father's
daughter, but he'd allow no one to say that the women of his household were ill-used. Sonnachdubh
would crumble as he sat on silk cushions and watched the mortal fall, but it would founder and rot
as his father's house, not as the elder Viscount Sonnachdubh's bastard son's brothel. Baelfire would
inherit much, but he would not inherit the reputation of a whore-monger.

Perhaps he would have found the encounter humorous and turned it to better advantage under
different circumstances, but his head danced with unbidden memories of fine blue eyes and small
white hands sponging sweat and sick from his face as he lay, wretched, in a chloral haze. Had she
come to him in his chambers, or was that a pretty lie spun from pretty lips to poison him?

Regardless, it could not happen again. She might have smothered him, defenseless as he was, or
found a razor to cut his throat and left his corpse for Mr. Dovey to discover. This, more than
anything, convinced Rumford that he'd been right to call on Jefferson in the first place. The party,
though a mild annoyance, would lessen suspicions as to why he'd called a disreputable chemist to
the house; the physician too, Dr. Victor Whale, would arrive on the morrow, though Gold intended
to share nothing of his personal difficulties with the man. Still, he would have a man of science on
hand in case his genius milliner-turned-herbalist-turned-druggist failed him, and none of his
enemies would dare to speculate on the state of his health so long as the requisite amount of money
was drunk up or gambled.

Gold turned back to Jefferson, still stifling his giggles at the expense of the girl, and choked back a
reprimand. He had more pressing matters to deal with, more important priorities.

"Are you sure this new salt of yours can dull the pain without drowning the senses?" he asked,
 glaring.

"Oh, this little beauty will numb anything," Jefferson replied, flashing a small, glass vial full of
white powder from somewhere up his sleeve. "It's quite stimulating."

"Can you offer me any securities?"

"Still think I'm trying to poison you, old man?"

"Isn't everybody? Besides, I still think you're a quack," Gold shot back. "Albeit a quack with a
knack for notoriety."

Jefferson huffed and pretended to take offense at that, before flourishing his little white bottle and
stepping into the charismatic, over-exaggerated motions of of a professional salesman.

"It can be sniffed, spread over the gums, or dissolved in wine; we'll both try it in tea, so you can't
accuse me of getting you too drunk to judge clearly, and when we're done you'll be buying my
whole supply," grinned the chemist, his smile cocky and full of uncommonly white teeth. As he
spoke, he performed minor sleights of hand - the moniker "parlor tricks" might have been too
generous, though Gold - giving the illusion of prestidigitation as the substance vanished up his
sleeve again.

"You seem very sure of this one, Jefferson. I'll not have a repeat of last time."

"The mushrooms were fine before you combined them with absinthe and chloral."

"My leg hurt," Gold defended weakly.

"It won't after tonight," Jefferson assured him. "In fact, you're going to feel so well that we'll all go
hunting in a day or so. What do you say to that? I like watching the foxes escape while your man
Hopper fumes like a whore who hasn't been paid."
"That remains to be seen, dearie..." Rumford liked a hunt, when his leg could withstand the riding; as with all aspects of his life, guns were strictly not permitted among a Sonnachdubh hunting party. They never sent in terriers, either. If a fox got to ground, it earned its life. If the dogs captured it, well... that was the point: between the clever and the strong, there existed a constant battle to survive. Of course, the hunt also represented all the pointless frippery that he despised, but - thankfully - one thing his Master of Keys and Grounds was good for was a complete and utter disregard for ceremony. He and his wife seemed like night and day, until the pair of them stood cornered and then the lies flowed like honey. Gold liked it, they kept his vigil over the dying house lively.

Still, he had other concerns to voice before talk of hunting. "What of the poppy?"

"If you can keep yourself clear of it for the next few days, I see no reason why opium should not be entirely replaced by my marvelous coca-leaf salt."

"It helps me sleep," Gold confessed with a wrinkled brow. In truth, he needed the laudanum to manage the pain both within and without. And, for twenty some years, he'd balanced the drops of saffron-red liquor with the demands of building up Baelfire's empire. That was before the Captain's daughter, though, and before he'd found himself drowning in the haunting echoes of rifle-fire and dying soldiers. Even now, after he'd had the girl for two weeks, he couldn't bring himself to think past their capture on the hills of Andouin. The truth of it all sickened him, and he needed a medicine that would not put him to sleep. Business and trade did not manage on its own for long, and Gold had been negligent of late. For a man so fastidious an demanding, a lapse of even two days felt like a grievous mistake.

"Well, there's no harm in mixing," Jefferson told him after pausing to think. "Though I doubt you'll need to sleep as often with the white powder in your system... but you shall see for yourself, just as soon as your Beauty brings the tea. Ah, speak of the Lady..."

Gold turned to see his valet pushing into the room, arms laden with a heavy tray. She'd brought the blue and white Royal Worcester set, and went to work immediately setting out cups and saucers on the low table in front of Mr. Jefferson's settee.

Belle as he saw her then looked a world apart from the brat he'd found wearing fine silk in the Judge's house; the Belle of that world transformed almost overnight into the Belle he knew at Sonnachdubh - the one in strange indigo livery, who barely flinched when he stared and scrubbed his scullery without complaining. The Belle in gold silk and the Belle in blue linen fit neatly into his perspective, a cunning ruse designed to test him, but this curly-haired woman in her stockings and dressing gown contradicted the other two. She was softer, somehow less threatening, and almost endearing in her discomfort serving them dressed in this manner.

Taking pleasure in the loss and suffering of others was a specialty of the Viscount's, but seeing her uncomfortable (not weeping or begging for freedom - merely embarrassed and wary) made her somehow more real, more a human and less the monstrous spawn of a treacherous devil. He did not like the change; if she'd intentionally dressed provocatively, then the daughter of his enemy had struck a small victory.

"What are you doing?" Belle demanded all of a sudden, voice sharp, as she pulled Gold from his reverie. She was looking at Jefferson, small hand wrapped around his black-cuffed wrist. "He was pouring something into the cups, Sir. I saw it."

"Just the cocaine, Rum," grumbled the chemist, holding up the vial of powder.

"It's not poison?" Gold's valet demanded, releasing Jefferson.
"No," Gold cut in, anxious to send the girl back to bed. "It is medicine. And now, Miss French, you may return to bed."

She looked as though she meant to object, but - glancing down at her state of undress - thought better of it, turned, and left.

"She's bright, I'll give you that," grinned Jefferson, offering him a cup.

The small chip in the rim reminded Gold of the days following his acquisition of the girl, and he turned it away so it would not face him.

"My Alice was like that," Jefferson continued, taking a sip. Gold followed suit, and found the flavor of the drug not quite as vile as it might have been. "Of course that was before..."

Rumford merely glared and suppressed a low snarl. It would not do at all for Jefferson to dwell so much upon Belle. She was not for him to tarry with, nor any guest at Sonnachdubh; Belle was his. He'd found her when she was lost and dragged her back to account for her bloodline. No Manchester druggist nor Prince Albert himself would undermine him now.

Whatever Jefferson meant to say about his wife, he trailed off into silence and nursed his tea instead of finishing aloud. Gold followed suit, satisfied that the cups were not poisoned, and waited to feel the powers of this new miracle powder.

**XVIII. Certain Entitlements**

"Come along, boy!" shouted the Groundskeeper to his son. John Hopper, Honest John as the folk in the village called him, typically liked his job as Master of Keys. It was a no-account position of relative authority, and it allowed him certain luxuries.

As long as he worked for Gold, his credit was good in the village and his word obeyed. Having the right to fleece the lay-about crofters for taxes and rent once or twice a year was just the bonus dollop of gravy on the proverbial kidney pie. If they were too stupid to know the law, then that was their problem. He took from them, they took from someone else, and the house employed them all anyway. It was the way of the modern economy, and John Hopper was a vital part of it, if he did say so himself.

Gold, the crippled bastard, even promised room and board atop John's already sizable "taxes" and wages, so he, Gidge, and the boy dined very well every night on whatever feast the witch-cook could brew in the kitchens. Mrs. Lucas gave Gidge no end of a headache, but her little Ruby was shaping up alright. She'd make a fine bed-warmer for one of the village lads one day (once they were unhappily married to lemon-juice blondes getting fat on bon-bons and suffering fainting spells in the bedroom), and if she went into her mother's trade he might even take young Archie around to the whore-house for his fifteenth birthday. They could both have a go, so long as no one told the boy's mother, and John counted the days until his gangling, awkward little ginger grew into a man capable of easing the Groundskeeper's burdens.

"I'm coming, Father!" his son called back, staggering up the hill with set of small, strong cages slung over his back.

They were walking out to one of the old blackhouses, flagstone floors and thatched roof held together by mud-mortar and stubbornness, to visit a man who bred foxes. The crofters lived like savages, some of them still keeping their animals on one side of the old house while the people lived on the other, a great room divided by the smell of shit from the assembled parties.
He and Gidge lived proper, in one of the cottages not too far from the privy, and it pleased him to piss in the master's toilet of a morning. Gold probably had a solid sliver chamber pot for his own stinking mess, but for a man like Hopper - born of Tinkers and very like to die a Tinker without Gidge's quick thinking all those years earlier - having a piss in the Viscount's privy was a great but simple pleasure.

"Hop-to, Archie," John grumbled when he spotted the man he needed waiting by the gate stint. The sooner he could leave behind these smelly sheep-fuckers, the better.

"Are you sure this is alright, Father?" asked the boy, shifting the weight of his burden to the other shoulder.

"Aye," replied John, leaning down to look the boy in the eye. "Gold, the bastard, has got in his head to do a fox hunt again. The little buggers are always getting away, or the dog's are chasing at nothing all day. Not this year, by God. We'll stock the field and catch one of the damned things for a change."

"I think Mr. Gold likes it when they escape," answered Archie. "Isn't it cheating to hunt foxes born in a cage?"

"Archie, Archie, Archie..." sighed John, coming to stand along side the farmer who meant to sell him four of the little red vermin. "Trust me, I'm your father. That's what parents are for, to do your thinking for you. We'll stock-up the fields and have a good, proper fox-slaughter."

"Bae says it's not good to cheat."

"Well Master Baelfire aint here, is he? Oh, Archibald, my boy, don't worry so much about what's good as what's right. It's right to be yourself, son. You are who you are, and there's no changing it."

"Alright," his son replied, handing him the first cage. They filled each one from the farmer's basket, slipped the man a few coins, and took their leave.

"Hurry up, Archie. Don't dawdle, you've still got work to do today my gillie," John called when his son fell behind.

"It's heavy!" the child complained, switching the cages full of yelping vermin to his other side. "Can you help carry?"

"Archibald J. Hopper, you hear me," the Groundskeeper scolded. "I've a bad back and bumps and lumps, and your mother's liver is failing. You don't want to send us to our graves early, do you son?"

"No, Father."

"Aye, of course not. You wouldn't murder me carrying foxes all around the county. Now come along, there's still chores to be done."

"Yes, Father."

He was a good boy, his Archie. Got a bit full of himself and grand ideas from Gold's pup, but that'd sort itself out eventually. Some things were certain, and it was in that child's blood to make a clever living off these country bumpkins and indecently rich noblemen, and blood, well... blood was destiny
Chapter 7

XIX. Bacchanalia

Pandemonium swept Sonnachdubh from the moment Belle stumbled from Gold's study in the frigid dawn. The fragile sunlight or a new morning pressing through small gaps in the curtains, keeping all her imaginary monsters at bay. She was undeniably a creature of light and day. Even the dogs roused themselves in the new daylight, howling from the kennels to be fed on bones and marrow.

The temptation of sleep loomed heavy over her head, but for all that Belle was obligated to do no more than answer the Viscount's summons all day long, (assuming any came) she could not leave Ruby and the others to struggle through the last of their preparations without her. The Housekeeper would not deign to assign Belle a task, but the Cook suffered no such complications and welcomed Belle with open arms. She toiled without pause to help ready the house for its impending inhabitants under the watchful eyes Mrs. Lucas; Belle may not have been competent to bake bread or prepare a roast, but she found herself entirely adequate for the task of polishing silver and wiping down China.

She and Ruby talked amiably all morning, regaling one another with their adventures. Ruby spoke of fields and meadows, and Belle spoke of midnight tea parties and mysterious little bottles. Finally, their conversation turned to the future.

"Archie says there's going to be a hunt," grinned Ruby, chopping onions for her Gran while Belle ran a clean cloth over an ornate serving spoon. "That means Warg and me will get to whip-in."

"Whip-in?" asked Belle, uncertain of the term. She'd not experienced much in her short life, certainly not a hunting party. Those were the pleasure of the rich and landed gentry, and she'd been the ward to a bankrupt squire who could barely afford to keep his own horse fed.

"I keep the dogs in order," she said. "Warg helps me. Archie used to, but he has to carry the rifle now in case Mr. Gold wants to shoot something. He never does, though. I think he's gun-shy, but Archie's dad says he's just cowardly."

"Ruby Lucas, watch your mouth!" ordered Mrs. Lucas from the pantry. The older woman had a tongue sharper than half the knives in her kitchen, and sharp ears too.

"Yes, Granny!" Ruby called back, giggling quietly and rolling her eyes at Belle.

"Have I met Warg?" Belle asked casually. She was certain she'd heard the name before, but could not conjure a face to match it.

"I don't think so. He's not allowed in the house. Warg doesn't like the other dogs, though, and Mr. Hopper could never keep a bitch with him, so now he just helps me whip-in and sometimes we play. He likes me best, out of everybody, even better than Bae."

"Warg seems a strange name for a bloodhound, Ruby..."

"Baelfire named him that when he was a puppy. I won him at a carnival throwing rings, and Granny meant to skin me for it, but Bae and Archie liked him so much that I got away with it. And Warg isn't a bloodhound, anyway."

"What is he?" Belle asked, intrigued.
"A wolf-hound!" Ruby beamed.

Belle could only smile in response. She'd never seen a wolf-hound before, but if Ruby liked one then it must have been a sweeter dog than the name promised.

As Belle discovered throughout the day, the kitchens - even more so than the Servants' Hall - functioned as the pulsating heart of Sonnachdubh. Gossip filtered through the sweet-smelling, brightly lit room as easily as air through the lungs.

The servants barreled like bulls through the halls, setting out candles and drinking vessels, until the crunch of carriage wheels on gravel announced the first arrival - the first real arrival - of Mr. Gold's sordid assembly. As Belle quickly learned from Miss Flinch, a Manchester druggist was entirely too base to garner Mrs. Hopper's sympathies. Strictly speaking, Jefferson did not count. He was only another of Mr. Gold's numerous employees, and all in his employ must naturally submit themselves to Mrs. Hopper's authority. No matter how the woman ranted, railed and insisted she entertained no airs or grandeur, the reality was another matter entirely; Belle was no stranger to hypocrisy, and she doubted very much that Mrs. Hopper would dare repeat her opinions on the chemist in hearing of anybody noteworthy.

Belle overheard no end of conversation through the day and dinner service, laughing quietly with Ruby and her grandmother at some of the revelations. Vera and Margie expected a young, unmarried doctor with an independent income to come up from the town, and they cackled wildly at some unspoken scheme; Ruby hoped to see Mrs. Mallory up close again - the brash, American heiress who wore dyed ostrich plumes in her hair had once shown the girl a brace of delicate, ivory pistols she wore in her garters, and Ruby wanted nothing more in the world than a set of her own to wear; Mr. Dovey repeated hourly that the staff must remain on their best behavior for the duration of the gathering, and do nothing to entice the Viscount's ire; Mrs. Hopper wanted to see Lord George Albert, Earl Spencer, a man with whom Gold dealt regularly in sums too large to repeat in polite company (but which did not stop the Housekeeper from repeating the figures ad nauseum to anybody in her vicinity); for her part, Belle only wanted a chance to observe Mr. Jefferson again and ensure that he did not mean poison somebody.

As was so often the case in life, almost all of them were disappointed - save for Ruby.

Almost from the first, the downstairs system of servants and authority began to strangle itself on tendrils of disharmony. The Earl sent his regrets, which prompted Mrs. Hopper to dismiss Mr. Dovey's footmen and usurp them with her maids, she saw no point in employing young bucks from outside the House when only a handful of middle-class climbers arrived at the house. Mr. Dovey acted as butler, leaving Mrs. Lucas and Mrs. Hopper struggling to establish supremacy. When the dinner party ended and the gathering settled into one of Gold's studies, Vera and Margie took to fainting spells in turns, each lovely red-head hoping to force the young doctor to loose her stays. Their antics prompted Gold to banish them from the room, forcing Belle to bear the brunt of his wine-service needs, and after the first few hours she had to fight to remain steady on her feet for wont of sleep.

"Damn it, Mal," Jefferson cursed, throwing up his arms in disgust. "You've fleeced me with your charms and sorcery."

"Maybe," replied Mrs. Mallory, brushing a dark purple feather back into her high-combed hair. The feather matched the silk of her gown, and if Belle didn't know better she'd have thought the woman's jewels all paste to look at the size of them. "But Luck is a bitch who bites, and I'm sure as hell not charming."

The woman's accent came thick and heavy to Belle's ears, ringing of her common, American
origins. It was to her credit, Belle thought, that she made no attempt to hide her roots or disguise her tastes. Mrs. Mallory was bold, almost to the point of indecency, and Belle felt an equal mix of awe and alarm toward the woman.

Jefferson laughed at Mal's language, and Belle watched him carefully. Her eyes sought any sign of prestidigitation or sleight-of-hand treachery. They played Hazard with a set of ivory dice, and Belle couldn't say whether she expected to catch him poisoning or attempting to cheat. They played for pennies, the stakes laughably low even to one of her financial history. It was, she knew, the work of a compromise. Save Gold, none in the room could afford to play dice for any meaningful stakes against the fantastically wealthy American, and it would take gargantuan winnings to truly please either of those two. At penny-stakes, though, the doctor and the druggist could join.

"Belle, my love, another cup!" the chemist cheered, lifting his empty glass in the air. "A luckier one, if you please."

As the last servant remaining, Belle had little choice but to pour him more wine and ignore his familiarity. She filled his glass with the deep, dry wine Gold favored, and looked to her employer for guidance. His dark visage glared through her, intense almost to the point of unseeing, and he seemed disinclined to help with Jefferson's increasingly forward nature.

"Luck," said the doctor in his reserved, grave voice, "is a poor statistician's folly. You wager badly."

Jefferson pulled a face, looking dramatically stricken and taking false offense to the sleight. Gold remained silent, casting at his turn.

"Hell, I thought you, of all people, would have found a science to this stuff, Doc," Mrs. Mallory offered, grinning like a predator from under her rouge and parfum.

"Science, Madame, is a more pure and perfect system of understanding than this travesty of gaming deserves."

"That means the sneak tried but couldn't manage it," supplied Jefferson, taking his turn as the room chortled with him.

Belle felt herself fading away from the conversation, standing with her back pressed to the wall and waiting for some indication that her services were required. They clamored and joked among themselves, and all the while Gold remained taciturn, scowling at Belle's corner. When the clocks struck three in the morning again, Belle wobbled on her feet, steadied herself, and allowed her eyes to slide shut for just a moment - barely long enough to matter at all, but the damage was done - she slipped into sleep.

XX. The Madame

As far as Felicia Mallory was concerned, the title Missus was entirely speculatory and debatably honorary. She'd made her fortune the old fashioned way, with a combination of whoring and thievery. Never meant to take such a strong liking to business, either, but one old, fat bastard died and left her the deed to a mine in payment for services rendered and the San Francisco cat-house keeper found herself among the very richest of the forty-niners. It paid for her retirement, the retirement of some of her girls, and when she looked to sell there was the Viscount of Sonnachdubh, Lord Rumford Gold.

None of the prissy New York brokers ever expected the ne'er-do-well daughter of Irish immigrants to give them such a thorough run through, but she'd grown her fortune and cashed out the more
tremulous of her investments just in time to catch a steamer for Europe before the so-called railroad barons sent it all to hell. Mrs. Mallory, as those prim, English snots called her, had more of their funny-money pounds than (as it turned out) it was polite to mention, and she made friends easily among the ambitious members of the gentry.

Gold was almost an after-thought, though he invited her along to his absinthe-fueled orgies once in a dog's age, and she attended more out of a sense of obligation than any real fun. She was travelling by train to the Blanchard house anyway, it seemed a shame not to. He'd given her good advice and a fair price, once upon a time, back when she was just some Madame with a few girls and some hired guns no one had ever heard of: "You see contracts... deals, well, they're the very foundation of all civilized existence. Get everything in writing, dearie - except your money. Always get that in gold."

It served her well. That, and the pair of pistols she kept strapped to her thighs.

Gold didn't tolerate anyone brandishing a gun in his proximity, she'd learned that the hard way back in San Francisco. It was a wild, lawless place in those days, and he'd looked very out of place. Still, Mal never forgot a face, and she'd remember the blind, violent rage that played across the Scotsman's until the day she died. Monsters came in all shapes and sizes - every whore knew that, or she didn't last long - and the slight, rich gentleman who cussed like a miner and frequented the opium dens like a Sultan had a big one bottled up inside of him.

Mal was catching glimpses of the monster all evening, glaring at that sweet-talking Jefferson and the ever-serious Whale as they chatted up the maid. The poor gal, trussed up in ruffles and pouring wine all night, had the great misfortune of being pretty but not powerful. Power was titled friends and rich lovers. Power was dressing how you wanted and piss on the fashion plates. Power was never getting married. Power was everything. It was why she and Rum had such a clear understanding, pure commerce unsullied by tits and fucking.

Still, she owed him no loyalty and trusted him less than a butcher with his dog missing. This assembly was small, even by Gold's unsociable standards, and she wondered what need he had for a Manchester chemist and a country doctor to call. It wasn't the first time she'd come across the men at Gold's house, and she liked them well enough (for English folk) in small, manageable doses.

It behooved her not to disclose Gold's habits to the rest of London, but "understanding" or no, this was one fluke that Regina might like to know. Mal kept few enough bosom friends, she believed with all her iron-clad heart that women were the fiercer sex, but there were some things that Gold didn't need to know. Mal kept her cards close to her chest, even when playing at dice. And, she supposed, there were worse things. Gold's distraction worked to her favor, and she cleaned up the penny-wagers neatly in almost every throw.

"More wine, if you please," called Mal, lifting her cup and claiming her winnings.

"Belle," chorused Jefferson, downing his glass in a gulp. "We've need of your company, m'lady!"

The girl jumped half out of her skin, flushing scarlet. Fuck's sake, they'd caught her sleeping on her feet. Poor thing, Mal remembered days and nights that wouldn't end, and didn't envy the maid her place. She even thought she heard Gold growling as the little thing hurried to fill their glasses and stopped to offer her master the same courtesy.

Whale was talking to them now, saying something dull and severe most likely, but with Gold taciturn and Jefferson drunk, it wasn't possible for Mal to tune the doctor out.
"When they take a surgeon on for president of the Royal Society and oust old Wrottesley, then science may be progressed enough to turn its eye back toward frivolity. And that will never happen as long as the peerage scorns the visceral art of medicine, looking to the stars like moon-calves to avoid acknowledging a tradesman practitioner."

"Oh, but..." came a breathy response from Belle.

Whale turned sharply, looking at the little maid with level eyes. Mal thought the girl looked shocked that she'd spoken her thoughts aloud, and covered her mouth quickly. She'd learn to bite her tongue eventually, that was the sad truth of it. Always was, always would be.

"Go on," the doctor deadpanned, adjusting his leather gaming cuffs.

Victor was a man of the first fashions; he wore a suit made specially for gambling, while the other men lounged in only their shirt-sleeves and waistcoats, with cravats half undone. She could appreciate a well-cut coat on a lithe physique, and took no insult from their disarray (though she much preferred the gentle swell and cinch of the ladies). Gold and Jefferson always met her on equal terms, with no nonsense or frippery on the occasions that they chanced to meet, but the well-dressed, sober doctor remained a mystery. How had a well-born son of such obvious intelligence come to work in the highlands of Scotland?

"I'm sorry," offered the maid weakly.

"Say your piece," instructed Gold, speaking for the first time in recent memory.

The little maid's eyes widened, and she nodded mutely.

"It's only that I thought The Lord Wrottesley studied astronomy. Surely that is not frivolity?"

"Astronomy, Theology, Alchemy... these are the shackles of a misbegotten past. The new science lies in physiology, natural history, geology, and - if I may be so bold - some branches of philosophy."

"But wasn't Newton an alchemist of sorts, Sir? And Archimedes studied the stars. These were mathematicians, and those principals are nothing if not pure."

For her part, Mal couldn't understand half of what they said to one another, but she admired the girl's grit. She wasn't one to be cowed, and a girl like that would do well for herself in this world.

"Oh, child," sighed the doctor, condescension coating his tongue like honey. "We've come so much farther than our noble Greek ancestors. Science, the new science, will transform the world. With the proper understanding of the mechanics of life, it is only a matter of time before men can replicate it and debunk miracles and lies. As for alchemy, well... our friend Jefferson here can tell you that it's a conning art. The new science is chemistry, compounds and the microscope."

"I wouldn't be so fast to dismiss alchemy, Victor," cautioned Jefferson, coming to the girl's aid. "The world is full of all sorts of unexplained things."

"But with science we will explain them!" championed Whale. "Name me one alchemist whose work went on to gain notoriety Just one. It's all quackery, though I suppose you would know more about that than me."

Jefferson floundered and made a face. He didn't know any.

"Cornelius Agrippa, for one," said the girl, pausing to think. "And Nicholas Flamel."
Several stubbled jaws dropped all at once, and Mal felt a surge of pride for the well-read wine steward. She, herself, was not much of an academic - though she was literate, and eloquent in a bind - but it thrilled her to see the cock-sure doctor so thoroughly thwarted by someone who, by all rights, shouldn't have known her own name on paper from President Buchanan's or the Queen's.

"You're just repeating things you've heard said by a hedge-witch or nanny," announced the doctor, never breaking his grim composure.

"I'm not," Belle replied, equally serious. "I've read all of Opticks and parts of Principia."

"And Agrippa?"

The maid colored again, and Mal leaned forward on the edge of her seat to see what she might say.

"No," the girl confessed, looking contrite. "I only heard of him through Mortal Immortal in The Keepsake."

"The Keepsake," scoffed Whale, turning back to the table. "Such is the state of modern alchemy, gentlemen!"

Mal raised her hand to feign a yawn, and mouthed the word "jackass" while nodding toward Victor. The girl caught her meaning and stifled a giggle. As the dice-game commenced, Mal chanced a look back at Gold to take his measure after the exchange. He looked sad, or maybe angry. Mal supposed it didn't matter, she planned to leave after breakfast to catch her train and then the world of Sonnachdubh would lie behind her for a time while she and Lady Blanchard talked of men, maids and other scandalous happenings.

XXI. Perchance to Dream

Begrudgingly, Gold had to admit Jefferson's victory when he'd promised that the cocaine would limit one's desire for sleep. It coursed through him, the medicine doing its work and numbing his body without making him drowsy. If anything, he felt more invigorated than he had since seizing his little valet out from under that country Judge's lecherous gaze. He'd drunk three cups of wine laced with the stuff, and his mind ran circles around him while he fought to remain still despite an unusual predilection to fidget with something. He even thought he could try his leg at a few jumps when they rode out to hunt in the morning - well, he supposed, perhaps afternoon was more likely. It seemed improbable that his guests would proceed from the table to the saddle without taking at least a few hours to sleep.

Rumford could no more focus on the game of Hazard than he could the inane chatter of his guests, but he had no desire to retire, no desire to gulp laudanum and absinthe until the world closed in, and no desire to sit alone in his chambers while the rest of them went half-mad with his wine. It was a strange feeling, wanting everything and nothing, feeling braced and subdued all in one trembling moment. He believed himself well rid of the poppy, whatever the cost; if Jefferson could produce enough of his miracle substance to fuel Gold's days, he could moderate his dose of opium to sleep and the world would right itself eventually. For every medicine, a pain... or was it the other way?

His businesses - Bae's businesses, really - required a calculating cunning that he'd lost in the week since Belle came. Drowning his memories and teetering on the edge of indecision was a weakness and a folly. Body cured for a time, his thoughts turned to the inward plights dogging his steps and haunting his thoughts.

The girl had to crack soon. Even if she didn't, he had to act or risk the lasting impotence of the past week coming to govern them permanently.
All of it - Bae, the girl, Jefferson, even that clever whore Mallory - spun outward in a tangled web from the golden sin of commerce. He'd bought and paid for his vengeance as easily as he'd bought and paid for his California gold mines; they said a gentleman never engaged in trade, but Gold was no gentleman. He knew what he was - an acknowledged bastard left to die in some ditch in Spain. The one thing he'd done right in his life, Baelfire, could not suffer because he'd grown soft in the face of a pair of pretty eyes sinking drowsily into the face of a woman whose heart pumped a traitor's blood.

His bravery was a reactionary thing, rarely the agent of its own destiny, but he would be active - he must be active - in the origination of her slow demise. It was plain to see with the way she drew attention from Jefferson, and even Whale, that the girl had inherited her father's easy charisma and grace. They'd looked up to him, a veteran of the greatest battle ever waged and a Captain besides, and he'd pissed on all their graves. Gold's leg throbbed through Jefferson's medicine at the thought, and he grimaced in pain. Someone had to pay, someone had to bear the brunt of justice, even if it was that tiny, ruffled, soft-handed thing.

A pair of coal-black eyes laughed from a smiling face, mocking him. If memories could not be killed, then he would find the next-best way.

This girl, Belle, his valet, was the self-same babe Jones proudly displayed. The one thing that made him willing to sacrifice anything, do anything, say anything, to escape with his own, wretched life. Gold would do no less for Bae, but Bae was different. Bae wasn't the product of two bad seeds - a loosely-legged Marquis' daughter and a turncoat; Bae only had one miserable wretch for a parent, his mother - bless her memory - was a good girl. Milquetoast and sickly half the time, but she'd married him for money and done her duty before she died. It was more than he could say for either of Belle's creators.

The clamor of the room and Mallory's shriek at throwing crabs and losing her first pennies of the evening pulled Gold back into the present day.

"I tell you," insisted Whale, speaking to Jefferson almost exclusively, "there are monks growing peas and men measuring finches who will prove within our own lifetimes the mastery of breeding perfect human stock."

"You say that so casually," groaned Mallory. Her purple dress hung low and tight against her chest, and Gold wished - not for the first time - that she'd make some attempt at looking the part of the unlikely business juggernaut she concealed behind layers of paint and lace. "Next you'll want to breed them for running and lay wagers while half the population chases rabbits on a track."

"Don't be absurd, I'm not a monster. It's no crime to seek to perfect that which the masses say 'God hath made.' We are modern men, we are of a higher order."

"Good," replied Jefferson, laying his wager. "You'll need a new breed of woman to put up with you, Victor."

"The truth is undeniable. Brown muddies blue as dark muddies light, look at a litter from a brown bitch and a red sire. It's plain to see the change, though we've not deciphered the precise formula yet," Whale told him, adding his own bet to the stakes.

Rumford supposed he should be used to such blasphemies, though none of it shocked him. Mallory was positively bored with the doctor's jargon, Jefferson drunk and contrary, and Whale liked the sound of his own voice. Sparing a glance toward Belle, she alone looked shocked and repulsed by the things she was hearing.
Good, thought Gold. If letting the doctor carry on granted him the catalyst he craved, then he would act the part.

"Well there's a simple enough proof for that," Gold said, taking up the dice to cast and nicking the pot. "Our little wine steward has blue eyes, and her father's were black. It seems your theories are defunct."

"That's wrong," Belle interjected, approaching with more of his favorite Burgundy. "My father's eyes were blue like mine. Sir Maurice told me."

"What?"

"He never told me much, but he said I had the same blue eyes as my parents. He said it made me lucky." The girl finished pouring and moved away, still eyeing Doctor Whale nervously. Victor had clearly made her uncomfortable with his talk of breeding men like livestock, but she appeared oblivious to the sudden rush of bile and molten lead ripping Gold apart.

Blue eyes? The Captain's eyes were black. Black as a cloudy, moonless night. He always remembered them as the Devil's own eyes, cold and faithless where they should have been kind.

Rumford thought he was going to be sick.

"And they are lovely eyes," cooed Jefferson, taking his turn at Hazard. "Aren't they lovely, Rum?"

Gold could make no reply. He simply rose from the table and returned to his rooms without saying good night. As his eye slid shut, the world spun around him, and the dreams of a man used to the dull, gauzy sleep of laudanum found himself trapped in a coal-black nightmare from which he could not escape.
Chapter 8

This chapter contains graphic descriptions of animal cruelty. Reader discretion is advised.

XXII. Pandora in Blue

When Gold abruptly quit the gaming room, Belle hadn't known whether to follow or remain at her post. She thought the guests would expect her to stay and pour their wine, but her concern for the Viscount - despite his ill manner and sour demeanor - tugged at her conscience to follow him out. Had she said something she ought not? Undoubtedly, she'd spoken out of turn, but that behavior had been encouraged by Mr. Gold and all of his cohorts. He was the only man (the only human person, perhaps) who'd ever encouraged her to state her opinions frankly and honestly, and he had fewer reasons than anyone to encourage her. Even her fiance had called it folly. Gold, more than anybody she'd ever known, owed her nothing. He had no obligation to listen to her, none at all, yet he regularly indulged her.

Certainly, she grieved for the loss of her family and all the familiar places she'd left behind. But he'd given her more than she'd ever be able to repay, and she'd chosen this - chosen him. Even in the scullery, frigid and miserable, she possessed the inner serenity and fire of one who chose her own fate. Strange, to feel she owed the man who'd good as bought her something beyond cool civility and disdain. She wanted to hate him, sometimes. Truly she did, only... he'd spared her so much of the pain and punishment she'd feared would follow her to Sonnachdubh, and he'd done it for no reason she could discern other than a general dislike for violence.

Perhaps Gold was not kind or reputable, but neither was he cruel and lascivious. Judge Frontland would surely have been both of those things if she'd elected to marry him, rather than risk herself in exchange for the Viscount's promised leniency on her father's debts. Sir Maurice's estates were safe, her virtue intact (let the rest of Sonnachdubh say what it would about the matter, she knew the truth herself - as she'd learned from observing the stalwart Mrs. Mallory - sometimes that would have to do), and she'd found some occupation for herself other than stitching samplers and birthing George's babies. It was an adventure, of a sort. Perhaps not the stuff of legend like Ariadne or Dido, but not as tragic by half as those two either, and for that Belle felt grateful.

Grateful enough that she'd dared a few steps toward the door before Gold slammed it shut in his wake, and - for better or worse - the remainder of his assembled Hazard party excused themselves to rest. She'd made a quick circuit of the room, tidying as she went, and then put out the candles, save for one, which lit her path through the pre-dawn Sonnachdubh labyrinth.

Belle arrived at Gold's chambers without really intending to, and took the sound of his beastly snoring to mean that he'd sunk once more into the nightmarish fever that plagued him before. He'd seemed well in the other room, more sharp and less dulled by the laudanum he favored than she'd ever seen him - finally, he'd borne some resemblance to the ruthless, cunning businessman of his reputation. To fall ill again so soon... if it was not the work of poison or badly made medicines, then Belle did not know what could have so entirely altered his countenance and constitution. Had Mr. Jefferson sneaked something else into the Viscount's cup while no one noticed him?

Well, she'd tended Gold in his sick bed once before. It would be presumptuous and uncouth, for her to enter his lair unbidden in the middle of the night, but it would be unkind and cold to leave him suffering with hurts to soothe. It had been impossible, since his first violent outburst in the carriage as they absconded North, for her to watch him suffer without offering at least the comfort of a soft touch. Propriety and expected behaviors between the genders seems an utter waste when
the simple application of a cool compress and a soft palm could chase away the worst of his symptoms, just as horned shadows eschewed the light.

She found him tangled in his bedclothes, a sheen of sweat across his brow, and immediately recalled the first order he'd ever issued. Dinnae ever, ever touch me, he'd snarled at her in the carriage on the way to Sonnachdubh. That edict lasted no longer than it took for him to fall ill, a week at most. He'd made it very clear that he expected no quarter, no kindness, from her, yet it still felt obscenely wrong to leave him in pain when it lie within her power to help.

Belle dipped a cloth into the cool water of his vanity basin, and dabbed at him while she hummed a listless tune and spoke to calm him. Gold thrashed and shook when she tried to extract him from the knot he'd made of his sheets, and - when she finally succeeded - she thought she saw his eyes snap open for a second before he finally lie back in repose.

"There now, you're alright, Sir. It will all be better in the morning," she promised, and hoped that some kind soul would care for Sir Maurice in his time of need as she'd found cause to care for Gold.

Belle took her leave of him as the rest of the house roused itself for breakfast, anticipation of the upcoming hunt sending red-coated servants running frantically between the gardens and kennels, then back into the house again. She passed Mrs. Mallory leaving in the foyer, clad in a fresh ensemble the color of lavender cream, and the brusque American actually acknowledged her with a nod of the head. The rest of the guest remained abed, only recently inclined to sleep, and Belle hoped they would remain so at least until midday. Gold might be fit to ride, if his knee didn't play up, but she took no joy from the thought of him half-exhausted in the saddle, breaking his neck at the first obstacle.

Belle had never witnessed a fox hunt, though she knew whatever amalgamation Mr. Hopper concocted would fall short of the grand coursing parties lauded in the papers. She did, however, know that they entailed large parties riding foolishly and chasing at whiffs of spore all day.

The staff had almost more than they could handle to facilitate the damn thing, if Mrs. Hopper were to be believed, but Belle had not slept in more than a day, and she made her excuses to Ruby - clad in a make-shift red hunting cape - as she turned up the servants' stairwell and went to bed. Gold would ring if he needed her, she thought ruefully, listening to the sound of baying hounds as her eyes slipped shut against the world.

Belle awoke to the sound of dogs barking. The sun hung in the West, not quite low on the horizon but not so high that she hoped to escape a reprimand. Still dressed in the blue dress and wrinkled apron she'd slept in, Belle made quick work of changing into fresh linens - almost used to the process of dressing entirely without assistance - and ventured back into the dark, still stairwell.

Sonnachdubh made no sound, save the distant call of hounds at work, and Belle found none but the kitchen staff at home.

"You might as well enjoy the afternoon," Mrs. Lucas told her, basting a large roast. "Ruby's afield with that pack of mongrels the Hoppers call hunters, and the gentlemen won't be in for supper until the sun sets on their foxes."

"Does Mr. Gold like hunting so well?" Belle asked. She'd never imagined he'd enjoy sporting, though she supposed most members of the aristocracy - no matter how eccentric or foreboding - took a liking to it quite easily.

Ruby's Grandmother seemed to take pause at the question, choosing her words carefully before
responding.

"He likes to feel less of a cripple and more of a man, I think. And I won't deny he takes some pleasure of seeing Mr. Hopper flummoxed every time the foxes escape," she added with a wink.

"A cripple? Surely his knee's not as bad as all that?"

"It's bad enough, girl. An old war wound, from Spain. Gives him no end of pains, though the medicine's gone a bit to his head of late. He wasn't always distracted and neck-deep in chloral like he is these days, that's a new one on me."

"Chloral?"

"For the pain, girl. Surely you didn't think he fell sick of some disease and fought it off in the space of three days? He's deep in his cups, if you want my views on it, and taking too much of that snake-water Mr. Jefferson sells."

Belle could only nod dumbly in response. Finally, she decided to take the cook's advice and enjoy a quiet afternoon. With the house deserted and suspicious accusations rampant in her head, Belle made her way silently toward the prepared guest rooms. The entire household - maids, grooms and all - were busy with the hunting party. She'd have no better opportunity to investigate the Manchester chemist. Could she recognize a poison if she saw it? Belle doubted that any good could come of it, and yet... If Mrs. Lucas also mistrusted him...

She pushed down her guilt and tried the brass handle of his shut door. It turned, offering no resistance, and fell open to reveal a comfortable room. The bedding wrapped crisply around the mattress, and the drapes hung open - a stark contrast to the rest of Sonnachdubh's window treatments. As Belle squared her shoulders and screwed up her resolve to continue with her scandalous investigation, she took note of the worn steamer's trunk occupying the space nearest the foot board.

Atop the chest sat Jefferson's over-sized top hat, some nonsensical numbers and dog-Latin tucked into the band, and a few well-worn trinkets lingered around it. Belle rushed to set them aside, eager to examine the trunk's contents, but paused when she saw what the chemist kept close to him. A well-loved, sawdust-stuffed rabbit, with tufted velvet fur that might have been white, wearing a patched waistcoat sat atop a small, blue cameo. The profile of a woman, carved in wisps of white, stood in a soft profile, set in a polished silver frame. The work was good, though not extraordinary, and the back of the brooch bore a single date: 26 Nov 1849.

An anniversary, she realized.

Shame stung at Belle's eyes as she rushed to replace the apothecary's keepsakes. No poisoner she could imagine kept such reminders at his bedside. These were not the cherished memories of a murderer.

Belle turned to look out the window, knowing herself to be the most vulgar of sneaks, and considered how she might make amends to him. He'd been kind to her, before flirtation and suspicion soured her opinions. Perhaps if she confessed and apologized...

Her thoughts were cut short at the appearance of a horse and rider on the graveled drive. Gold, the doctor, and Jefferson were not due back for the better part of an hour, and the rider did not look as though he'd dressed for hunting. He was a small man, slightly lanky, on a horse a few hands too tall for him. Belle could hear the sound of baying drawing nearer the manse, and she caught the barest flash of a red fox darting into the horses path before the animal reared and threw its rider to
the ground.

He was not a small man at all, she realized, seeing his limp body on the ground. The rider was a child.

Moving faster than she could think, Belle raced down the stairs and out the front door. She had to help him, if it wasn't already too late.

XXIII. Whipper-in and Gillie

Archie enjoyed his work as gillie. It was something of an honor, and a very serious duty, to be tasked with carrying the brace pistols and old rifle. He kept them all oiled, the gunmetal grey and polished wood gleaming in afternoon sunlight, and took immense pride in knowing their interior mechanisms. Ruby couldn't have done it, though she desperately wanted to try. Mr. Gold tolerated no firearms in his presence, save those necessary for hunting, and even those remained unloaded until the very moment he required them to put down a lame horse or scare off a wild dog. Yes, it was definitely an important job to have.

He even got to ride a dappled gray pony alongside his father's beige gelding while the white-blazed thoroughbreds of Mr. Gold and his guests cantered behind them, keeping pace with their hack.

Ruby didn't get a good horse, because she was just a whipper-in. She used to be a skirter, but they'd lost a groom in an accident a few months ago, and Ruby - Miss Lucas, he reminded himself - got to fill him. She had to sit atop a slouch-backed mare while Warg, the great wolf-hound they'd raised from a pup, lumbered along and snipped the couples her whip and crop missed back into the thick of it. Where he wore a slightly over-sized red hunting livery, Ruby's Gran had sewn her a little caplet from a scrapped jacket - he could still see the seams where the panels met from the original garment, a stark contrast to the hand-stitches that spoke of Mrs. Lucas' worsening arthritis. In all, the girl looked shabby. Shabbier than him, anyway.

It wasn't fair that she'd been the one to sight the most foxes. It was always Ruby who made the first halloo, to Archie's chagrin, but he got to blow the horn his father carried once, so that made up for it a bit. Ruby'd never be allowed to double the horn, that was too important a job. She'd probably do it wrong anyway - girls couldn't be good at everything, not even wild and sluttish ones. At least, that was what his mother said.

They'd entered ten couples, plus Warg and a half-dozen skitters none of them terriers. The dogs ran loose in the highlands, a foot one minute and seeking a line the next; his father said the bogs and streams made it hard for them, but all Archie could see were fences and black-houses dotting the low-lying farmland.

Archie wanted to be proud of his father, proud of the smart picture the whole group of grooms, whippers-in, and gentlemen made in the countryside. He was satisfied just to ride out and see beyond the brown stone walls of the house, but his father seemed displeased. They hadn't killed anything, despite stacking the odds in a way that was somehow not cheating. Gold and the druggist seemed elated at the chase, grinning wickedly each time the fox managed to escape, but each near-miss only served to blacken his father's mood.

Archie did not want to think about what that meant for him.

It couldn't be cheating or his father would know it. His father knew best. The dogs had not been fed in two days, to instill a sense of urgency. They gave no quarter, and yet the tricksters slipped them at every dense glen. Even without a kill, hunting was fun - especially when there was an important job to do, like carrying the guns.
They'd wasted hours in the draw, flushing the creatures into a bolt until they picked up the line again. Even Mr. Gold was smiling at their antics - the only grim countenance in attendance was Papa. Archie wished his father could thrill in the chase as much as the blood. It was a foolish wish. Both of his parents knew best, and they both said there was no point to a hunt without counting heads.

Even though they'd caught nothing but the wind, the hunt was far from a failure. Mr. Gold enjoyed seeing the foxes double-back and slip the scent-hounds, Archie was sure of it. If the Viscount approved, it couldn't be a sin, could it?

Archie wondered, briefly, if the fox they hunted now came from the crofter who raised kits in a cage. Those foxes wouldn't have dens, it should've been impossible for them to go to ground, yet it still slipped the pack and vanished into the thicket whenever the riders were bearing down.

"Damn it, boy!" cursed his father, pulling his gelding abreast of Archie's pony. "That's the third loss. I've a mind to take the crop to you, the grooms, and those cur-dogs if they aren't scented breast high in the next ten minutes. We'll have a bit of blood sport today, or I'll know why, dammit!"

"They're doing their best, Papa..."

"I'm going to draft that white-eared bitch and her pups. It's bad blood, you can see it in them. None of the white-ears has given tongue at all. They're mute monsters, ought to be drowned." He finished by spitting a blob of lumpy, tobacco-stained phlegm on the ground.

Archie blanched at that, but then he caught the flash of a red caplet skirting by. "I think Ruby's got a couple picking up a line," he tried. "Look."

She did have a line, too, the boy saw as he pointed her out to his father. A pair of hounds, joined by a length of fine chain between their collars, had their noses pressed to the ground as they cast for the scent of an animal. Archie heard them cry before he saw the bolt.

"Halloo!" called Ruby, the biggest smile he'd ever seen writ large across her face. She'd gone to some trouble to braid her hair of late, and Archie thought it a shame she hadn't left it loose today. It looked nice when they rode fast, or in the autumn breeze. Better than when it was all wound up like some fine Lady.

His father sounded the horn, and several whips cracked to turn the other nine couples toward the line. They caught the scent quickly, Warg steering back a stray pair of bitches found fault, and Archie finally saw the bristled tail of a fox break cover just ahead of the front-runner.

Racing after the streak of red as the dogs closed in, pushed up on the balls of his feet so the saddle barely touched him, felt like freedom. He laughed and smiled, lost in the joy and thrill of it all, and even caught Ruby's eye with a smile when his fat pony made a tiny jump neck-and-neck with her aging mare. Somewhere in the back, his father's horn called the gentlemen toward them, and the world slipped away. All that mattered was sunshine and air, accompanied by the bright sound of their laughing as Warg pushed to keep up with them.

When the hounds turned and called again, they reigned in their mounts and doubled-back; the fox made a foil, retracing its steps, leading it toward both the main hunting party and the Sonnachdubh gardens. That would be a sight for poor Mrs. Lucas, a pack of twenty dogs ripping through the courtyard and baying for a catch.

Archie thought one of the dogs caught the fox in its starving maw more than once, only to see it
again a few body-lengths further out than it once had been. As the bulk of the hunting party joined them - riding in a throng four deep and three wide - the swift vixen pushed itself to a wild sprint and truly outdistanced them. The next jump came at the hedgerows around the house's main property, and where the dogs pushed through the brambles their horses could not follow. Warg tried half a push to follow his line of sight, but fell back to run alongside them.

In the time it took them to circle round the hedge, both dogs and fox were far afield and closing in on what looked to be a mounted rider. The house stood to the right of them, much closer than Archie thought it would, and he realized half a second too late that they'd chased their prey straight across the Sonnachdubh driveway.

Something happened in the distance, and Archie witnessed the horse rear as the fox dashed beneath it. Half a breath later, the rider plummeted down. The dogs, maybe two minutes behind the fox thanks to the thick hedge, closed their distance as a small woman raced out to help the victim. Archie spared a glance to Ruby, her oldest dress tight about the arms and hiked up to her hip as she straddled the mare like a common farm-hand. A pair of his own patched trousers preserved her modesty, and the red-headed boy was painfully aware how easily she could have slipped the nag's saddle had the fox chosen differently.

They drew close enough, in the span of seconds, to identify the maid. Despite the rolling gait of his horse and the jostling of the terrain, he knew the woman to be Miss French, and the man - the boy, really - he could have sworn that the boy was his old friend Bae. A new wave of nausea gripped him tight. It could not be Baelfire - he boarded at his school, he wasn't meant to be at Sonnachdubh...

Suddenly, the lead hounds gave up another cry.

Archie looked on in horror as the pack veered toward the un-manned horse and exploded around Miss French. They bore her to the ground, biting and shaking her like they meant to rend the head from her body. Then he heard her scream.

The hounds had not eaten. Not in at least two days.

**XXIV. The Return**

The roar of a bullet tore through a hound's throat, chased by gurgling whimpers as the mutt slowly bled out. Red trickled across the kennel floor, bringing him back from the deepest annals of his inner hell. How long was he out? It didn't matter. When you had a dog that bit, you put that dog down.

On the blood-stained straw floor, the hound pissed and shat itself, legs kicking as the last breath rattled out of its throat. Dogs screamed down the line, smell of a slaughterhouse thick around them, snapping to free themselves and flee. All of them were wretched beasts, frothing at the jowls, and then they whined so prettily, like genteel lap-pets, rage forgotten in the final act of death. They died the same as men.

Gold passed the rifle back to his gillie, and the trembling boy muddled through the reload as they came into the last chained couple. The dogs knew he meant to kill them, and they thrashed against their chains, nearly snapping their own necks in a frantic bid to escape. No one ever escaped. The one with white ears looked afraid, no sounds of displeasure or begging made. It died quickly.

The next one lunged to loose itself. A ring of red seeping down its neck where the flesh rent in its futile thrashing, but that's what animals did: gnawed off a foot to save themselves rather than die at the huntsman's hands.
It's what Jones did.

Bile churned in his throat when Hopper's brat returned his rifle to him again, and the smell of gunpowder reeked of Spain. The hills of Andoin and half the Carlist army surrounded him. They'd shot and cut their way toward the city - so close they could see the sentries posted in watchtowers looking out at them. They'd seized the canons, done every task assigned them and then - in their hour of need - what remained of the Scottish infantry was left to the savage wiles of Spanish pigs.

A Carlist would scalp you and spit you to roast before he'd capture you. Savages didn't take prisoners, they didn't need to. Prisoners were the illusion of civility in battle, and that was the prettiest lie ever told. Decorum. Courtesy. Honor. All lies of the crown set out to beguile men the generals called "acceptable casualties."

It was stupid of him. Carlists took no prisoners. Every last soldier they knew or recognized died that day, left to the mud and vultures, yet Gold and Jones survived in irons. But Carlists took no prisoners. They'd promised torture, naturally. Demanded information on O'Donnell's movements. Left them fettered alone, isolated, staked to the hard-baked earth to await an uncertain, unavoidable demise.

Rumford fired the rifle wide, ripping a hole into the lunging bitch's gut. He wondered if the snakes of viscera pouring out contained any whelps, and then suddenly the too-real howls of the thing - dying slowly as its own belly emerged around it - choked his mind. Young Hopper had the rifle back in his hands, struggling to load it through tear-stained eyes, and Gold tore it from the boy's hands without waiting for the bullet. It took three heavy slams with the butt of the stock before the dog's black eyes turned red and dimmed, one final whimper escaping its shattered head.

The dog next to it snapped and snarled, fighting to bite anyone who approached.

"Dammit, Gold," cursed his Groundskeeper, wincing from beside his son. "Drown 'em and be done with it."

"You will stomach your own mess! If a dog bites..."

"Put it down," finished Hopper, looking back through the kennels. "It's in their blood. Bad stock, the lot."

Only one dog, with hackles raised and struggling to fight, remained. They'd backed it into a corner and chained it to die. Gold knew the feeling, but it would not be enough to spare the creature's life.

"Reload," he commanded, handing the bloodied stock back to his gillie. The child cried in earnest now, but to his credit he did as he was told. He thought he heard the boy start to say something, but he'd fallen deaf to all but the sounds of Spain. Rumford made the next shot count, taking the last hound neatly between the eyes. He'd no more appetite for bashing in heads, but the memories came unbidden at the muzzle-flash.

He'd torn his wrists and ankles raw trying to escape. It was no use. The irons gave nothing and took all he had to give. The Carlists never came for him; he'd have refused to tell them anything - doubted he could have anyway, even had they'd tortured him - but the anticipation was worse than knowing. It was worse than seeing the knife they would inevitably use to flay him alive.

Rum meant to die there, locked up in an impossible prison, until Captain Jones staggered out to him - one hand reduced to a burnt stump - and helped him escape. In that moment, he'd believed the gallant tale of foolhardy bravery. Mirthful eyes (were they black or blue this time?) told him that they would survive, and he'd believed it - believed it until the moment a bullet lodged in his
knee and his own cohorts left him in a ditch to die.

When Gold asked Jones why he'd done it, what made him strong enough to self-amputate, he'd only handed him the sepia photograph of a little girl. A girl still a babe at her mother's breast. Jones' most precious pride. Belle. He'd been so sure, until...

No. He'd been blind to the truth. There was no escape, just as there was no prison. Carlists did not take prisoners. Conjurations and concoctions, political theatre, designed to cover a meeting with a favored spy. Gold was the victim of circumstance, nothing more, but they accused him of playing the co-conspirator.

That was a lie.

"Was that the last?" Gold asked. He spoke with a voice both dead and listless, catching in his chest and paining his heart and lungs.

"Just one," John told him, and Rum thought he almost sounded happy.

"But... No! Papa, no. Not Warg... Warg didn't bite anybody!" recoiled the son.

They found the brutish, grey beast hidden in an empty stall, the cook's girl wrapped around it and weeping for reprieve.

"Stand aside," Gold commanded, holding out his hand to accept the rifle. His hand remained empty.

"Don't let him, Archie..." the little girl cried.

"Warg didn't bite anybody!" the child challenged again, still not proffering the firearm.

"A dog that bites is a dog to put down," Hopper hissed back. Gold hated the sound of his own words dripping venom from the man's mouth.

"They only bite because you taught them to!" the son shouted.

His father cuffed him then, fierce and sudden, about the head.

"Do as you're told, boy!" the father roared.

John attempted to wrest the gun from the child's arms, but the boy hung on tight and kicked his father squarely in the groin. Gold watched it all as though he stood outside his own body. In his mind's eye, staring into the wolfish, coal-black eyes of the dog and surrounded by the sounds of screaming horses and weeping girls, the struggle between father and son felt distant and surreal.

Only the splash of water as the son threw Gold's rifle and brace of pistols into the horse-trough brought him back to the here and now.

"It's not right," the boy repeated again, defiantly meeting the Viscount's eyes. His father was slow in rising from the floor, a horse-pie in his hair and murder in his eyes. Gold would have laughed, if he'd remembered how. Still, the child's point... Be it a distemper of breeding or a cruel Master, one truth remained: when a dog bit, you put it down.

The beast did not bite.

"So be it," he muttered, turning his back on the weeping kitchen girl. "Hopper, did you teach these mongrels to savage people?"
The Groundskeeper paused, caught between a blatant lie and a clever half-truth. Gold could see it plain as day across his features. "You ordered them to take the scent of the tart!" Hopper started. "None of 'em is such bad blood as they'd harm your son, but they smelled her off her straw cap and-
"

"This is your fault," Gold concluded. He'd heard enough. Perhaps he had given Hopper orders to train the pack to take her line, but he hadn't meant it. Not... not like this. It was a quip, nothing more. The fear-mongering of a coward. The vicious idiot didn't have to listen to him. No decent soul would have taken his word. It wasn't Gold's fault. It wasn't. Not now, not that he'd learned to doubt...

"It bloody well is not!"

The Viscount only stared at him and started the slow, limping walk back toward his deteriorating house.

Somewhere in Sonnachdubh, the doctor and the apothecary were tending to his son. The boy was in no real trouble - some scrapes and bruises, scared silly. He remembered blue eyes in a dead man's face, but a hundred black-eyed demons still haunted him from the abyss. Were the Captain's eyes blue or black? Did it matter? Whale's science was just another way to validate pretty lies until new lies grew up to usurp them.

The world felt fractured and all too much in one place. Gold left orders with Dovey to beat his Groundskeeper bloody, and left to find his son.
"Papa, I'm fine. Miss French rescued me! I was dazed on the ground, and she protected me when the dogs set on us. I only wanted to surprise you, I thought you'd be pleased to see me after so long."

"You belong at the academy, studying! Is it even a holiday? Nae, I thought not, you've gone truant like some waif. Besides that, if you'd written for the carriage, I'd have met your train at the platform. Instead you ride up on a rented nag, nearly break your neck on the drive, and champion a servant!"

"Well someone ought to; Miss French has done nothing wicked, yet you demand that I list her crimes so you can punish her. It's too much, Papa."

"You were only injured by those mongrels because that girl was with you! Every scrape on your skin is her work."

"Did you want those dogs to attack her? Are you a murderer now, too? Papa, you're ill again aren't you? Please don't penalize Miss French, I... Papa, why is there blood on your boots?"

Victor turned away, unnoticed, from the door in disgust. Listening at keyholes was a woman's work, and he'd rather tend the servant in question than waste the merits of an excellent medical education on the scrapes and bruises of an errant child. Leaving them their privacy spared his dignity.

He'd never witnessed Gold so enraged as when they came upon the violent scene, and Victor had silently performed his duties in resuscitating the boy and sending for a groom to carry the maid away. The child survived almost entirely unscathed, but boys of that age so often had more luck and devilry than brains and sense that he'd treated a score or more similar cases this year alone.

Mr. Jefferson, the quack, along with some such assortment of grooms and maids, installed the girl in a guest suit, bathed her wounds in vinegar-water, and - at last report - left her asleep in the sheets. Consciousness weighed in her favor, though the sleep after a trauma had been known to take victims from all manners of life, and bites were wont to fester. Still, from Jefferson's report, if she did not contract lock-jaw and take a bad brain fever, there was no reason she shouldn't recover.

Now if only he could locate her sick-chamber and ascertain for himself the severity of the injuries... Damn Gold, damn his wretched maze of a house, and damn his son for good measure. Imagine the very best of his trade, educated in London and lauded for brilliance, lost in a crumbling, country estate in the middle of rural Scotland.

In London, sullied by criminal charges, he might've continued the practice of anatomy with relative anonymity. In Scotland, the children sang their little skip-rope ditties just to mock him. Horrid memories of his first arrival in Edinburgh with the Viscount, who'd preserved him from facing charges of resurrection work, came unbidden to him. Doun the close and up the stair, but an ben with Burke and Hare...

Whale knew he'd no right to refuse the Viscount's summons in any matter, let alone those pertaining to the health of his sole heir, but he'd tended the child twice in five hours and found no faults that a good willow-switch could not handle. Willfulness, where it passed for character in the
mature, was still a sin in one so young as the Right Honorable Sir Baelfire Gold.

"Where the devil is the sick room?" Whale muttered to himself, frustrated by the unceasing titter of nursery rhymes running unchecked through his head.

He found it quite accidentally, as one of the kitchen girls bustled out carrying the soiled linens and Miss French's shredded clothing. Victor stopped her to inspect the rags, and breathed a little easier upon seeing that the livery seemed to have borne the brunt of the dogs' teeth. She'd looked a nightmare when the party finally arrived, Gold with the very freeze of Dante writ large across his visage, but after viciously kicking back and restraining the curs only two or three bore any blood on their fur. That foolish, whimsical girl who talked of alchemy and defended astronomers had been lucky. If all the brutes had torn her flesh, she'd be dead - or worse, bear scars for life.

If the blood stains about the girls' skirts were any indication, he'd need all of Jefferson's quackery to keep the flesh from turning sour. 'Twould be a shame to amputate so fine a leg, but such was the curse of the living and of dead; gangrene and puss destroyed living flesh as easily as time turned his cadavers to sludge in the midst of a time-consuming dissection. Even with the 1832 legislation, men like him - ambitious men, men unwilling to work on the generous leavings of the very old and sick, men who required fresh specimens without the as-yet unidentified deformities of the criminally insane - had an ever-increasing need of flesh to ascertain more perfectly the smallest structures of a vein.

He'd been so very near a meaningful, publishable discovery... it was no crime to take that which had no purpose on Earth but to rot and help it dissolve a bit more slowly for the greater knowledge of all. The nonsense of the soul bound in chains to the remains irked the doctor, as did most trappings of a religious, illogical nature. Women, purported to bear the weight of virtue in an otherwise savage world, were distracting, illogical things. He'd taken up with a chimney sweep's daughter as a lad, but since had learned to look for more genteel company.

Doun the close and up the stair, but an ben with Burke and Hare...

Victor shifted the torn garments into the waiting girl's hands and took his leave of Sonnachdubh's twisting halls. Within the closer confines of Miss French's make-shift hospital, he found himself much more at rest. She'd a calming nature, even incapacitated and bloodied, though when her mouth opened it raised his ire and distemper in equal measure.

The laundry girl had run away with the bedclothes, speckled with blood seeping through from the bandages, and it left Miss French in an overly-large nightgown, dressing coat peeking open about the chest, with soft curls escaping across the pillow. She still slept, and Victor felt himself blush red at the despairingly base half of his psyche.

Science and the natural philosophies were pure, and dispassionate purity - austere logic - were the traits their Master needed. He should not be distracted by a fine pair of legs, displayed immodestly by an accident of posture. Swallowing back the urges upon which he waged war and one day hoped to conquer, Victor turned his thoughts to the College of Medicine in Edinburgh. In the summer, they used great blocks of ice to preserve their cadavers, and he'd make the trek to study and lecture (Gold having spared his reputation in exchange of services to be rendered). Closed about on all sides by ice (if any could be had), a humble corpse might be preserved a fortnight before any significant loss of material integrity appeared before the naked eye. An augmented eye, though, could not avoid - with the help of a microscope - to find all manner of flaw with the over-preserved cadavers, some flesh frozen solid while other portions blackened with rot. In the laboratory, as in the wider world, all ice melted.
This was the clinical manner in which he endeavored to view the girl, though when he pressed his fingers along the length of her calf, seeking any deformity or tear in the flesh that might require stitching, the sublime heat of her set him raging again. You're a doctor, dammit, he told himself. Yours is the hand that cures.

It might not be so terrible, were their circumstances different. Had he found in Gold's retinue an out-spoken serving wench whose appearance pleased him, he might've indulged the man and left the scientist to coolly disentangle himself come morning. But Whale had read Wollstonecraft's monstrosity, and had not met a maid or valet yet who took to defense of the Greeks and spoke of Principia as one might a worthy cousin. Radical, liberal, and progressive to a fault, but in the estimations of her own philosophies she'd be deemed fit to marry an Oxford don, to keep him proper company.

Victor never placed much stock in the writings of women - novels and poetry, mostly - but he must give some credence to The Vindication, and to the notion that a Lady's education standing commensurate with her place in Society. What would it be like to hold a worthy Lady with a voracious mind in intimate conversation?

He drew again upon the icy confines of the College's cold-storage, the first illusion he'd concocted already melting, and pushing back his inclination to touch her her slender ankles under the guise of monitoring for swelling. None need know of his little transgression, yet no nobler trade existed than the exact science and perfect art of medicine. It would not be sullied by Victor Whale, its truest disciple. He must be worthy, behave worthily.

Relieved that the girl suffered primarily scrapes, few punctures, and no tearing, he dressed her wounds with the same dispassionate manner that served him in all things otherwise distracting. She did not wake. Warm and pliant in his hands, skin soft as an indulgent dollop of cream atop oven-warm treacle...

What could have brought so finely made and outrageously schooled a creature to peddle wine in the crumbling walls of Sonnachdubh? Gold had an eye for luxuries, and for treasures of all makes... was she his paramour, then? It made one wonder, and encouraged all kinds of indecent things. Still, it would never do to press himself upon a Lady - and a Lady she must be, for no strumpet of common stock could master the Classics and speak so eloquently, even if her sex did condemn her to following such rags as The Keepsake.

If he could know for certain whether the girl were an angel of virtue, kind in her mercies, or a coquettish harlot, free in her favors, he might have quantified her more easily. He was close - very close - to finding the physiological differences between the virtuous and the fallen before leaving London, disgraced. A few months more in London, and he'd know what he was looking for, yet that work lie fallow now - along with all his noble pursuits, spanning from a re-evaluation of Aldini to the study of exotic zoology.

With the proper facilities, science could explain any phenomena otherwise considered unfortunate or lucky. But it could not be accomplished with only the recently deceased pouring out of asylums and the ancient crones who bequeathed their bodies to their grandsons. Sometimes a man, a doctor, a scientist, had to engage in penury to satisfy a nobler need. Let no man judge a crime for the sake of science to be a crime against humanity, for science was the very fire and light of reason - a fire he would bring the people, and in so doing fulfill what he knew to be his destiny.

All about him, the visions of ice fields melted and Miss French's flesh became unworkably warm. All ice melted eventually, even that in the morgues of Edinburgh. The girl did not stir, and Victor dared to press his lips to her forehead. No one would know. He'd no way to prove that she was a...
Lady. Her skin mocked him with its heat against the tepidity of his own.

"Forget your mercury? See to my son, body-snatcher."

Victor leaped back from the bed, cursing himself. He had not heard Gold enter.

"She's fervid," Whale said, forcing the waver of guilt from his voice and feigning that he'd used his lips purely to ascertain a relative temperature. "The next few days will decide her."

Gold only scowled at him, and Victor hurried from the room.

XXVI. Albatross

Rumford scowled down at the small slip of woman exposed on the mattress. He tugged her gown down, unthinking, and preserved what remained of her modesty. The Doctor left her in clean dressings, with daubs of iodine on the gashes from the smell of her, and he could see the sheen of sweat from this alleged fever.

"I'll be buying that bastard a thermometer," he cursed to no one in particular. Looking down at his feet, he found the dried crust of dog blood Bae had been so concerned about. The boy was a soft touch, like his mother, and righteous to a fault. Sonnachdubh was no place for him, the very air here poison to all who breathed it. Too much of his father hung diffuse in the atmosphere, and Gold wasn't sure if he meant himself or his own sire any more. Bae would do well to remain at school, boarded and kept with no expense spared, than to linger over-long in the highlands. Whatever madness brought him hither nearly cost the child his life. That must not be allowed to happen - not to Bae. Never to Baelfire.

"And I suppose you'll expect a bloody commendation for your part in it all, won't you?" he asked Belle. She made no response. "Dammit, woman, I've half a mind to smother you while you sleep. You were meant to be such a prissy little French thing, raised to coo and preen like some petite Marie and offer no allegiance to any living soul.

"I expected to find you a cheap imitation of some powdered court, and you come to me quiet as a cat with secretive claws twice as deep."

Rum scowled at her, his brow creasing, and snagged his hand in the mess of his hair - still unkempt from the twitchy work of killing. He tugged over one of two leather-upholstered wing-backs in the room, and sank into the cushions to take the weight from his leg. It extended outward, angle slightly awkward, and he marveled that Jefferson's concoction let him ride and shoot without need of the cane. The pain gripped him now, as it hadn't since before he had Bae, and his medicine lie somewhere in the study - or perhaps his quarters. He couldn't think straight after so much time in motion, terror gripping his innards through the whole of it.

She'd saved his boy, if Bae were to be believed - which he must be, and that left only Hopper and himself to blame.

"It wasn't my fault," he told her. The lack of a response throbbed in his leg like an anvil-strike. "I'd not martyr you in my own garden, but I couldn't allow you to run away either. Foolish creature... I'd expected that you'd try half a dozen foolish escapes by now, yet Mr. Dovey reports nothing but some small struggles with the incomparable Gidge Hopper."

He had to chuckle at that, despite himself, his own misery, and the shooting pains in his leg. If Jefferson's new drug kept its potency and didn't leave him in agony of an evening, he'd pay the miserable chemist so well he'd be able to buy ten men's wives back. Pity about the child, though.
Reaching blindly and nearly toppling his chair out of the sheer impossibility of standing, Gold found a decanter of something that might have been brandy in ages past and poured the vile, syrupy liquid down his throat. He ought to have ignored the girl and settled in his study - all manner of conveniences only a hobble away, and a litany of bell-pulls to summon somebody. This room, not the girl's usual room - and he'd have words about that with somebody - lacked even the most mundane of novelties. A writing desk, a few books, a suite of dressers, and a wardrobe. Positively Spartan.

"I'd expected a little girl raised on sweets and stories about a charming Daddy who died brave and honorably," he continued forcing himself to swallow the liquor. "That's what they tell the widows and mistresses when the reports read Missing, that their men died bravely. In my case, it looked as though there'd been some sort of mistake in the record keeping. Not a man alive at my execution survived Spain, just me and this wrecked leg.

"Bae used to think I'd been some sort of heroic soldier who gave his leg for the Empire, but that was a lie. I'd hoped to disabuse you of similar notions, and somehow... somehow that would help make it right. I've sought the girl Jones would cut his own hand off for, betray his country for. I've sought you almost half my life, and now I've a son who won't look at me, a prisoner who's not scared of me, and I can't remember if the bastard's eyes were like night, day or fucking chartreuse.

"And what am I to do with you in the meanwhile, hn? Situate you in the solar and feed you tea cakes while I determine whether or not I am wronged by your father?"

It occurred to him then that he may never be forced to decide. She might die and liberate him, in dying set him free of all the daemons still clouding his brain. Every day, every waking hour, since putting down the Carlist revolt, felt as though he walked through a clouded, foggy landscape. The climes of the Highlands emulated the feeling very well, but not even taking a wife and wresting the estate away from his dying father - elevating him from a by-blow bastard to a useless, fancy Viscount - did nothing to diminish the haze.

Bae cut through, illuminating everything he touched with an easy charm. All the world pleased Bae, nothing - not even his own shell of a father - disappointed the child. But he was a child, and Rum had sent him away. Better the boy came to adulthood well shed of the English boys' schools and London Society - they'd selected a boarding school in Brussels, with a focus on application rather than rote nonsense and fables. Bae couldn't grow amid the paroxysm and poison that dogged his father. Not even the kindest and most forgiving of souls could live in eternal darkness.

But in the darkness, the cloud of anger and fear that emanated outward from him - a coward to his center - only one thing remained constant; even more constant than Bae, for he'd known the figure some decade or more longer than the boy's scant fourteen years of age. Jones' daughter, and - for a while, before he learned that she died and hid the child - even his pretty, French wife.

He'd captured her, finally, and she might die that his own son could survive. Such a thing as life debt could not be forgiven, no businessman who prized his sharp, unforgiving trade and dominated commerce as thoroughly as Gold had could accept such a thing without paying the price in exchange.

The girl, his figure from the mist, circled like a vulture his entire life. To die now, when Bae insisted on lauding her the heroine, would unmake the very fiber of his maladjusted and misshapen world.

"You've circled overhead so long I'd lost sight of the stars," he murmured, choking back another swallow of drink straight from the cut-glass decanter. "And what's to become of me with you gone? Shall I be free, or cursed and left to linger in my own foggy sorrows?
"Well, Miss French, you've not quailed under my gaze yet. Let's not break with tradition, dearie, it is - as a man I once knew liked to say - bad form. You're not much like him, except in that affable charm you spew into a room. The Captain had charisma and guile enough to swindle the jewels off a Duchess, the rank of his mistress proved it but you could see it to look at the braggart as well.

"The men idolized him, distinguished at Waterloo and a sure-shot, but not a bad hand at a sword. I think he killed more men with the damned saber than the rifle, but that never stopped him from smashing a man's head in with the butt, like some savage with a club. And worst of all, we looked at that and called it mercy. Was it mercy what I did to those dogs, do y'think? Bae doesn't, though I'll do something for Hopper's boy; he spared the worst of it, though he didn't mean it to help me.

"Damn it, woman, you've no right to die on me. I'll call in my notes on your Sir Maurice if you're going to let a few gnashing teeth send you running. Tell him I didn't get my full value from a short life."

He took another long pull on the decanter, noticing that he'd consumed almost the entire contents of it without meaning to. Gold felt tired, exhausted in a way he hadn't felt for a decade or more, and drunk on bad brandy to boot.

A drunken coward. An honest, drunken, coward - at least for one night. He dared not close his eyes, for fear of what he'd find, so Gold contended himself to speak about nonsense to an audience he wanted desperately to hate. He feared her as much as loathed her, for all she represented and for fear that he'd made a mistake. If she was not the daughter of Killian Jones and his infamous Lady, then he'd have nothing. And, raw and hollow as he found himself after a vitriolic argument with Bae, that mattered to him.

Rumford Gold was far from innocent, but he'd cloaked himself in righteous indignation for so long that the undeniable, irrevocable possibility of guilt - that he would be the agent of destruction for an otherwise unrelated third party. He never wanted to see the hatred and revulsion in his son's eyes again, and whatever came in the morning would come with or without his leave. But for tonight, for the agony and horror cutting at him like knives, it mattered. Belle French had to survive.

"They brought witnesses, you know," he continued, resurrecting words never articulated from a sort of internal mausoleum. "Men I never saw, but soldiers all the same, who testified before an Officer in the arse-end of Spain that they'd known Jones to solicit the company of Spanish prostitutes and one who swore he'd seen Jones passing information to the enemy outside of Andouin.

"You cannae know wha' tha' means," he choked, accent thickening as the words turned to a sob. "They slaughtered us, all of us, 'til it was just him and me, and somehow we were worthy to capture. Imagine that miracle: the first two prisoners of war in the entire Liberal army, and the first to escape captivity. The bastard cut off his own hand to prove his story, and I believed it. I believed he'd do anything to get back to the little girl in the photograph.

"And he would hae done anything. Said anything. I was simple for not seeing him for what he was, a disloyal profiteer. They produced a letter from an old servant-soldier, claiming he'd played the sides between Nelson and Napoleon too. The man in service to him at the time, name of Smee, couldn't refute it. Do ye hae any idea how much blood spilt for ye and yer kin?"

Gold's language slurred, and mixed with his natural brogue - the thick accent of a boy raised by spinners and weavers, a bastard planted by the lusty landlord - and he lost himself in the smell of sulphur and gunfire. Destroying the hounds brought it all back ten-fold, every memory a new jolt of suffering in his old war wound.
He woke at dawn, stiff and sore, with a head ache and an itch welling up inside him. He'd been covered, at some hour of the night, by a thin blanket, and Miss French's small frame lay under a pile of bedding with another small lump pressed up against her side. The cook's girl, Gold realized.

Unsteady on his feet and unwilling to be caught playing nursemaid, Gold shambled back to his study to find more of Jefferson's prescribed cocaine.

**XXVII. Morrow Morn**

Belle woke in a haze, sore and burning, but very much alive.

"It's alright," whispered a soft voice. "He's gone away now, he wasn't angry with me."

"Ruby?" Belle managed, her head lolling against the pillows. From the ache of her arms and legs, leaden beneath the covers, she did not think they'd dosed her with anything for the pain. That thought struck her as important, but she couldn't quite place why... if she'd avoided Gold's bad medicine, it meant something. It meant her head was not right, because the thoughts came to her agonizingly slow and fuzzy.

"You have a fever, but Granny said I'm to nurse you today. You'll have to help me," her friend replied.

"The boy..."

"Baelfire's fine. He and Archie are probably off doing something stupid already. Doctor Whale's not to be disturbed until after midday... you have to tell me what you need, Belle." It sounded funny, to hear Ruby beg.

"Just... cool water on my face," Belle managed. "Clean the cuts and... and some tea."

"Can you sit up? Belle? Belle?"

She wanted desperately to respond, but all Belle could manage was a weak smile before she sunk into the mattress and faded back into her own private dreams.
Gold's leg bellowed, setting a deep and hollow echo up his frame until it resonated and reverberated at the base of his skull. He'd brought himself low in every way imaginable, and felt he had still further to go.

Jefferson's medicine dulled the pangs, but the damn powder made him restless. He could barely tolerate any exaggerated use of the stuff, cooped and confined as he was. Several days hence, the agony of the hunt clung to him. He'd over-exerted himself, working the numb joint into a bolus of fractured glass and swollen veins. The memory of his stirrups still cut at his ligaments, even as the cocaine and wine solution worked to diminish it again.

On his first day of recuperation, he'd wanted to pace the room, yet found that he could not endure more than a few hobbling steps about without the aid of his cane. He'd thought... he'd dared to dream that Jefferson's cure would invalidate the crutch entirely. But the pain was nothing at all compared to the dreams, and so resumed small doses of laudanum to ease his fraying nerves while resting in a favorite arm chair.

On the second day, the cane returned to its place by his side and he called up all the trappings and contracts of business and trade, much neglected in the fortnight since the arrival of Miss French. He solely sought the comfort of pen, pence, and pound to occupy his hands, eschewing drug and drink, in the hopes that some productive labor might distract his mind. The gamble succeeded, in some respects, but - having been, for two weeks, consumed by unpleasant memories and a near-crippling ennui - he shocked himself to find that the presence of Miss French had nearly cost him significant profits from New Guinea.

It drove him nearly to drinking again, but Gold tempered himself - as he'd been accustomed to do before she arrived - and hobbled the razor's edge between oblivion and productivity.

The distraction of seeing the girl every day was nothing compared to the distraction of not seeing her, of fearing that the fickle doctor took liberties, of anticipating Jefferson's further ingratiating himself, and - above all - fearing what future influence she might claim over Bae. Baelfire was a good boy, when he didn't take into his head to run away from school on a half-wild post horse. He was the inspiration and spirit behind Rum's mummer-juggling over the razor's edge of success and self-loathing. Baelfire was the reason to ration his laudanum and preserve his sanity, the ballast against his heavy burdens, the redeeming speck in his need for vengeance, and the very heart and soul of a broken old man.

Gold's businesses - Baelfire's inheritance - could not be permitted to fail, not on account of his own need for strong medicine. And yet Bae wanted naught of it; the child was the very best of him, and even from a young age the boy tried to reject all that his father would give him. He was headstrong, and Gold hoped it would not become a fault in him.

Bae took no pains to make any account of himself, or his escape from school, after their first argument. He'd worn boots stained with the blood of his kennel into the parlor, Gold recalled. Foolish of him, really; the boy was entirely too soft to countenance the sight of so much blood. Gold himself could barely stomach it, torn between memories of a favorite sheep dog ran down in the road outside his childhood home and the sight of a soldier's brains bashed in by the butt-end of his rifle. Thank God for little Archibald Hopper, a voice of reason chirping softly in the deafening downpour of rage. Baelfire would not have forgiven him if he'd executed the giant wolf-hound he
and the other children had raised, never mind if he'd shot the damned kitchen girl by mistake. He owed the Hopper boy a good turn for thwarting the slaughter, and Bae said he owed Miss French his life; it was a price almost too high to suffer, and Gold's leg pained him all the more for his trouble.

As Victor was ever keen to observe, the "quackery" of a Manchester druggist could only dull the symptoms of his old War wound; it would take one highly advanced in the art of anatomy (to hear the doctor tell it) to cure the ailment entirely. Still, for all his dissent and platitudes, Doctor Whale had equally failed to rid him of the nagging limp/ The devil could take the pair of them, as far as Rumford was concerned. They'd been nothing but salivating wolves since the accident, and he couldn't reign them in properly with Bae still lingering about the manor.

The memory of the French girl's exposed legs and Doctor Whale's damp lips brushing her forehead while she lie limp in her sick-bed caused his leg to wail, and on the second day - cane firmly in hand - Gold ventured back into her sanctum. By his own orders, the doctor was not to attend the girl without the presence of Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Dovey, but Gold trusted the honor of the young grave robber no farther than he could throw a caber with one arm, so he conspired to see for himself what sort of designs and conspiracies might be brewing. It would not do to have Whale find some shred of softness for the girl; he might feel compelled to steal the child away, and then - whether Rumford satisfied himself as to her identity or not - she would be gone from his care.

Escape could not be tolerated. He once might have thrilled for her to provoke him, had she dared to try such a sordid scheme, but now - so riddled with doubt and a begrudging gratitude that would not quell - the thought only served to turn his stomach and make him feel ill.

When, in the twisting passages of Sonnachdubh, he passed the doctor occupying a ghostly, sheet-tented room with two fingers up the front of one or another of his red-headed maids, Gold could not say if he felt disgust or relief. When the Doctor took a mind to fleshy, sinful pursuits he was as devoted as any man breathing, yet Gold could not object to him fingering the quim of his very excited housemaid when it most likely meant that he'd kept his word to spare the pretty little valet.

"Sir... sir, please, can't I come to you again this evening?" she moaned, face obscured.

"Shut your mouth and lift your skirt for me," the doctor growled out, and she hurried to obey.

Gold had seen enough, but felt only a numb relief where he ought to have felt rage. He kept walking. He'd deal with it later, if there were familial complications, or if it affected Baelfire.

He entered Miss French's make-shift hospital without knocking, only to find her wavering on her feet. She'd risen and walked the half-dozen steps to her window, it would seem, and stood in nothing but a pale night dress against the blistering sunlight pouring through the pane. The rod and drapes lie in a shambles at her feet.

"What ever are you doing?"

Her pale skin shone almost alabaster in the sunlight, and large petals of pink lay flush in her cheeks. Her blue eyes met his brown ones, and for the first time he saw none but the girl herself, blissfully devoid of ghosts, reflected within their depths.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to make a commotion," she panted. Gold could see the thin sheen of sweat on her brow as she supported herself on the sill. "I only wanted a little light and air, but the drapes-"

The girl moved to gesture at his crumpled window treatments, but as her hands left their hold-fast
her legs gave out.

Impossibly sure on his feet, Rumford caught her about the middle and pulled the girl into a standing, half-slumped embrace against his shoulder. He looked on in sick disbelief as the girl awkwardly thanked him and stumbled back to her bed to rest. The heat and weight of her clung to his skin, and Rum fought to look at anything but the alleged daughter of his most hated memory. The cup she'd chipped stood on the dresser, next to a tray of mis-matched tea things, and he picked it up to examine blindly.

"Thank you..." the girl tried again, and he turned toward her so slightly that the edge of her escaping curls brushed against he corner of his sight.

"No matter."

Gold's tongue turned thick and stupid, and his legs refused to cooperate with him.

"Belle," cheered the Cook's girl, bursting into the room and sparing him further indignation. "Are you feeling better? I- Mr. Gold!

The child looked as though she had the fear of the Devil in her, and not three steps behind her stomped the Hopper boy, a great, grey wolf-hound, and his own child.

"Is something the matter with Miss French, Papa?" Baelfire asked him, looking to the fervid woman with some concern.

"I'm very well, Master Bae," the girl replied, struggling to sit up a bit in her bedding. She was most decidedly not well, but she would not die and it was a kindly lie.

As Gold's head whipped between his prisoner and his son's little gang, he was overcome by how adult and well-made the Captain's daughter really seemed. Stooping to reclaim his cane and with the handle of her chipped cup still looped around his finger, Rumford made a series of curt nods and a hasty retreat. Half way back to his study, he slowed to a shamble and remembered the severity of his aching leg.

**XXIX. The Hellfire Club**

Bae watched with an air of worry as his Papa retreated from Miss French's bedside. He left the room a tumult, clutching an spare bit of porcelain in his off hand, while the bedclothes and drapes lie in shambles around the place. Was his illness so terrible that he'd finally succumb to a lasting fever of the brain?

Baelfire prayed for him and feared his rage in equal measure; when he'd been a boy, things were different between them, but now... now he felt a nauseating mixture of helplessness and something like shame. He thought he might be a little afraid.

Sonnachdubh would always be home for Bae, the best home anyone could ever want, but the man and mortar of his childhood stood crumbling under an absent Scottish sun. His Papa was jumpier when he was younger, he recalled. Nervous and pained by a bad leg, but they'd been happy before things changed. Something wicked grew out of his Papa's success at trade. Suddenly, he was not heir to a defunct estate, but one of the wealthiest men in the hemisphere. Nothing was denied them, and even as he swore to doing it all for Bae's own sake the scab of an old hurt fell away. It festered and soured as the child looked on, not understanding - not knowing what might be done - before his father sent him away. And now it might be too late.

Bae could not remember the woman who was meant to be his mother, nor the man who
bequeathed his title to them, but he remembered his father before commerce, rank and easy access to medicine changed everything. It changed him, the possibility of some decades-old intrigue he'd abandoned became suddenly necessary, the zealotry transmuting his father's flesh into something hard and unyielding, marring his eyes with darkened intensity.

Bae could scarcely recognize him when held the wiry, menacing face up to the softer, more frightful one of his memories. The man he remembered liked a good sheep dog or spaniel, he'd even tolerated Warg's slobber. His boots were never bloodied. He'd always wanted his Papa to be brave, but not like this. Not this way.

His father's illness had taken a turn toward the extreme - Dovey's letter spoke of it and of the party in brief - and Bae feared what would come of the conversation he'd delayed again and again for fear of the man's fragile sanity. His Papa needed something, if Mr. Dovey's invitation to the party (and surely that was a plea for him to come home, for how would the enormous man have invited him by mistake?) did not convince him, the state of the place surely confirmed everything. He'd been away for so long, and now that he'd returned Baelfire only wished there was something that he could do.

Instead, he only brought what must surely be taken as bad news.

Bae was glad for the excuse to escape the boarding school for a week or two - any excuse would do, though his father's condition was the most noble of pretenses and that did abate some of the guilt for him. The boys at school teased him for a bastard's bairn, bearer a Scotch courtesy legacy, and the son of a common-bred tradesman and a dead baronet's daughter, but shut their mouths quick enough when their fathers wrote to demand that they court his friendship and his father's wealth. Bae could only imagine how much worse the bullying and sycophancy would have been in the English institutions, some dusty grave like Eton or Harrow populated by tuggers and oppidans.

He could not refute his father's wisdom in sending him abroad, but Bae resented it despite himself. His was the role of the exile, a stranger in a strange land, while his father stagnated and darkened in the only home they'd ever had.

The Sonnachdubh he remembered was a better home than any boy could ask, full of cranny and crag to tempt a stalwart lad; it might be again, if only he could find a way to reinvigorate the past. Days spent with Archie helped, but he couldn't deny the growing gap. Age, station, and now a significant period of education divided them, and yet still more separated him from Ruby. With his dearest friends, the gulf was not too bad. With his father, he felt himself drowning at sea, unsure which direction promised dry land.

He had to tell his Papa his plan eventually, Baelfire owed him that. The truth was a difficult thing between them, perhaps it always had been, but he'd no intention of returning to his studies. He wasn't going back. Papa would be furious, but Bae's mind was decided even before Mr. Dovey wrote to him.

Why shouldn't he learn his Papa's dealings sooner than later? Or take a tutor into their home? They could afford the very best. His Papa promised him they would not be apart long when he left, yet it had been years and he'd not been permitted to return once, not even at Christmas. If Papa thought he was protecting him from all that was capricious and wicked in the world, he was wrong. Men had blood on their boots in Stockholm or Minsk as often as Sonnachdubh, he knew.

But with or without his Papa's blessing, it was good to be home. The place sagged and soured a bit around the edges now, but Bae would fix all that when he came into his majority and received a proper allowance. Archie and Ruby - Miss Lucas, he reminded himself - never teased him, despite their growing differences, and Warg was here; they didn't truss him up in silly platitudes like the
kids in town liked to do, either, and that was, perhaps, the best thing about them. Whether he was the Right Honorable Baelfire Gold or Captain Hellfire, scourge of Madrid, holed up for a game in an abandoned Blackhouse, Archie - and Miss Ruby, to some extent - stayed with him and kept up his spirits.

He was too old to run amok in the highlands, steal sweet rolls from Mrs. Lucas, and dare Miss Ruby to howl at the moon as they used to do, but it eased a burden he'd barely been aware of enduring to smile and laugh as they all sought refuge in Miss French's room. Strange, to see the pair of them with new eyes after so long at school. They'd always feared his father, he could understand that nuance, but they'd never shied away from him for the sake of their own fears, and Bae loved them for that.

So here they stood, as ever, in his Papa's wake. Archie dared not face his own father for fear of a murderously violent beating; Miss Ruby had no mother at all - not even one who cared so little as to name her only child after the very flames of Baal - and only her Gran and the pair of them to turn to; and Bae had escaped home to secure his father's health, but could not find the words to make more than light conversation at the stilted dinner table. He was a coward, and his Papa's hands - like his boots - were bloody.

No, he liked it best just Warg and the three of them, as it ought to be. And... and Miss French too, he allowed, after she risked so much to save him how could he deprive her of company?

The woman had protected him bodily, at the cost of her own injuries, and - more than that - Ruby adored her. Ruby... Miss Lucas, he reminded himself again, could not be pried away from Miss French by any offer of sweets or adventure. Warg, the traitor, would not be parted from Ruby, and so the boys made Miss French's bedside their base of operations as often as Mr. Jefferson and Dr. Whale allowed them. Adults were not, as a rule, wanted within the confines of their childhood gatherings, but Baelfire was fourteen and now a man. On his twenty first birthday, he would stand strong in his majority. Seven years seemed a lifetime to a boy, but a man must not scoff at anything less than a decade. That's what his Maestro and the Mother Superior were always saying, anyway.

So, for as long as she would tolerate them at her bedside, Miss French warranted some consideration from the friends. She'd even taken to reading them stories, pointing out some letters and words in a little game with Archie and Ruby. Bae had not imagined what a privilege it was to read, not when the tutors and nuns forced Adams' economy and Papal morality on him from all sides, but Archie especially marveled at the letters, and even Ruby demanded to be shown the characters of her own name with a pen and ink purloined from Mrs. Hopper's sitting room.

Tonight, though, Miss French looked exhausted. He wondered if, perhaps, the lot of them - Miss French, Ru.. Miss Lucas, Archie, himself, and Warg - would pile onto the narrow bed while Mr. Jefferson read from a well-worn copy of Perrault. He'd done so once or twice before, to the general joy of all assembled.

Dr. Whale made some fuss about them when he came, and Mrs. Hopper glared icicles at them, but he'd come to know at school that being the Right Honorable Baelfire Gold, heir apparent to Sonnachdubh, came equipped with particular indulgences. His father would hate that, he knew, but for a few still moments as Ruby wailed against the unfairness of Blue Beard and Miss French petted Warg, tangled as he was in her bedclothes.

The gentleman (if such a word could stretch to Mr. Jefferson) liked to linger over-long and listen to them talking, which annoyed Bae more than he liked to say. Miss French tolerated him, though, and Ruby supposed that they all ought to do so in solidarity. It was nice, she said, to have someone fatherly worrying after them like an old nanny. For Miss French's sake, Bae did not chastise the
man. It was better to have an extra set of eyes to read, and an extra-animated voice to do the voices properly, especially when their adopted invalid tired so easily.

When she did not sleep, Miss French smiled very prettily, made herself amiable to all, and Baelfire doubted very much that she had a harsh word to say about anybody; still, if his Papa wanted to then he would find fault with her. Of that, Baelfire had absolutely no doubt.

Bae realized with some alarm that he'd spoken nary a word since they'd settled themselves around the room and righted Miss French's curtains. She slept now, Ruby curled up beside her, with Warg at their feet, and Archie lie curled on a recently pilfered love seat. Baelfire hated words some times, the need for them and the lack of them, but he thought - perhaps, if he was very brave - that he might find the ones he needed this evening.

With a heavy heart and a reeling mind, Bae crept from the room and stepped into the corridor, moving through shadow toward his father's study.

XXX. Ariadne's Hands

"I hope you understand, Miss French, that with Master Baelfire returned to school you will have no more indulgences like some spoiled, haughty lady. You're to return to the attic forthwith, relinquish my kitchen wench, and cease all this nonsense with Archie. My son will have a position in this house when he's grown, you'll not ruin him with letters and pack him off to the shipping yard. He's suited for better than trade, I'll tell you that. And another thing, you've got some nerve encouraging him to defy his father like that. My Archibald wasn't no willful savage before you showed up."

Mrs. Hopper halted her tirade at last, drawing breath even as she reared back to deliver another lash of words to the recovering valet.

In truth, Belle'd felt well enough to resume her work some two days prior, but Dr. Whale and Mr. Jefferson would not hear of it, so she remained abed. They'd left on the same train as poor, forlorn Master Bae, that very morning, and Belle could see no reason in prolonging her stay. She'd promised Mr. Gold her services, and what he required of her was nothing more than the hum-drums fussing of an ill-trained valet. Belle was not so naive to the ways of the world as her one-time fiance seemed to think; she knew that she'd been extremely lucky that none of the Viscount's egregious breaches in propriety stretched to the non-consenting use of her body.

Poor George Frontland, if he could see her now he'd hardly know what to make of her. She bore some small scars about the leg, and wore an alarming shade of indigo cut very modestly. A vast difference from the showy, old-fashioned dresses she'd worn at home, but they were the best Sir Maurice could provide her and she'd wear nothing more than sackcloth and camel hide for the rest of her life if it meant she could visit with her father one more time.

Mrs. Hopper was still shouting, her voice shrill and almost unnatural in its rapacity, but Belle barely heard her.

"Mrs. Hopper, won't you please consider allowing the children to continue with their studies? It needn't interfere with any of our duties, I could teach them a few letters in the evenings," Belle tried, hoping against everything that she knew of the older woman for a small act of clemency.

The Housekeeper spat and shrieked, and Belle gave up on her line of questioning. She'd simply have to show them secretly. It had never entered her mind that anyone in the modern day and age employed in a great house would not know the simplest letters and numbers, yet both children were woefully ignorant and voraciously hungry for such things. Master Baelfire had encouraged them, perhaps she might even entreat his father to do the same.
Her legs felt a bit stiff, possibly even the victims of slight atrophy, but she found her feet spry enough to carry her into the attic after Mrs. Hopper dismissed her, satisfied she'd had enough berating for one day. Mr. Gold would know soon that she was well and returned to work, so Belle dressed herself in fresh clothes - unused to the sharp chill of the air after so long in a much warmer clime of the house - and set out to tame her hair. Ruby'd made some account of her curls at the start, but the simple, mussed braid she'd sported would not do forever. Just as she secured the last pin, the call-bell rang for Mr. Gold's favorite chamber.

He would be in his study at midday, most likely glowering and behaving like a perfect mystery. It was no small annoyance to Belle that she'd yet to make out more than the barest sketch and skeleton of her master's character. He shifted, mercurial yet somehow steady in his propensity for change. She'd thought, after learning Master Baelfire's identity that the boy might further clarify the father, but they seemed such wholly separate entities that Belle dared not ask after his father's dispositions and dislikes too openly.

Ruby swore the man had kept a vigil at her bedside on the first night, when they were unsure of her survival, and that was perhaps the grandest mystery of them all. To Belle, it felt as though nothing could ever be the same again, yet what it could not be evaded definition and frustrated her. How was one meant to define their dynamic in the first place? He held the contract that determined her fate, and she'd only ever wanted to be brave. Saving Sir Maurice's estate was the best and most foolhardy thing she'd done in her life, and Belle refused to be sorry for it. That was, she decided, the only thing she knew with any certainty: she was not sorry.

Well, perhaps she was a little repentant over her suspicions and invasion of Mr. Jefferson's privacy, but he'd shown himself a decent sort of man by reading to the children piled three abreast on her bed in the evenings. That man was yet another mystery, though not one Belle cared to consider at length.

Belle walked swiftly toward the Viscount's summons, her legs sore from the exercise, but - to her relief - she did not lose the way. Sonnachdubh seemed somehow less menacing since she'd heard so many excellent stories about it from Master Bae. It was a pity he'd been squired back to school so swiftly, Belle could tell he did not wish it for himself, but he'd borne it nobly, without tantrums, and Belle found that entirely more honorable than any young lordling she'd chanced to know in the South.

Knocking twice against the polished oak, Belle showed herself into the room. As ever, Mr. Gold lived in perpetual candle light, drapes closed, but this was the first time she'd chanced to see him at his writing desk, a storm of papers strewn across the place. He appeared focused, busy. Not at all the ill, addled man she'd come to expect before the ill-fated fox hunt.

"Miss French," he acknowledged, turning to face her. Shockingly, he wore his shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow and ink stained his fingertips. "We've much to discuss."

"Have we?" Belle asked, unsure what he could mean. She'd almost rather he treat her dismissively and ask for tea.

"Aye. My son, you see, is not a topic which I breach lightly. You've met the boy, and spent some time in his society if Mr. Dovey's to be believed. You will not speak of him or anything he may have told you to anybody. Small viscountcy this may be, but none who dominates trade as I have done is ever without enemies. Do you understand me?"

"Of course, Sir," Belle assured him. "I'd never thought to sully his name, or-"

"Your intent is meaningless to me. However... it seems that I owe you some manner of apology."
"Sir?"

"I've been ill at ease over certain... personal histories - no, don't interrupt - and, much as it pains me, the burden of proof is my own penance weight to bear. You don't comprehend me, that's as it should be. Still, I've no pleasure in finding that it now behooves me to temporarily change your duties."

Belle felt herself very stupid suddenly, grasping neither his meaning nor his method of reasoning. Gold carried on without waiting for her to comprehend anything.

"From today, you will take a careful inventory of my library in the mornings. Mr. Archibald Hopper and Miss Ruby Lucas will be assisting. I expect this task will take some several years to complete."

"Mr. Gold, the children cannot read. How are they to help me?"

"You'll see to that, I've just informed Mrs. Hopper and Mrs. Lucas, and one of them - though I've no doubt you know which - has been compelled to agree. In the afternoons, you will serve me my tea and then you will assist me with the ledgers and correspondences you see littering the place. Your evenings will be occupied as the need arises, but for the better part I believe you will find yourself at liberty to do as you please."

"Thank you," Belle breathed, hardly believing that this sober, serious man could be one and the same with the one who'd whisked her away. "But, if I may... why are you doing this for me?"

"You saved my son's life Miss French, I don't forget it. And... Bae, he..."

For a moment, Belle thought she saw a tear forming at the top of his cheek, but half a breath later it looked more a trick of the flickering light.

"Baelfire has agreed to continue his studies abroad without resorting to truancy on the condition that I provide some semblance of instruction for his little gang of miscreants. Besides that, the Hopper boy is a good lad, and we might make something more than a Grounds Keeper of him."

"And the ledger? The library?"

"Am I now beholden to answer to a scullery maid, Miss French?"

"I thought I was a valet now."

Nothing could have shocked Belle more than the half-snorted laugh that erupted from him, and she thought he even surprised himself at the sound.

"You're clever enough to be of some use, I think, and I've need to keep you employed for quite some time if you remember correctly." There was the cold sneer she'd come to expect, the reminder of her life-long indenturement.

"Now," continued Gold, "I don't want to hear any more about it. When I find what I'm looking for, you will know it, and in the mean time my revenues must not suffer. Do we understand one another?"

"Not at all," Belle answered, feeling brave and a little foolhardy. "But I'll do the work, and do it well. I thank you, and for the children's sake too. It's good to know that these hands will do more than chip cups and pouring brandy. Shall I fetch the tea, though? Surely a cup would not go amiss as you introduce me to all of this." She gestured grandly at the paper-strewn work area.
"Yes, I think so. And a cup for yourself," he allowed, turning back to the blotter once more.

Belle did not know what creeping metamorphosis had begun to transform him, but she said a silent prayer for Bae, hoping that he did not suffer too greatly for all their sake.

End Part I.
XXXI. The New Regime

The clocks of Sonnachdubh ran and chimed at hourly intervals now, since he'd sent Baelfire away to school. All dusted, all wound, all set to the stout, yellow-faced fellow who graced his own mantle. The odor of civilization clung to their tick-ticking, which irked and aided him in equal parts.

Rum had his genteel servant to thank for that (more so than Mrs. Hopper's attentions, he was sure), and he found the regular winding of the clocks alarmingly conducive to his recovery. Helpful in one cause, yet still haunting.

A mixture of cocaine and Turkish coffee with his morning egg, timed at precisely at eight thirty, to dull his aches and rouse him for work; the contemplation of youth and of dying at eight forty; at noon, a dab more of Jefferson's powder in wine, if he needed any, and a bite to eat - whatever his stomach could keep down; by one, the fear his secrets might be un-earthed and everything ruined; at four o'clock, an unadulterated tea with Miss French - Victor assured him the Chinese expounded on tea's health benefits; after that, counting his hours of pleasant smiles and dwindling sunlight, as the tea's mystical properties soothed him; Miss French offered him a hot water bottle every evening, at exactly ten, and he tried a drop of laudanum in whiskey when she departed for her bed; later, if he needed rest, a measure more of the laudanum to lull him to sleep around two ante meridian. The absinthe and chloral he skipped entirely, and - so long as the pain did not render him an invalid and the medication did not undermine his agency - business flourished.

A wonder, then, that he had neither missed nor wanted for a house full of clocks in nearly two decades. Without the clocks, anarchy found him. He'd dose himself irregularly with laudanum or cocaine and then sleep or fret away the day. With the clocks, an ordered regimen and memento mori to follow him. This new plan was better for him, and better for Bae, but it still hurt to think how he'd become something like the pale echo of the man who'd most wronged him.

Captain Killian Jones hated clocks too, he remembered; in his youth, he hadn't made much of it, but for a spy living on borrowed time they must have sounded every bit as final as the gunshot that killed him.

Gold tolerated it for the precision it afforded his medicines. The key to Jefferson's medicine, to Whale's chagrin, was a small dose at regular intervals, and if the chemicals did muddy his senses then it was not so bad that his affairs suffered for them. Only focus, the same single-minded determination that governed his early days, kept the over-indulgence in oblivion at bay. And at the center of it, Balefire; all he did now, he did for Bae.

The boy never wrote home, as Gold knew he wouldn't when he strong-armed the lad onto his train nearly six months ago, yet the trust broken between them would mend. It must, for he worked tirelessly to ensure the boy's legacy and to keep his half of their bargain, and if it did not then all was lost. He could not sacrifice his own son for the Captain's daughter, no matter how pretty she was.

Miss French tutored the children in his library every morning, safely out of his sight (and safely away from Whale and Jefferson, when they insisted upon a visit with him), then she retired to his study for tea each evening where the real work of lifetimes unfurled in inky ledgers and notarized deeds. Remarkably, it was this herbal medicine that made him feel the least of his pains in the day, though he found its potency somewhat lacking if he took it prepared by one of the other maids, a
circumstance Dr. Whale could not explain.

Miss French deported herself well, made sense of accounts he'd left fallow too long, and - though not as burdened by cut-throat instincts as he - matched him in his superb arithmetical speed. He had not expected it from her, this kind, competent side, and he almost believed...

Damn her and damn her wide, blue eyes. If his indent was the Captain's daughter, if she was the only obstacle between himself and his tattered honor, then she'd - perhaps - earned some degree of clemency. And if she was not? If the doubts that plagued him proved true? Then she was kind and good, and he would have to set her free. Either way, he would lose her, and so he did nothing. Rum found, no matter how he approached it, that neither thought pleased him. Miss French was bound to him in writ, and so she would remain, as long as he maintained the delicate status quo between them.

He knew himself for a coward, in this as in everything.

They would say, one day, that the father of Lord Baelfire Gold, Viscount Sonnachdubh, died a traitor without pride or valor, that he was not equal to the title of Lord, that he was a base-born cripple who besmirched himself in trade and stole his title by sheer force of will, and that he'd purchased in blood and gold every scrap of respectable decency ever afforded him. For all the favors, debts, and money that transformed a wretch like Gold into the irreproachable gentleman with a reputation custom-tailored to serve him, Baelfire would inherit an equal measure of infamy and scandal. They would say he was a coward's son, and Rum knew all anyone needed was a single scratch from the poison blade of truth he'd buried in Spain for the whole of his family to fester and turn.

Rumford Gold was not a traitor, but then - was Rumford Gold even alive, or had he dreamed it all in dying as he sometimes feared? He'd been executed by firing squad for the crime of High Treason, reported missing to spare his Lord Father, and then climbed from the ditch with a shattered leg, blind with rage, and a thirst for revenge. Power to protect himself, power to punish Jones' line, power to destroy his own father, and somewhere in that deranged, broken world he'd found it. He lived in darkness before Baelfire, and then - so suddenly - the world was bright again.

And now, with the addition of Miss French, the light flickered with doubts, but was - on the whole - perhaps a little brighter.

In this new light, he lived every day in fear - a coward to his centre. The Crown executed traitors, stripped them of their rights, and left their sons nothing but shame to keep their company in the night. All of it was true, none of it libel, except the greatest of his crimes. He did no treason, and he could reclaim that much of his good name for his son. In this mad world where one hundred years prior innocence could be proved at dawn with pistols, and where no debtor's died in prison only to have their children share the burden in a perpetual cycle of ever-growing red, he could set his own demons to rest. He could prove, at least to his son, that his father was not what the stories said he was.

Time would tell for the rest. The truth of his situation in Spain might never be uncovered, or it might upend him at his next breath. Those ticking clocks haunted him as steadily as the Captain ever had, and the whole of his delicate web might be upended at any minute, any second.

It was enough to drive a good man to madness, and Gold was not insensible to that. He was not certain that he was a man at all, certainly not a good one, and rather knew himself for a crooked, scheming cripple - a caricature of the stage. More monster than man these days, but there was nothing to be done for it. No medicine had yet been made to transform a beast into a human being. So instead he focused on his son, on giving Bae enough protections and wealth that - should his
father's past ever catch him - he might escape it all again.

All this, and a thousand other misfortunes of circumstance, danced before him in the mornings as he considered his holdings and waited for Miss French. Jefferson had promised a certain invigoration, and so long as he maintained small, regular doses, the effect was almost pleasant... until he lost himself inside his head.

"Mr. Gold?" Miss French said. Gold looked up from his writing desk, shocked to find the morning spent. The sun lie in the west, visible now through drapes she'd opened to let in a little Spring light.

"Ah, Miss French. I trust the lessons went well?" he asked, shuffling the papers in front of him for the tenth time in a row.

"Oh, yes. Archie and Ruby are both doing splendidly - I thought I might try them on a few Burns poems tomorrow. Surely Mrs. Hopper must approve of that?" she asked, setting out their tea things.

As she poured, Gold seized up his favorite cup, the chipped one, and marveled at the delicate Worcester porcelain that seemed so much more important than it ever had been.

Belle perched herself on the edge of his desk, and the very moment the tea touched his lips he felt its near-miraculous medicinal effects. Mrs. Hopper, Mrs. Lucas, or one or the other of his incompetent red-heads must have stewed every pot they served him, for he'd never noticed any particular boon to his health before starting regular afternoon service with Miss French.

"I doubt very much our dear Gidge Hopper would approve anything of the sort," Gold allowed. "But as she's been instructed that the lessons will commence uninterrupted, A Red, Red Rose might not go amiss. Will they know the words with the Scots language?"

"I hope so. They are both reading very well in the Queen's English, and I'm afraid some of that has been dreadfully boring, even for all my efforts to cherry-pick the best stories," Belle grinned.

Gold almost smiled in response, by now thoroughly relaxed and without the worst of his pangs. Tea, brewed properly, really was marvelous.

"So soon?" he asked instead, returning his cup to its saucer and preparing a ledger for Miss French. "You must patent your system, and sell it to the tutors at all the great houses."

"It's been nearly six months, it's not nearly as quick as all that," she hedged.

Gold looked down at his ledger again: March the third of 1858, and she'd come to him in late August of '57. Had it really been so long? He supposed it had, begrudgingly looking up at his clocks, before accepting a second cup and returning to the art of capitalism.

XXXII. August 29, 1857

My dear Mrs. Mallory,

How do you fare in the Lake District, my dear? It is not, I hope, too alike the unfinished stretches of American countryside which you so despise? I have never taken pleasure at a walking tour in my life, I'm sure, but to ride out where poetry and dragonflies lie thick on the ground would not be so great a burden. Perhaps, if His Grace consents, I shall find the means to join you at a second pass in a year or so?

I took great comfort in seeing you in town this Season, despite my generally poor health, which
prevented me from entertaining His Grace's guests as my Lord Husband feels I ought. It was too kind of you to leave your cards and come to call, neglected though I was in the smaller parlor His Grace's town house, when we had both much rather - I think - sit astride good cattle in Hyde Park of an evening. There are no words to express the perfect freedom that a good steed affords a bold Lady, even in that small speck of tamed wilderness. A good horse must be the most superior thing in the land!

To that end, the little filly I sired from my own Rocinante is finally saddle-broke, and it would please me to see no other alive ride out on the pretty little girl but yourself. If you've stables, you might even take her with you as a gift of friendship. Please say you will join me here in His Grace's Scottish holdings, where we languor all the winter long? If you do not, I fear His Grace might settle the poor creature on his vicious Lady Mary, and that would be an abominable waste of my own superb bloodlines. Sweet Dulcinea is too fine a seat for one such as her.

Need's must that we plan our little outing before the snow falls, which for us comes rather earlier in the autumn than for those lucky few south of the Wall; His Grace will not visit any of his more hospitable homes, no matter how I beg, for they insist that the person of the last Duchess still clings close where they spent their happy times. And so, in Scotland I remain. I fear, when I die, this rough Scotch castle will be in possession of only another wretched, wailing - ignored by all, as in life. But my thoughts turn black: if you are amiable, how soon can you arrive? The presence of a friend would lift my spirits immeasurably.

You asked me, once, before the rotten apple of His Grace's eye so ignobly intruded on us, how I came to be so perilously unwell with so many balls and suppers available to me. It was your claim, I believe, that some combination of land, lineage, and lucre should ensure the most perfect felicity. It is, perhaps, true that a widow of means such as yourself, blooded or no, may come and go freely, but it is not so for me. In truth, I envy you - all but your American roots, but you will forgive me that, won't you? If my life as Dowager Duchess should not throw me so hopelessly into the heir's power (and as I've no son, nor prospects of producing one without some input from His Grace, it would certainly be some stranger whom Lady Mary might feel compelled to bind herself to), I might wish to don the black with all haste.

Oh yes, a marriage is a hard thing. Especially where one did not look to marry, but found herself bound in matrimony - and a little-loved, second wife at that - all the same.

I will tell you a tale now, as I was prevented from doing so then, and you will judge for yourself if the wife is not the victim of her husband's necessities. The story begins in unlikely climes, a poor miller and his spinner neighbor fagged by rising factories at the height of Napoleon's reign. She's an ambitious, pretty thing and he the by-blow of some minor laird, and they've known each other all their lives. Their circumstances change, and so the bastard (acknowledged now) returns crippled from Spain and thinks to marry the miller's girl for reasons we cannot know (though I expect he hoped to find the very soul of caprice in her) - but she will not have the half-blooded son to husband her, yet they find that another union better suits them. And so, in a fury of ambition and rage, they scheme - and, together, master the vulgar arts of trade.

The girl - nearly a woman, now - rises quickly. She spends her riches on her own dowry, to secure a marriage with the most genteel Baronet in the county, abandoning the cripple and his factories. The man from the wrong side of the sheets never forgave her that treachery, and he turned his unspeakable rage toward the rest of society. She ought to have accepted him, you see, because he - without scruples, with murderously keen instincts - eclipsed her own fortune, married for duty, and snatched away his half-brother's birth rights. As long as she lived, the miller's daughter never mentioned him by name, for fear that all her past commonness might yet catch her. Still, you may know of whom she whispered - our own Viscount S., Lord G. Remember that, for it will be of the
utmost importance as I continue.

And so our story sours. Suppose, for instance, that the Baronet's new wife turned her eyes upward - beyond the Viscountcy, or even the Earls, and sought to, perhaps one day, find herself in the lineage of a future Queen? What might she do then?

She arranged that her daughter should be riding at the exact moment that a motherless Duke's daughter suffered a hunting accident astride her favorite pony. The girl was kind, and she comforted the child, a mistake by anyone's reckoning, and the child took word back to her father - His Grace, the Duke - of the woman she wanted for a new mother, as easily as we might ask our tailors for a new set of hosiery.

Well, what was the girl to do? She thinks of elopement with her own love, rather than the loveless marriage between an old, indulgent man and herself, but the little girl knew. She was careless, our heroine, and trusted the child to let her go. But, of course, the spoiled, over-indulged wretch would not be denied, and so told the would-be-bride's mother of her plans to make the midnight ride. The groom - the one she wanted, for her own sake, even if they be poor and common - died. Or, as is more accurate, it was arranged that he should die, yet none cared to investigate the death of a stable hand kicked in the head by his own steed, and why should they? None in this world cares one whit for those without titles or deeds.

The Duke would not release her from the engagement, for his daughter had asked so prettily for a new Mamma, and the Bride's mother cut off all other means of escape. And so the Bride tried, desperately, one last time, to beg a favor of the only creature wicked enough to save her. Our very own Lord G., you see?

He'd power and pound enough for ten Duchies, though not the pedigree to match it, and arranged that both the Baronet and the Miller's Daughter should be carried off to the Indies, seemingly over night. Ambassadors of the Empire in far-off lands, to be treated as agents of the crown with all honor and ceremony, but too far away to restrain their daughter. And she missed her father, missed him terribly, but the Viscount's work was done and she dared not beg clemency.

She might have gone free then. She might have done anything, but our own Lord G. provided a most tempting offer: a fortune in her own name, an independence from the Duke's entailment and purse strings, and with it the power to bring misfortune to all her enemies. For what is power, if not land, lineage and lucre? All he required of her was that she marry, an easy thing with no one else to love her, and - once Duchess - ensure he and his were welcome at any table in London. She accepted his offer, perhaps hastily, and thought that these three things might make her happy. In that ineffable search for happiness, she did not succeed.

So here we arrive, at the apex of the whole tragedy, with a girl who got precisely what she wanted at the precise moment that she allowed her wants to eclipse her needs. And who is to blame? Is the Duchess not a victim of her mother's greed? Of the Viscount's cunning? Of the Duke's indulgences?

The story of our unwilling Duchess is not concluded, but that - I think - is best left for conversations whispered over luncheon and a private tea. Our hypothetical Duchess, with her unlikely allies and enemies, remains - above all things - unflinching. But that tale, too, we must save for some moment of privacy.

So please, my darling friend, won't you come and ride out with me? In the style of Boccaccio, I have told you a story - one of many - of how a Duchess might, in theory, come to be unhappy. Whether it be my own tale or not, is (I think) best left to guesswork. Suffice it to say, I am as you found me in London, and I wish nothing more than an audience with one of your particular...
predilections.

Yours in kind,

R.M.B.

XXXIII. 1858

Belle felt satisfied with her work when she retired from her employer's study at ten, heralded by a house full of chiming clocks, the sound of which she'd almost grown accustomed to after all these months. It made a definite improvement over the eerie silences and baying of hounds, and she could almost navigate the place without becoming lost in the corridors. Belle wondered, sometimes, if the house kept its secrets closer than even its master, but satisfied herself that she may never know the real depth of either without first overcoming more superficial obstacles like locked doors and harsh words.

He liked to prowl and fidget, hands always looking for something to smooth, and then suddenly all would go still and he was lost to his own thoughts - sometimes for an hour or two. Then, more rare of late, sometimes he looked almost like a rabbit caught, as though he feared she'd do something. What, exactly, Belle was meant to do she did not know, but he looked at her with haunted eyes from time to time, and it made Belle wonder. She could never forget that he'd taken her from her home in the dead of night, promised a life of servitude, and then quietly gone about his life, but it was her choice.

She wanted to save her father - the only father she'd ever known, if not hers by blood - and she'd wanted to avoid George's father, the Judge, and (a small part of her, she supposed) wanted to escape George too. He was her dear friend since childhood, but the marriage arranged between them would not have been what either of them chose for themselves; of that, Belle was certain.

She missed Sir Maurice: his kindly eyes, his dwindling library, their shabby clothes, and even his abominable business sense, but Belle was not so naive to think that she missed the poverty. Here, in Sonnachdubh, as a some-time clerk she lived a far more comfortable life. The same could not be said of the maids and valets, as Belle knew firsthand, and she was thankful for that too. Gold might have worked her until her hands bled, but he did not. That he declined her requests to write her father outright, rather than letting her pen letters and burning them - as the Judge had once done - was another sort of bitter-sweet mercy.

Oh, but she did miss her family. Archie, Ruby, Mrs. Lucas, and occasionally Warg, the massive wolf-hound, kept her company, but none of it felt like home. The winters were too cold, the Christmas and New Year celebrations too morose, the house too grand, the bedclothes too plush... And if nothing suited her, then she must suit herself, and make it work. That was what she'd promised as the old year became the new, and it seemed to have worked. That was her life, the whole of it: a series of second-hand things that never quite fit right, and she'd only to make the best of it to be happy anyway. It felt selfish and unkind to resent it, but in this case - in the case of being cut off from the world - she felt it almost justified.

Belle dressed herself for bed, reminding herself to be grateful that she no longer had to sleep in the drafty attic, and Ruby joined her a little after ten thirty - ready for her evening braid.

"Was he in a good mood today?" the girl - not quite a child and not yet a woman - asked her.
"Granny said he sent back his eggs overdone twice before quitting the table without eating anything, and you know what that means."

"I suppose he was cross as ever," Belle sighed, choosing a comb from her night-stand and tending
the dark tresses in her hands. "A foreman in the West Indies tried to cheat him of ten per cent, and he's all but pulled out of American cotton... something to do with politics. Still, all the books balanced at the end. He's got me double-and-triple-checking them, but he does seem to finally trust my calculations."

"It's a shame about that India thief. Stealing is wrong, but Gold will probably kill him now."

"Ruby! Please, the man is many things but he's hardly a murderer. I don't know where you come up with these intrigues." She gave a playful tug at the girl's hair before separating it out into three pieces. "And it's the West Indies, not India. I think tomorrow we ought to start with geography."

"Well geography's all well and good for Archie, but there's no point in teaching it to me. All I'll ever be is a kitchen maid, or a cook if I'm lucky."

"What in the world makes you say that? Ruby, you can do more... you can be so much more than in service your whole life. What do you want to do with yourself? That's the real question."

"Not work in a factory or for some mean Housekeeper," Ruby growled as Belle worked deftly through her locks. "And not be some boring farmer's wife, either. There's not much else that I can be, so isn't it enough that I can write down the groceries?"

"You've been listening to Mrs. Hopper go off, haven't you? That woman is..." any number of unkind things came to mind, but Belle settled on the least of them. "That woman is poisonous, Ruby. We can be anything, though the bulk of occupations may evade us. Maybe we can't be Oxford Dons or soldiers, but a woman can be clever, she can be brave, she can be strong. You mustn't listen to their talk; there's what's expected and proper, but there's a whole world inside of you too, where you can think about anything at all, and the second you let small-minded, petty people silence that, well... well, then, I think you've really lost yourself."

After a long moment of thought, Ruby turned to her with sober eyes and asked: "Is that why you came to Sonnachdubh? To stop them from shutting you up?"

"I..." Belle was not sure she knew how to respond. Maybe Ruby was more grown up than she'd credited her for, if she picked up on so much.

"You've never told me how it happened," Ruby pressed. "Only that Mr. Gold made you sign a paper that says you have to stay with us."

"You've never asked," Belle tried weakly, finishing Ruby's hair with a worn, crimson ribbon. "It was a trade - I came with him, as an indentured servant, and in exchange he spared my father from debtor's prison."

"But isn't it against the law to just buy somebody?"

"He didn't... he didn't buy me, exactly. He didn't even have to offer to trade, he held all of Sir Maurice's notes - or enough of them that the rest didn't make much difference - he could have sent the man who raised me to die in a cell and razed his estate to ground. But I had the choice to stop it, by coming here, so I did."

"I believe... well, I believe now, that we've always got a choice. It might be a choice between two wholly unpleasant things, but you've got to choose for yourself. Your father, husband, fiancé... they can't choose for you. And, sometimes, if you do nothing... that's choosing too."

"You could have let him collect on your father's debts, you mean."
"I could have. Or, I might have married impetuously and hoped that the worst of it could be resolved. I could have done all that, and trusted my dear friend George to find his spine and play the hero, but I wanted to be brave. I wanted to be unmarried, and brave, and I did what I thought was right."

"And was it?"

"Hn?" asked Belle, already lost in her thoughts again.

"Did you do the right thing?" Ruby repeated, a conflict of emotion playing out on her young face.

"I'm not sure we'll ever know," Belle confessed, hugging her close. "If I hadn't, I would never have met you, and that would make me very sad. And Mr. Gold is... he's not unkind to me, now. There's something inside him, making him sick, but underneath it all I think he's working very hard to do some good. He certainly loves his son, which is more than I can say for the Judge. It's complicated, I suppose; there is no easy answer."

"But would you choose differently, if you could?" Ruby prodded, rising to leave for the servants' wing.

"Probably not," Belle decided, and even she was a little surprised at the truth of it.
XXXIV. The Knight

Gold rolled the darkening, saffron liquor in his glass. The sun had not passed its zenith on this fine May day, yet he'd transformed the golden amber of his whiskey to the furious red of poppy twice now this morning. He might pour another, if his nerves would not settle.

The clocks reminded him of his convictions, of months spent in a calculated regime where wits overpowered the need for oblivion, and he prided himself on retaining his sharp acumen where other opium-eaters peddled poetry in China Town. Today, though, the pain had only worsened as the clocks ticked on and on and... If it was not the endless thoughts of Miss French – whom he'd declared innocent of all wrong-doing, but who, in practice, was a constant source of discord as his drug-addled head became a playhouse of doubts – then it was worry for his son; or another of Her Grace's veiled threats demanding for more funds, demanding information on the Spencer heir, demanding that he clean up her own tumultuous dabbling, and wholly ungrateful that he'd sussed out the young Swan lad for her; all conspired to make him wretched from dawn to dusk.

Today's culprit was almost worse than the other three combined: Miss French's fiance meant to seize her that very evening. He'd written in early March, just as the routine between himself and his sometime-clerk had begun to settle into an affectionate sort of comfort. Gold put him off as best he could, but the lad was dutiful and righteous, and even without the force of the law had announced his intentions to seize the girl.

Rumford had seen his share of head-strong, fiery men like the Frontland pup, but they'd all died in muddy uniforms, bogged down by regrets and moaning for a swift rifle-butt to the head. Would the Mr. George Frontland beg for those same mercies? Gold had conveyed, in no small terms, that the boy would be shot on sight, the moment he set foot on the Sonnachdubh properties. Still, the boy pressed his claim admirably. He wrote well, so well that Gold didn't doubt his father composed what the son must sign, and spoke of gentlemen's agreements, of engagements, and of Miss French's disobedience to them all.

Any self-important whelp who claimed that the Belle made her choices lightly, who implied that she did not posses her own agency at the time of signing, had better prepare for pistols at twenty. To defame her so easily, and yet still insist that he meant her no harm, left Rumford in a quandary; should he face the boy like a gentleman and beat him bloody with his cane, or simply allow Mr. Dovey and Mr. Hopper the honors?

Perhaps one day the will and wiles of the world would change, but for the son of a country judge to insinuate himself into the affairs of a wealthy, powerful Viscount put the gentleman's son in the wrong simply on principle of title. For the first time in nigh-on a decade, Gold was almost glad of the amnesty his father's line afforded for something other than his son's sake. Miss French was the very balm of Gilead, a panacea of calm; her slightest smile could charm the most bull-headed of monsters, and besides all that no one else prepared his tea properly. Only a full service with Miss French's subtle attentions suited him, and the steeped, black leaves soothed his knee as fully as any poppy or cocoa leaf.

The very spirit of calm wrapped itself around her, in everything she spoke logically; the girls' rhetoric was not at fault. She was no more mad than he – but perhaps that comparison would not turn out very favorably – and far to valuable a prize to give up lightly.

It was not so terrible that the Frontland boy wanted to take her back, he'd be a fool not to cherish
what was once so nearly his to honor, but Gold resented the very principle of his methods. To be nothing more than his father's catspaw, to steal another gentleman's servant, to involve her reputation in the proceedings, and very like to force his marital claim upon her... Mr. George Frontland lacked the character and resolve of one deserving of her love. As her Master, it fell to Rumford to protect her. He had a duty that he owed her, that was all.

His claim was absolute, and any attempt to remove her would be abduction, kidnapping, common thievery. They hanged men for theft in Scotland, but what to do with this one?

If she was the Captain's spawn, though...

No, he would not allow himself to entertain doubts today. She'd proven herself, proven herself at every test, and to Baelfire no less. He'd found a small, thoughtful girl stricken by poverty, and he'd viewed her old, second-hand wardrobe and desire to understand the deal he offered as immodesty and pride. But she was not too proud for his scullery, not so spoiled she'd disavow an entire set of porcelain for a small chip in a single cup, and clever enough to confound Victor very regularly. Miss French deserved better than the likes of Mr. Frontland, who called her strengths frailties and saw only beauty where he might see bravery.

The decision to keep her – to protect her – was easily made. He'd known from the first demand of her release that no circumstances would ever prevail upon him to acquiesce, though it hadn't stopped him from torturing himself over the proceedings. The real question was what to do when the fool-hardy young pup came growling for its bone later today.

Belle would know how best to behave, yet consulting Miss French was the one road barred to him. She never tried to run away; she smiled when he felt snappish; she demonstrated, in her own way, an unflinching loyalty to family; but what would she say if she knew of the Frontland claim? She might ask to leave him, and that... if she asked him, Gold knew what was at stake. He might release her contract, but only... only if she asked, only if she begged.

He'd kept the bulk of his troubles from Miss French, but that had not stopped her from commenting on his agitated state. So, he drank to calm his nerves, and when he was alone he schemed. No course of action could be permitted to compromise Baelfire's legacy; nor could anything be done to the whelp that might give cause for a formal inquiry; and, almost an after-thought, really, nothing could be done that would give Her Grace leverage over his not ungenerous contributions to her estate.

So what to do with the fiend?

Gold felt himself beginning another circuit around the worsening pipe-drain of uncertainty when the door to his study pushed open. Miss French busied herself situating their tea things, then proceeded to trim the candles casting long shadows across the room. He had not realized how much of the May daylight had melted away, addled as he was by the unusually large doses of laudanum and drink.

“Are you well?” Miss French asked him, finally content with the state of his study. “Mrs. Lucas said you never rang for luncheon today, so I had her include a few extra seed cakes.”

“Quite well,” he replied, pulling himself to a more dignified posture in the over-stuffed chair he favored. “It was only a little pain, and the medicine tends to limit my appetite.”

Belle tutted at him, and busied herself draping a pair of hot compresses over the fire grate. The third, already hot from the kitchen blaze, she wrapped carefully around his leg. He flinched back, always wary of any hand that drew too close to the old injury, but he needn't have worried. As ever,
Miss French's warm compress and supple fingers soothed away all but the barest ghost of his pain.

"You've been so well since March, I thought..." she started, worrying her lower lip with her teeth.

"Whatever it is, say it outright," Gold huffed at her. She needn't bother about speaking impudently with him, of all people; she must know by now that he liked to hear anything she might care to say.

"It's just... Sometimes I think the laudanum makes you forgetful and lonely. I've been your clerk and valet nearly eight months now, and I've started to notice sometimes your leg gives you more trouble when you're over-thinking. There are letters at your desk, not business ones and I thought... I thought maybe they were from your son?"

Her question caught him completely off-guard. He wasn't lonely, of course not; not because of anything that came out of a little glass bottle, anyway. He hadn't considered that she might've noticed the Frontland letters and letters from the Duchess among the ledgers and contracts she serviced.

Gold stammered over his response. Much as he would have liked to say nothing, she'd saved his son's life. If she wanted to know about Bae, well... he owed her something.

"No, no. They're, uh, not from Bae. He doesn't write me much any more, my son. Not since we parted at the train."

"I'm sorry," Belle replied, and he thought she looked a little heart-broken at the news.

She passed him a cup of tea – his chipped cup, the one he liked – and perched herself on the arm rest of his chair, as she'd taken to doing some time in March. Gold couldn't recall the precise moment their scandalously informal interludes ceased to be stilted, shocking affairs and became almost comfortable, but he could remember in perfect clarity the first time Miss French sat on the edge of his arm chair and talked to him like he was more than an eccentric old monster. March fourth, a good day. Unseasonably warm.

"So, um... what is bothering you, then?" she pressed, sipping her own tea from a matching Worcester cup.

"It's just an old war wound, dear," he told her. The words came out so simply, so matter-of-fact, and he wondered if the laudanum hadn't addled his wits more than he liked to admit. No good could come of talking about this.

"From Spain?"

Who the hell had told her that?

"And you.. you were shot, is that it?" she pressed.

Gold couldn't find the words to make an answer, and so remained silent instead.

"There's no shame in it, you know. Walking with a limp, it's... it's not as if it changes who you are, not the parts that make a man who he is."

Unable to look her in the face, Gold stood and walked toward the fire. With his back to her, the words dribbled out in starts and stops.

"Hardly a man now," he tried at last. "And not a pretty story, I'm afraid."
“But you were a soldier once? Or an officer, or... or something?”

She'd risen to stand beside him, setting aside her tea, and Gold could no sooner turn to face her than he could curb his own mouth from speaking.

“Aye, a soldier. And crippled in Spain. I'm not sure now if I ever told Baelfire that, and you'd have the whole sordid tale from me in a single night. One would think you're plotting something.”

All too quickly, Miss French had come to stand in front of him, one hand cupping his cheek as he fought to stop the whole tragedy from playing out across his face.

“If I've agreed to remain here for my whole life, by my own choice, can't I at least be trusted to know the man who keeps me? And if not me, then you should tell Bae. He's a good boy, Sir. I think he wants to understand his father.” She turned away then, a sad look in her eye, and Gold reached before thinking.

The feel of Miss French in his arms as his head swam in laudanum and the fire's heat overwhelmed him entirely, and he could feel the slightness of her waist and smell the faint parfum of her hair so keenly that they cut at him like knives.

“Why did you want me here?” Belle asked him, relaxing in to his tentative embrace rather than pushing him away.

Gold dared to press his face to her plainly-pinned curls, and fought to make his arms release her. His conduct toward her had been incorrigible, his intent a miserable fluctuation between passionate and bloody, and he'd no words – no words at all – to convey how desperately and sincerely he wished that the truth of the matter would not send this poor girl running.

His hands, where he touched her, were trembling, and Miss French's own breath came hard and heavy.

“You could have hired any servants you needed, for much less than the cost of saving Sir Maurice, so why... Why me?” She turned to face him as she spoke, lips nearly brushing his own from the impossible closeness of it all. If he leaned but a quarter of an inch more, if he dared...

And then Rumford's blood ran cold. There was a knock at the door.

XXXV. The Seduction of Sidney Glass

September 8, 1857

Mr. Glass,

Thank you for your especial attentions to me the other evening. His Grace does occasionally forget that he has a Duchess in need of her escort to and from the dining room, but of course we cannot reproach a father who so dotes on his daughter for neglect.

If you are not inclined to join the shooting tomorrow morning, I hoped that you might join me for a turn about the garden?

I've an apple tree in the very last days of its season, brought up from my childhood home in England; I thought we might sit there a while and discuss the estate? I am sure His Grace has underestimated my willingness and aptitude for taking part in the governance of the estate, but I am his wife and Duchess, and I should very much like to demonstrate my ability.
Cordially yours,
Lady White Hall, Her Grace R.M. Blanchard

September 9, 1857

Mr. Glass,

I very strongly suspect that I have you to thank for the divine little compact found waiting under my apple tree this morning. The kind words you wrote remain will remain with me always. I hope I may depend upon seeing you in my parlor this evening?

Surely there must be more duties for His Grace's most trusted manager to execute here in Scotland, and he need not leave us presently? Though, if needs must, I shall keep the mirror and always remember fondly the bold gentleman who once found me lovely.

Yours,
R.M.B

September 12, 1857

Sidney,

His Grace has discovered my compact and part of my blotter from the note I sent you yesterday - I think he means to lock me away in my chambers today. And if he should denounce me for daring to dream, though we both know I've done nothing unworthy? I need not tell you what this will mean.

Mrs. Mallory has been kind enough to play courier for me. Please, meet me tomorrow by our apple tree. I must speak to you, no one else can comfort me.

In haste,
R.M.B.

September 13, 1857

Sid,

His Grace suspects me of unspeakable adulteries, but it seems he possesses only half of what was said between us – half a blotter and a mirror, enough for a husband always spying to see me sullied.

He does not accuse you, or anybody but myself, and I rest easier knowing that you are not compromised on my account. There was no name, only mine own hand thanking a gentleman for his gift to me.

His Grace has denied my right to leave my suites, except to take supper and tea, and you will see once more that dear Mrs. Mallory is invaluable to me. But make no reply, lest her jealousy of our attachment prove tempting; I have have gambled enough on your head already simply by daring once more to write.

Please, you must make your way to my parlor this evening so we might speak – come by night, if the window is not too high. It will be only myself and Mrs. Mallory, whom I trust to excuse herself for a few moments as all discreet ladies in waiting must do. His Grace will surely allow you to excuse yourself, you are one of his oldest friends, he cannot suspect that I... do not doubt the warmth of my attachments now, not after I have endured so much!
In need of my comfort,
R.

September 15, 1857

My love,

Perhaps we might have been happy in another place and time. I cannot abide life in this house which has been too long my prison, not while my Lord husband finds cause to keep me in gilded chains. Not while he invades my private tokens and ignores my pleas for the smallest measure of human mercy.

I mean to put an end to this misery today, and am only sorry that you will have to endure now without me, to know that I had rather be dead than married.

Please, please do not mourn me. In death I shall be content as I could never be in life, and perhaps we will meet again in God's own time. I am sorry, Sid, that you must find these bitter words with your morning paper - I had no other means of conveyance that only you might find, and did not wish for my final words to find their way into my husband's eyes.

Yours always,
Regina

September 16, 1857

Sidney,

The servants are saying terrible things... they're saying an accident happened in the hunting party. They say you have shot His Grace, and that he lies dying!

You have saved me so completely, by every conceivable means, even from my own ennui, and such words were spoken yesterday... I know you cannot have meant to do this intentionally, no matter what we might have said privately. I am not the kind of fabled beauty for whom such Heroes wage war against tyranny.

These will be the most difficult of days, but if you are innocent then please do not leave me. Leaving would only make them lay such claims as I dare not even speak upon your name. Knowing you are near comforts me, seeing you at dinner comforts me; even the sight of your name to paper is a blessing. All will be well, you will see.

With all my heart,
Gina

September 16, 1857

Can you really love me so fiercely? To do as you have done for me, I could believe myself almost worthy of salvation. Yet I fear we shall find no happy conclusion to this wretched tragedy.

Even to his last breath, His Grace persecutes me. My maids tell me that he sends for you to make amendments to his papers - I only pray this note may find you before he calls you to his chambers, as I fear it shall be the last occasion on which we two communicate. I believe he means to leave me destitute, for nothing more than an old man's suspicions, a trinket, and half a torn note. We two know, whatever we may feel in our hearts, that no wrong deed has been done. For a kiss, I... but these are foolish thoughts, for we shall have none.
A Dowager Duchess might have been forgiven much, things for which a country widow on two hundred a year may not, and she may certainly not continue her friendships with handsome bachelors. I am as one dead at eight and twenty, my gilded cage transformed to a pine box. I might have lived to eighty, my black veil a pair of sparrow's wings, but I am ruined - and all for an unkind Lord's vanity.

Who shall care for Lady Mary, or the new heir once he is discovered? Who shall keep the estate solvent from the money-lenders? Not His Grace's stewards, certainly; you know and I know them for viperous thieves, where he sees only his sycophantic Cambridge fellows. I alone am a suitable regent and guardian, but of course he cannot see it – you know how His Grace has always doubted my cleverness.

All is lost, my love, for the Duke will have his way - even on the brink of death, by God - he will have his way, and it will cost him everything. I did not love my husband, Sid, but I do not wish ill to his legacy. Who could, when he is always so kind to everybody but me?

Tomorrow, I will be either an unlovable widow or brought up for adultery, and none here can save me. Be thankful for your masculinity, even under suspicion of murder it will allow you to walk free, but the feminine knows only vile lies and infamy.

And so, it falls to me to spare you the rod where my husband would not spare me. I set you free, you owe me nothing – neither sentiment nor charity. You have done too much already in my unworthy name. Good bye, Sidney.

September 16, 1857

Sid,

If you have truly done as you say, then I am saved. In thwarting His Grace's bitter plan to bankrupt me, you have guaranteed our future security. How sad that none will know of your bravery; I hope that my own songs of thankful praise will convey even an ounce of the gratitude now owed you by the Duchy. You are my very own Odysseus, and I your loyal Penelope.

We travel, all of us, by train tomorrow for the Devon estate, that His Grace might be placed along side his first wife in the family cemetery. That much, at least, will have to be as Lady Mary and my late husband dictate.

Mrs. Mallory must leave me, it would be too unseemly for her to stay on now, and I will have no one but you against my sea of troubles. I know that you must come South to settle the estate and the matter of determining an heir, but I find immense comfort in the airy notion that you also stay on, at least in part, for my own tender heart.

I cannot fathom what I would do if you were gone.

Yours,

G.

September 19, 1857

Mr. Glass,

I am in mourning for His Grace, and I have not the heart to endure such impure overtures on the day of my husband's interment; I will do my utmost to forget that such ghastly words were ever spoken, but I cannot excuse the misguided passions which led you to a sin so greatly in my presence.
The constables have been instructed to present you with this note of farewell at the time of your arrest, which I am led to understand will take place immediately following the dispersal of the funeral procession. They have seen your signed confession of murder – in a love note to the wife of the man you killed, no less, and they have seen my own pleas for reprieve from your ardor.

The way you have intimidated and insulted me with notes of love and treachery is disgusting; in diffidence to my own reluctance to see any person hanged or to sully Lord White Hall's memory, the judge has deemed you criminally insane and unfit for public trial. You are to be delivered directly into singular, solitary custody, and - God willing - you will remain there always.

Please know that I will never forgive you for depriving me of my husband's love. You must be locked away, for all our sake, where the ravings of a lunatic and satyriastic-fiend cannot do further harm to society.

I hope you shall bear it with dignity, and learn remorse for mistakes made.

Her Grace, Dowager Duchess of White Hall and Guardian of the White Hall Estate
Lady Regina M. Blanchard

XXXVI. The Morning Train

The suddenness of the knock shocked Belle to her core.

Mr. Gold tensed with his arms around her, and made a bumbling, clumsy apology as he excused himself from the study. She caught a glimpse of Mr. Dovey in the corridor, heard mumbled instructions to await his return, and pressed his forgotten cane into his hands before he shut the door.

Belle felt the heat of a furnace radiating out from her body, and her heart clenched furiously in her chest. It happened so quickly, such a sudden burning of emotion, and she'd nearly... She'd nearly forfeit every remaining scrap of her reputation and dignity, all for the chance to know him, to find some comfort in his arms.

She could not love him. Such an overwhelming surge of emotion might be any number of symptoms, some illness of the heart, or... or apoplexy. Mr. Gold was a good business man, and he wanted to be a good father, for which Belle could only admire him, but she'd also seen the darkness and violence of his desires. He would, at odd moments, appear to her the most haunted, wretched creature on the Earth, and in every measure that she saw his hurt – an old scar that ran deeper than sinew or cartilage – she saw his hatred too.

Sometimes, in the early days, when she remembered him with the benefit of now knowing his moods, she thought he hated her too.

But then he would be so genteel, so different from any scrap of his reputation that she ever knew, and Belle couldn't bring herself to despise that man – even if he did share a face with the snarling, sneering Viscount who spirited her away from her family. And, even when she desperately missed her old life, Belle still thought it was a fair price.

She hadn't thought to be of any more use than scrubbing chamber pots or mangling the laundry, but Mr. Gold had given her tasks that also challenged her mind. He spoke to her, seemed pleased by her passion for both teaching the children and his library. She thought he might be the only gentleman in the isles who cared to give his valet's thoughts and opinions a voice, and certainly it was equally uncommon to meet any man who found a woman's intellect equal to the task of account-balancing.
All of these unlikely, unexpected traits made Belle feel impossibly fortunate in her situation – it might have been worse, she'd expected such terrors as her mind could barely articulate – but love? She didn't know. He deserved kindness and companionship, yet was denied by everyone – even his own son. Sometimes he deserved a good punch in the nose, too, but that she was ill-equipped to give.

No, Belle decided suddenly. She could not love him. She must not. And still, the ever-important question remained: could he, in turn, love her?

He could not, she decided, remembering that ferocious, half-wild man who'd carried her away to Scotland in his freezing landau and snarled like a cornered fox that she was never, ever to come too close. That thought alone soothed Belle's nerves. If he could not love her, the it didn't matter what this new feeling struggling to take root in her gut foretold; she could be kind, perhaps a comfort, and there would be no future lapses in her own propriety.

Resolved, Belle turned from her position by the fire and prepared to ring for fresh tea when the man himself returned.

“What was it?” she asked him, busying her hands with the tea tray.

“Just one of the crofters, come to sell the early roses door-to-door. Here, if you'll have it?” he stammered, offering her a single, crimson blossom that looked only a little wilted.

The smell reminded her instantly of home, and – if she could not love him – then she certainly loved the flower.

“Thank you,” she demurred, making a little curtsy to him. “How funny, it's the same type we used to grow in our garden. I hadn't thought to find any in Scotland.”

Gold appeared pleased with himself, whatever inner turmoil he'd suffered of late seemed absent from his face, as he almost happily took a seat at his writing desk.

“It's no matter,” he replied, almost preening with delight. Something had clearly set him at ease.

Belle could only nod and agree, happy that he was, perhaps, a little pleased by her acceptance of the thing. Hoping to continue the evening in good spirits, she immediately set about finding a small vase and putting the rose on display.

“You had a life, Miss French. Before... this. Friends, family. What made you choose to come here, with me?”

The question took her a little by surprise, but it was not so unprecedented, was it? She'd asked him the same thing before he left with Mr. Dovey, and turn-about was meant to be fair play. She answered honestly.

“Bravery and sacrifice, I suppose. A chance to be heroic, like my Greeks. Perhaps that was naive of me, but there aren't many opportunities for ladies to show what we can do. We're stronger than we look, common servants and – I imagine – Her Majesty work harder than any gentleman I've known, but everyone always expected me to faint at the slightest trouble. I thought, if I behaved bravely, perhaps I would learn feel brave some day.

And... you know, it's very bad of me to say it, but I was not... unaware of my Sir Maurice's poverty. He was not my father by blood, but he raised me tenderly, and you gave me the opportunity to save his estate. Certainly I owed him that much, no? I thought it was a reasonable trade.”
“And is it everything you hoped it would be?” He had an almost playful lilt to his voice, and Belle couldn't deny that it helped set her restlessness at ease.

“Well, I... I'd hoped to see a bit more of the world than the inside of your carriage and the post-house privies. I suppose that part didn't work out, but I did save my father, and all of his employees. And the highlands are lovely, from the small bits I've seen,” she added, hastily. “It's really a beautiful country.”

“What about your... understanding?” he asked nervously. “I believe you were engaged to be married, might you not have tied your fortunes to your husbands and left the old debtor his lot?”

That was an odd question to ask, and a bit unkind, but not one that she'd begrudge answering for him.

“It was an arranged marriage between our families,” she told him, starting at the beginning for the sake of simplicity.

“Sir Maurice was the village squire, and George's father was the Judge and Magistrate. They’d known one another since their Eaton days, and they knew my father – my real father – as well, I suspect, though they would never tell me his name. I think... I think they thought they owed me the match, but George and I never felt more than a warm friendship. Sometimes not even that.

And Judge Frontland, he...” Belle paused. She did not like to think about his intent, and felt herself well rid of his lingering touches. “Well, I did not like him at all, certainly not more than George, so here I am. If I'd loved either of them, perhaps things would have gone differently. I'm not sure I could ever love Mr. Frontland, even for all his loyalty there was a sort of superficiality... he did not like that I asked him think so deeply.

To me, love is a maze to navigate together. A beautiful sort of mystery, with two people holding a single string, and I don't know how to love anybody so unwilling to help discover the center of it with me.”

Suddenly embarrassed by how forward she was being, Belle quickly changed the subject back to her own curiosities. “But I do rattle on. You were going to tell me about Spain?”

“I'll make you a deal,” he replied, voice almost eerie in its calm. “I'll send you on the morning train to Manchester, to refill my medicine with Mr. Jefferson, and when you come back I'll tell you the tale.”

“To.. to Manchester?” Belle stammered, utterly bewildered by what he was saying. “Without Mr. Dovey? You trust me to return again?”

“Oh no,” he breathed, looking as distant as she'd ever seen him. “I expect never to see you again.”
Chapter 13

XXVII. The Last Petal

She would not return to him. Of that much, Rumford was certain. What remained less certain were his feelings on the suddenness of it all; three days later, he still wasn't sure. He'd been resolved to keep her no matter the cost, to kill the Frontland whelp if he must, and jealously guard his little Comfort.

Was it the laudanum's fault? In small quantities it could prolong a man's potency, but used habitually as he required, managing his pain, it quelled the libido almost entirely. He hadn't realized that his thankful need had turned to wanting until Mr. Dovey interrupted, catching him touching – tempting – where he ought not to be.

That realization alone had been quite enough to ensure the Frontland boy an early grave, but he settled instead for pressing the lad, bruised and drugged, into the arms of Her Majesty's Royal Navy. The practice was, of course, a bit out-of-date, but no Naval Officer yet had looked to closely at a sailor who came, papers signed, with an unofficial recommendation and 50-pound note from a Viscount. Gold liked it; he'd broken no capitol laws, and the boy would be recompensed by the Crown for his time.

It was meant to be a mercy, for her sake as much as his son's, but – at least in part – he'd done it for the rose. The thing was already half-wilted and nearly trod-upon when he found it, but that headstrong boy had thought to bring it for his Belle, to woo Miss French away from him, and Gold knew then that – unabashedly stupid though it was – her one-time fiancé had meant only to help her. For his father, the elder Frontland, Rum could not stretch to suppose, but the boy thought to bring a flower for the girl he hoped to marry, and for that Gold spared his life.

Miss French was so pleased with him when he offered it to her, so prettily thankful, even commenting on how it reminded her of home. Home. The word soured his thoughts, and the wilting rose – precisely where she'd left it three days ago – shed another petal as it sagged a little further. He found the sweetness of the scent had turned to bitter regret when it dared waft near his nose. Home. Home, home, home.

Gold's eyes had scarcely left the window, drapes now tied aside, since he'd set Mr. Dovey to see her off in the carriage at dawn. That was two days and one night ago, and the second night began to draw close. Manchester was no easy journey – not that she would actually go. It was dangerous, unfriendly, and entirely unheard of for a gentleman's daughter (or a gentleman's ward) to travel into one of these industrial towns alone. He'd never have sent her, if he thought she'd actually go.

That guilt gnawed at his guts beyond even a good whiskey's ability to calm him. Miss French was brave, self-composed. What if she'd wanted to come back to him, only to be waylaid by roughens at the shift-change? What if she'd been abducted or robbed? He'd never forgive himself.

But she wouldn't be harmed, because she hadn't gone to Manchester at all. He'd made it abundantly clear that he expected her to go home.

In a fit of frustration, Gold kicked at the low table where Belle had left the rose, and a clattering of porcelain cups on saucers punctuated by an onslaught of pollen burst through the room. The poor, sad stem had lost all but one of its petals when all was done.

Three days ago, when he'd first seen the thing, he'd thought of white roses rather than this crimson
one. He wanted her, not to ruin her but for her own sake, and he'd thought to marry her if she'd have him. That was the sort of wishful, foolish thinking that destroyed dynasties; he had Bae to think of, and she wouldn't have him anyway. She was not looking for love.

She wanted adventure. Mysteries and romances, if she must, but to see the world and help her father and hear about an old fool's ruined leg, so long as it came with tidings of far-off Spain. It was all he'd ever wanted for Bae, even if the boy wanted none of it, and so he'd given some small part of it to the only other person he loved. He sent her away.

It was for the best, he was sure; he'd have ruined her, in his fluctuating misery about her origins and his own vile habits, he'd have destroyed her. He wouldn't mean to do it, but he knew from experience that his bloodied hands could only ruin the purity of others. He had to send her away, just as he had his son, lest he violate and corrupt goodness so unselfish and kind that it broke his blackguard's heart.

It had once been his goal to destroy the girl, and if he'd succeeded… the mere thought of it brought bile into his throat, and sent him gasping toward the window. The frame fought his attempts to open it, but with a few violent shoves he finally managed to take in a few cleansing mouthfuls of fresh, highland air. He wanted to turn away and hide in the nearest bottle, but there was time left for him to cling to hope, and it was his only guiding thread in the looming, twisting dark.

Baelfire came back to him, even when Gold told the boy that he must not. He always wanted to come back, and (Gold was sure) he hated his father for offering him a deal that ensured he could not. Belle might return too, she might… She would not.

Rumford steeled his nerves, swallowed back another mouthful of bile, and turned to watch as the Scottish breeze loosed the final petal from his stolen rose. He might have pressed it as a keepsake, he realized belatedly, but now it too was lost. Forlorn, Rum turned and looked one last time at the drive. He almost thought he saw a familiar gait, the petite frame of the only Comfort he craved, but it was only a trick of the light.

He thought he'd better shutter the pane again. A few drops of spring rain had drifted in, onto his cheek.

Rum brushed the offensive droplets away with the back of his hand, and looked for the second time at the vespertine specter. He blinked, then looked again. She was less than a mile away. She was coming back.

In a spurt of mania, Gold rang for his maids and set them to the frantic task of righting his study. They cleared the crockery, swept away debris, straightened his things, and fetched a fresh waistcoat and basin for him while he fretted and seethed. Vera and Margie knew better than to ask questions when he was in a rage, and within ten minutes he had fresh clothes, fresh tea, and a fresher face – though nothing would hide the stubble on his cheeks. In the morning, he'd have to call on Mr. Dovey for a shave. Or perhaps… Miss French had offered him a shave once…

To hell with it, it was impossible. He'd grow a beard and be done.

Gold was pacing, clutching at his hands, and so he forced himself to sit at his desk and examine his ledgers, unseeing. It wouldn't serve to let her see him so undone. She'd only think him weak, reconsider, and ask to leave.

Three minutes later, still staring unseeing at his accounts, he heard a soft knock at the door. He turned to look, and watched in from a hazy pupa of stunned disbelief as his own Miss French let herself into the room.
"Back so soon?" he asked, scarcely able to breathe.

"Yes," she smiled, a little out of breath and flushed from her exercise. "Mr. Jefferson wasn't in, but his clerk said to take the lot in one gulp when you're ready."

She placed a small, purplish bottle among his decanters of gin and whiskey.

"Good," he replied, tripping over his words and cursing his tongue. "Good thing. Belle… Miss French, I… you know I've not changed in the three days since you left me."

"No," she acknowledged, pouring two cups of tea before approaching him. "But still, I… I thought you might be happy to see me."

"I am… not unhappy," he managed, accepting the cup she offered him and moving to sit in his usual spot, an over-stuffed wing back facing the fire.

The silence where there ought to be words cut at him like a hot knife, but what could say? He dared not speak of love, nor hope, nor marrying. Not until he knew why… if she… But the words would not come, so he forced himself to think.

Finally, he said, "I've not grown kinder, nor more gentlemanly. Why…"

"That's why, Sir," she answered, cutting him off and settling herself on the arm of his chair. "That's why I decided to stay."

Gold's cup slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor – no matter, it was the one she'd already chipped – and in a rush of passion unworthy of her, he wrapped his arms around her. She let herself slip gently into his lap, resting on his good leg as she tried to comfort him with words he could not comprehend.

It was all he could do to bury his face in her curls and remember to breathe.

XXXVIII. October 19, 1857

My dear Mrs. Mallory,

Mal, my very own darling! The house in Devon is approaching calm and the family's grief need not be so severe as to stop me from some modest entertaining. Won't you join us again, my pet? I could not have borne so great a burden without your stalwart support, and I am certain that you would like to pay His Grace your respects. Rarely a day passes in which I do not pay my own respects along-side his grave, sometimes two or three times in a day, keeping the groundsman busy from so much kneeling and plowing and sowing of seed. I cannot bear that the furrow remains useless and dry now that the spirit is free of all Earthly constraints.

You will like Mr. Humbert, I think. So few men are endowed with so great a gift for tilling, and the ground is now near to bursting with the frothy white baby's breath and sweetest aroma of honeysuckle. He was, I think, a little reluctant to begin so regular and fervent a regime, but I have found that the whims of the Dowager Duchess-Regent of White Hall are not so easily restrained. He disappoints me only with respects to my weeping step-daughter, but – as I think you will understand me – it has not been a loss entirely bereft of these more immediate gains.

Of Lady Blanchard, I'm afraid that there is nothing encouraging to say; her grief keeps her confined to quarters, the poor thing, and I wonder if something might not be done to remedy her ennui. I hate to think her mourning a sign of weakness, but hysteria requires a firm hand and closed door; one of the physicians treating our most loathsome Mr. Glass believes that a long confinement of hysterical
paroxysm and hydrotherapy may set her to rights, eventually. Though, of course, these treatments have been known to take some time to achieve full potency…

I think you, more than anyone I know, will be least surprised to hear of the great difficulties I've had in assuming an active role in the White Hall bookkeeping. The barristers and lawyers His Grace kept in retain are wary of letting any woman examine their numbers and figures, one even dared to suggest that he'd be more confident in Lady Blanchard's counsel, but of course that is impossible as she has not yet achieved her majority.

They see a black veil and think of frailty, but I am not so meek. Until the matter of the male heir and entail is settled to the Crown's satisfaction, White Hall and all its fortunes fall to me. I have begun to suspect… and you will think me silly… but I have begun to suspect that the clerks' reluctance is meant to cover His Grace's dignity, to overcome some deficiency.

My own dear Mal, they make me wonder if His Grace has not left us on the very tight-wire of bankruptcy, as inwardly destitute as Earl Spencer himself! You know as well as I that the figures Mr. Glass quoted me were far from complimentary, but these people – these ludicrous, powder-headed, bull frogs – will not speak in neat figures and sums of money, they can only croak out platitudes and abstractions to me. They would not speak clearly for anything, and it is utterly infuriating.

If speculation is ungentlemanly, trade is ungentlemanly, and any alacrity of accounting is ungentlemanly, how in the Devil's own name do they accomplish anything? For fuck's sake, Mal, I cannot even obtain a reliable accounting of my own dowry! How His Grace could have spent it all remains a mystery, yet if he did not then I do not know what else to think. So, you see, I do need you with me; I may be married to rank and family, but you and I both come from a more sensible breed.

The next man to defy me will be a sorry sort of gelding indeed.

Ah, yes – but speaking of the more noble of these two beasts, I've quite enough in my own purse to keep me and my stables trotting along merrily. There is no question at all of my personal fortunes salvaging the White Hall name, but the lands in the South of England are so well-suited to riding that I would certainly be sorry to leave.

Rocinante is in keen form among all the hedgerows and heather, and – if you bring your own young mount – the pair of us could easily ride out and enjoy the scale of my groundsman's gifts at length. I am not at all jealous of his talents, you see, and very willing to share where my friend has an appetite for overwhelming, sublime beauty.

Even imagining how happy we both might be brings an inner warmth to me. The small hills roll on and on like waves, toward ever-higher peaks, pressing upward so quickly that the breath quite leaves the body and all coherencies are abandoned in the simple pleasure of conquering new territory. I never took such a fancy to hard exercise when His Grace was living, but a widow likes to be alone with her thoughts, and no one questions my love of riding.

I like the sweat and soreness of it, the mess, the hard ferocity of the climb and the swift, sudden joy of descending back into the next valley. Every glen and rock in Scotland bored me, but Devonshire's youth and spring intrigues me. It is all so exhilarating, precisely as you said it should be.

Won't you come and enjoy the fruit of the South with me? There, you see, I've asked you three times now – and I am the Regent of White Hall, no one may refuse me. Well, almost no one. I think I will need every drop of our combined cunning to persuade our mutual acquaintance, G., that
he must be of some use to the estate if His Grace's accountants are even half so useless as I fear they must be.

Yours affectionately,

Lady Regina Blanchard, Guardian of White Hall

XXXIX. Thisbe's Veil

Belle petted Mr. Gold's graying hair as he held her, waiting patiently for his hands not to tremble and for his breathing to transform back into a regular rise and fall of his firm chest from the ragged, gasping sob it had become. Being like this, so close to him, felt wonderful, and she fought against every urge to press herself into his arms and kiss him. It would not be proper. None of it was proper, not in the least, but to kiss a man who was not her family, whom she was not engaged to marry was too much even for Belle's progressive morals.

She had to be the strong one, for both of them. She loved him.

When his arms did not loosen and the alarming newness of it all, the intimate closeness, was not so very overwhelming to her, Belle started to talk to him. Just soft words at first, small, daring endearments, and then a narrative started to form.

She told him of her little adventures on the train platform, of the workers stained black as tar who shoveled coal into the boiler, and of the deafening roar of the whistle. The speed had been more than she could comprehend, having never ridden a galloping horse before, and she was sure the rail would shake her to bits before she ever reached the change-station in Glasgow.

She'd spied the jetties and ship yards of the River Clyde, a mass of working bodies thick as ants in the hill, and even the great dredges, hauling up silt; the thick smoke-towers of the locomotive yards, where the shift-change screamed out louder than even the train's departure whistle; the smoke-tinged spires of old St. Mungo's Cathedral with its green, copper roof, flitting in and out of sight amid the steam and sky-line. Truly, it was the Second City of the Empire.

Belle thought her voice had calmed him a little, so she pressed on, telling of her own clumsy misadventure, leaning out over the platform to see a strange bird pecking stones only to slip and nearly fall into the tracks; Gold only tensed and held her tighter at that, so Belle continued to comb her fingers over him and spoke instead about the sudden gloom of Manchester.

That whole town hung in a sort of dark mist, pouring out of the mills and factories and tainting the atmosphere with a sharp, sooty scent. Belle had needed to press her handkerchief close to her face at first, but had feared offending the people who made the town their home, and so carried on – for the most part – unaided by perfume or linen. Her little blue dress stood out, a bit, but the ladies she glimpsed wore more vibrant tartans and calicoes than Belle would have thought possible, and so she passed without bother, even traveling without a chaperon.

She told him about the room she took, a small bed with the most charming little pillows, and about hiring her very own hansom cab to visit Mr. Jefferson's storefront. She even considered telling him about the kindly old widow who'd helped her find such charming accommodations, but thought better of it. Some words passed only between women, and did not need to be repeated.

How could she tell him that she'd only meant to fetch his medicine, then return home? It had not been in her to leave him suffering without cure, but how could she abandon her own father? It had been Mrs. Humbert's kind words about a woman's strength that comforted and encouraged her, that made her believe a man such as her own Mr. Gold could change.
Belle had never believed that a woman's place was on the moral high-ground, it struck her as unfair that men might be absolved of all wrong-doing, that keeping them civilized was a woman's responsibility, but who would know but a woman happily married for so long? Mrs. Humbert loved her husband so fiercely, she wore the nearly opaque black veil of mourning almost two years after his passing; such a thing was unheard of, but her heart had been buried with him, and so she grieved on and on.

Mrs. Humbert helped immeasurably, and Belle knew her own heart, her own will. She loved him, despite everything, and he loved her – at least a little – or he would never have set her free; the possibility of a happy ending meant everything to her, and if it had taken the sage counsel of someone with more experience in these matters than she, well… that scarcely needed repeating.

Instead, Belle told him how she'd nearly missed her return train; how the tickets were mixed-up, and she'd almost been set for Edinburgh before catching the mistake. Still, she made it to Glasgow, then back to town, and – finally – had been dropped on the road nearest the Sonnachdubh estate.

"So you see, Sir, I am quite alright," Belle finished, running her fingers over his scalp one more time.

"I should never have let you go," he groaned, leaning back and letting her relax her own torso against his. "I'd no idea you'd take me up on that trip to Manchester, you might have been murdered or worse! I only meant…"

"You meant to let me go," Belle filled in when he could or would not complete his own thought. "I know. I do. And I meant to run South at first," she confessed, still unsure how much of that particular story she should divulge. "I didn't want to leave you without your medicine."

Gold's face paled, and she saw a glimpse of the great void she sometimes saw lurking inside of him.

"Say the word, Miss French, and I'll send you home. I swear it." She could tell he meant every word, just as easily as she could tell that it was a torture to make himself say it.

"I believe you," she answered. "But this is where I want to be."

"Something changed your mind?" he whispered, and Belle wondered if she ought to say. No, she decided. If all the world believed that women were so different from men, who was she to refute it again? Maybe some knowledge was just for women, and other bits just for men.

She didn't like it any more than she ever had, but she'd never had a mother to tell her such things, and if the words of a woman happily married for four decades could not be trusted, well… Belle doubted there was any person alive whose opinion on love and marriage would be more sensible.

"I love you," Belle confessed shyly, face going red. "Can you doubt it?"

She felt him go rigid again, and his fingers dug into her hips where his hands once rested. Seconds spanned to centuries, and Belle could hear the drums of fear pounding inside her head. She'd spoken poorly, said too much too plainly, and now he must think her slatternly. If only he'd speak, say anything.

"I'm sorry," she finally choked out, too miserable to prolong the quiet another moment. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said… You must have loved your wife very much, I never meant… Is your leg hurting? If you'll let me up, I'll get your medicine…"

His hands tightened, barely a flinch of resistance, but it was enough to delay her departure. He must
be furious with her, but Belle didn't know if she could bear to turn and look at him, to see the
disgust and shock that must be written on his features. Gentlemen – nobles, for he was ever so
much more of one than the other – did not desire confessions of devotion from their servants. Not
even from servants whose mathematical prowess and companionship they valued. She'd been
immodest, and now it was all ruined.

"Please," Belle begged, fighting back tears. "Please forget what I said, I… I didn't' mean… I'm
sorry. I'm sorry for all of it. Please say something."

"Marry me."

"I'll mix your whiskey, if you'll tell me how many drops you're taking," she pressed on, words
pouring forth instead of the tears she refused to allow. "I think I saw some of the red medicine on
the mantle, or there's the powder if you prefer…"

"Belle," Gold said, his mouth hot on the shell of her ear, hotter even than the furnace of shame
burning her up from within. "Nothing hurts, nothing at all. I'm asking if you'll be my wife. Will
you have me, Belle?"

Her tears did come then, in burning trickles. "Please don't mock me."

"Never," he swore, wrapping his arms around her waist and resting his chin on her shoulder. "I
love you, and if you'll have me, I'll protect you from the world."

"I'm only little and poor, the natural-born daughter of no one," Belle answered, smiling despite her
tears. "I can't need protection from much at all, but I'd have you for yourself, Sir."

"Dammit, woman, call me Rumford. Or Rum, if you prefer. I'll not have a wife who Sirs me, nor
one who M'Lords. I'm a rough-cut devil, a bastard, and a third son who contrived to inherit a title;
you would be equal to a King, Belle, so take pity on your poor fool and tell me, once and for all, if
you will."

"I will."

He kissed her then, softly at first, starting from the corner of her mouth, and Belle gasped when the
tip of his tongue traced the contours of her lower lip. The shame that had so recently consumed her
flared up again, deeper in her stomach, and she could feel the throb of her own heart between her
legs and in her ears.

Rum groaned at her little start, and applied himself with more gusto to the slight gap between her
lips. He slid his tongue tenderly into her mouth, meeting her own for a soft caress, before running
his teeth gently over her lip. The slight suction at her mouth tugged an invisible thread down
through her navel, and – head swimming – Belle reflexively repeated the motions on him.

Belle didn't have time to consider the precision of these new, exciting kisses; her intended made a
noise deep in his throat that left her body aching and damp, and she felt the proof of his own
longing pressing into her leg.

They shouldn't… they needed a chaperon… they…

Rum pushed them both into a more upright position, allowing her to lean back into his arms, and he
turned his attention to the gentle cossetting of her hair, the chaste press of lips against her temple.

"R-Rum?" Belle asked, unsure what he meant to do.
"It's alright, love," he cooed. "I promised to keep you safe. Safe from myself, too."

"Thank you," she sighed, and let herself relax into him, safe from everything.
Chapter 14

XL. Pride

Only the distant, hopeful promise of matrimony gave any relief from his pain, now that Belle was so wholly lost to him. He'd thought of himself: his hopes, fears, and longings. He hadn't spared any consideration for what her assent might mean.

Mrs. Lucas had come to him the very next morning, rigid in her scolding and vindicated in the extreme. They needed chaperoning now. Miss French needed more suitable clothing. She must have a suit of rooms on the other side of the house, far away from his wing. She must have a June wedding. She must take supper and tea in the dining room, not nibble off his trays and bolt down porridge with the servants in the mornings. And, most irritating, he must go through all the proper channels for the ceremony. Running off to Gretna Green was the Southerner's folly, as a Scotsman he had the right to wed with all speed, that very morning if she liked, but Mrs. Lucas insisted that the Scottish laird would not be said to elope with the pretty, English maid.

Gold begrudged Belle nothing that money and bureaucracy could furnish her, be it jewels or chaplains to ensure her dignity, but he ached to hold her as he'd done the night they became engaged. In his mind, he'd envisioned no greater waiting than the days it would take her to return from Manchester. That she might actually come back to him, that he could know her as a husband knew his wife, seemed too wonderful and distant a possibility to contemplate. Yet she did return, and she did love him, and he would know her…

Mrs. Lucas provided a never-ending litany of little sayings, all of which she'd designed to drive him insane. The fiery woman, finding she could not jab him with her knitting needles, needled him in other ways.

"Wed in May and rue the day." "A gown of white, chosen right." "Marry on Wednesday, the best day of all, but Saturday brings no luck at all." "Something borrowed, something blue, and a sixpence in the shoe."

They could not ride out, less the Landau be opened that all could gaze upon them; they could not touch, except to hold hands, less the village gossips take a dislike to Belle; they could not sit, as they had liked to do, conversing amiably in the evenings without Mrs. Lucas' permission. Gold had decided within the first ten minutes of it that there was no divide more tiresome than that of a gentleman courting a lady, especially to one unaccustomed to curtailing himself to the whims of Society.

Of course, Belle was not a lady. She was not even a gentleman's daughter, in the proper sense, though he'd make her a Viscountess in a heartbeat, and she'd shame even the Queen with her unflinching strength. Belle did not object too much to this new intrusion, though he flattered himself that she disliked the loss of touch as much as himself. His fiancé was, as in all things, both patient and kind. The grating punishment of frustrated waiting was, he knew, a monster of his own devising.

He'd found, quite accidentally, that he liked a woman with thoughts and words of her own; he liked less that her genteel independence left him in a constant state of bewilderment. He wanted to outfit her in clothes befitting her rank, a froth of lace and swooning neck-lines to match with any Lady yet alive; she accepted only three plain dresses, of modest cut and color, the likes of which only a girl so wholly divorced from the London Season could prefer, and he'd have kissed her senseless for that if his Cook hadn't harrumphed him. He wanted to provide every little comfort previously
denied her by poverty and cruelty, to hold her close and revel in the majesty of indulging another – the same way he reveled in seeing to Bae's future; she worried that he'd be shamed for accepting her without dowry, thought her father ought to come and give some semblance of jointure so none could mistake her for a fortune hunter. How infuriatingly bothersome that, in securing their future, he'd denied himself comfort.

If he could stand to be blisteringly honest with himself, a barely tolerable circumstance of self-loathing and misery even on the best of days, he had only himself to blame. Mrs. Lucas had the right of it, most likely. Belle had the nobility of spirit and a proud sort of modesty that would've made her a mockery in the tea rooms, where ladies flitted with fans and prejudiced themselves against unfashionable modes of spoon-handling. She had a preference for elegant simplicity and deep thought that awed him, inadequate though he was to appreciate her delicacy, and a mind that could imagine every trial of the Odyssey in stunning detail, but could or would not imagine a rich purse furnished for her pleasure.

His Belle stood as a monument to inner strength, insisting she needed only a small wedding and would have one immediately, though she did want her father… Alas, Mrs. Lucas would not hear of any lacking niceties, and as Mrs. Hopper could hardly speak for frothing, the matronly old spit-fire ruled over them all.

To expose a girl with no practical application of that viper's den that was Society in London to any sort of scandal was a sin; to do it to Belle, a travesty worthy of hanging. The least he could give her now was a wedding – a perfect wedding, for the girl who never thought to marry, but consented to do so anyway, because she… Rumford's mind would not articulate what his heart could scarcely believe.

And so he waited, and the waiting left him aching for her. His enthusiasm for the proceedings (if not the protocol) could not be contained, and if Mrs. Lucas' fretting was meant to calm the mettle and soothe the beast, it had affected the opposite on him. Poppy dulled the worst of it, but flesh betrayed its Master in every sense. He'd grown accustomed, addicted to that sweet, soft girl in his arms, and not to have her made him almost dangerous.

They'd both of them have made a quick matter of it, he was sure – gentle and tender. Somehow the waiting had spoiled all that, and now he almost feared for her when his palm chanced to caress her waist. All of this culminated in a searing pain through his leg, the consumption of poppy and whiskey, and the one sin (in recent memory) for which he actually felt ashamed.

Her letters – all her hopes for reconciliation with her father – lie in ashes at the bottom of his fireplace. When Maurice failed to send his reply, he would comfort her and she would, perhaps, forgive an old wretch his insecurities, in time.

To his son, he said nothing. Better that he wait, and ensure the union forged before summoning his son back to him. And would Bae be happy? The boy had snubbed him entirely since he'd sent him back across the Channel last autumn, offering nary a whiff of reconciliation through Christmas and the New Year, and now… Now it was the warming month of May, and Gold wondered if he hadn't made a mistake.

No, he rationalized, pouring himself a drink. In two decades of vicious capitalism, he'd climbed from nothing – less than nothing – and crawled from that wretched ditch in Spain, taking by force of sheer will-power and hatred every inch of power and standing he could reach. And, when he found himself unable to touch the top-most fruits of security from his place on the earth, he began to climb.

Behind closed doors, they would whisper of an ill-bred, Scotch brute, the Devil come to collect,
hinting at a name none dared speak, of a creature reputed to beat men bloody in the streets and
gnash violently at his meat, and in their grand drawing rooms and parlors they would court his
favor like whores who were hadn't eaten all week. He'd been elevated from obscurity against his
wishes, given an almost gentlemanly education against his liking, thrust into the army with no
opportunity to object, and executed for Treason to the Crown which he did not commit; the thing
that returned dreamed of vengeance, played victim to no one, and feared nothing. It had taken the
defeat of a man to birth a monster, and – as a man who feared losing nothing – he'd learned to trust
his instincts.

Only Bae's birth had given him any ballast on the stormy sea. And now, with Belle so nearly his to
keep…

Instinct was a fickle thing, at times snarling and roaring, and at others in an almost frantic state of
retreat. Instinct told him to privatize, isolate, to keep Fate from snatching away his love, the same
frenzied passion that compelled him to send Bae away. Instinct told him to clutch her tight, unpin
her hair, and revel in the soft beauty who spoke so cleverly and artlessly ingratiated herself to
everybody.

Mrs. Lucas' presence in the evenings prevented any transgression of instinct from happening, but
Gold felt – if he could not honor Belle's wishes in regards to her letters – that he could, at very
least, honor her in the other, usual ways: pearls by the yard, little rings, combs and feathers, silks
and cashmeres, lacy under-pinnings, and the hope of long embraces that turned to still-sweeter
things.

He would like to be married again, to be properly a husband instead of the looming shadow of
obligation he'd been to Bae's mother. That was a marriage borne of duty and ambition, a business
arrangement in its purest sense, and – though he'd never thought of her as a vehicle for sons – it
was the child, rather than her body or companionship, that he valued most after she was dead. Of
Belle he wanted everything, anything that she would consent to give.

When he dreamed of Spain now, it was Belle's face he saw at the end. It was Belle he'd fought and
suffered to protect. Denied even the once-simple joy of burying his face in her hair, he almost
began to dread that she was some Fae-phantom enchanting the space inside his head. All the old
pain welled up around Gold when he denied himself her chaste embraces, the delicious weight of
her against his lap, and the soft strokes of her fingers over his scalp. It could all be overcome – his
pain and lust – with a dab of laudanum in his cup.

"Six drops in whiskey, please," Gold requested, forcing a smile to his face. It was half his normal
dose, but he'd indulged in two or three cups earlier, and – deprived of touch – he found that tea no
longer comforted him as it used to do.

"So many?" Belle asked, lifting the small, red bottle up to her eyes. "Ought you to? Only, I don't
think it's absolutely wise. This bottle was almost full yesterday, and now it's nearly empty."

"You think we have an opium thief, Miss French? Perhaps I should search the pockets of our
sticky-fingered Gidge."

Belle giggled at the Housekeeper's expense, and then looked a little ashamed of herself as he
expected she would. She liked his little quips, and he liked that she liked them. Mrs. Hopper,
however, liked nothing, least of all the elevation of her one-time scullery maid to future Mistress of
the estate.

He'd happily have run both elder Hoppers out of Scotland after the fiasco with the hounds, their
surly charm long since faded from memory, but he'd promised to do something for the boy – Bae's
friend, Archie – and it hardly seemed fitting to deprive the young man of his family, whatever their shortcomings.

"I think Mrs. Hopper would rather you didn't," she replied. "She wouldn't stand for it. But... I do think you're in more pain than you're letting on. And, well, it's hardly a secret that opium weakens the constitution, is it? You're not quite yourself, Sir."

"Am I Sir now?" he teased, ignoring the objection. "Will you demand I release you from our engagement and send Mrs. Lucas back to the kitchen to scowl?"

The older woman made a sort of disgruntled scoff in the back of her throat, shuffling herself like a roosting hen, before settling back into her chair. She made an adequate, if ornery, chaperon, and – loath though Gold was to admit it – he was grateful of it tonight. Her Grace had given him no end of fits, enough to prevent him taking his business and household to London for the inevitable, infuriating Season, and he was not about to sacrifice his wife's reputation to a wicked Lady's avarice and caprice. Ideally, he would draw the drapes, hold his Belle close to him, and – along with Bae – their own, secluded sanctuary would keep them safe; in reality, no matter how the tiresome waltz of courtship pained him, he wouldn't expose his fiancé to gossip for the sake of his own lust.

Belle's voice brought him back from that dark, secret place where the world and reason melted away. "I only meant..."

"Aye, love," Gold reassured her, pouring himself a drink and daubing in the tincture of poppy. The whole glass took on an almost fiery shade of amber, richer and more sinister than the peaty spirits alone, and less like a syrupy blood than the poppy alone.

He replaced the empty bottle on the bar, next to an assortment of similarly-sized, red-stained bottles, all of them approaching empty, and the new one, from Jefferson, in an alarming shade of purple.

"It's an old hurt, and an old treatment tends to lose potency as it goes," he told her, struggling to add a conversational lightness to the words. "I'd deny you nothing, Belle, but you must allow that I know what's best for me in respect to these things."

"Yes," Belle agreed, though he could see the shade of uncertainty upon her face. Still, despite all that, she trusted him. That trust meant everything. "How did you hurt it?" Belle asked him, as they settled into their respective seats. "You never told me."

"Ah," Rum replied, caught in his own web of promises and half-lies. He owed her a story. "Not much to tell, I'm afraid. I caught a bit of friendly fire by mistake – as you said, in Spain – so Her Majesty saw fit to discharge me."

"And you've carried the scar all this time?"

"Oh yes, darling." Rumford whispered, downing the remainder of his whiskey. "Always."

XLI. November 5, 1857

Gold,

It is, as you say, your own coin to squander, but I cannot accept that – after so loyal a service as I have bestowed upon you – you mean to refuse me even some scant allowance to re-forge the alliance between our two families. Have I not been the very spirit of acquiescence? Is a word from Her Grace, The Duchess of White Hall, not the very thing to ease your squirm through London?
As to your reasons, allow me to refute:

"Our arrangement broke on the breaking of your marriage…" Nonsense. There are ties more binding than matrimony. What of our auld alliance? What of loyalty born of necessity? And am I not the Dowager Duchess-Regent of White Hall? I assure you, great pains were taken to make it so, and so I shall remain until the heir is of age. I've not yet met the lad, but they tell me he's not yet weaned - you've no choice, not for some decades, but to trek with me.

And then there's some drivel about the "smell of gunpowder and guilt on Her Grace's best lace…" If you mean to imply that I have somehow contrived not to be married, then you are a libelous prig. The Monster, Glass, killed His Grace for reasons unknown to anybody; let it be enough that he has confessed his crimes and been sent away quietly. You will not question my innocence again, nor ever again imply that circumstances of my marriage ending have made me unworthy.

I am a Duchess, the Guardian of the White Hall estate. I am worthy by law and by divine right of matrimony, every inch of me nobility.

"You will be treated as a figure of suspicion and scandal in Town, and I will not pay so great a sum only to watch you hang…" Oh yes, and then you spoke of the economy of remaining at home and garroting myself from an apple tree. So gentlemanly, Rumford. You, my Lord of Drink and Gambling, will not deign to throw your fortunes away on a respectable, titled Lady? All of London adores me; the Blanchard name inspires a loyalty older than the days of Charlemagne!

The Season will resume in little more than two months, and you would have me believe myself at the precipice of destruction. It is utterly absurd, Sir. Speak to me instead of certainties, of bank-notes and drawing rooms. How am I to attire myself and my retinue? How to fit-out my townhouse? It is hard enough upon my health that the damned old martyrs dressed all in black demand I sit a year in their dusty parlors, not to dance or ride out in the Park, but to now add to that some whisper of scandal? It will not be tolerated, even of you.

And, lest we neglect the most loathsome piece you have to say about me, "I had better sink my money into American cotton, as that, at least, would be a more remarkable waste." If you hope to ridicule me for the current Panic setting in to the American Railways, then I am happy to report your venomous barb has missed the mark. Slander my spirit, my station, my sincerity… but never slight my wit.

We two have agreed, allied ourselves against the grossest enemies. So it has been, and so it will be. Some histories run too deep for publicity. Are we not a nigh unstoppable tempest when unified? Will you reduce us both to some petering breeze? Cora lies banished in the Indies; His Grace has left us, and an heir found if my solicitors are to be believed – young, a boy barely out of the nursery, and that suits us both, I think; a friend tells me you've even taken to terrorizing maidens and ruining families – as pointless and silly and public an endeavor as any for which I might need money. And yet you call me witless? You question my cunning?

I am no man's fool. Your atrocities are beyond reproach, an immunity that cannot come of fortune alone, and for that you ought to fall at my feet in thanks. You need me, and for the moment it suits me to rely upon your generosity. I believe your common sense will prevail over whatever stingy malaise has so far steeled you against me, but know this: I am free to seek another sponsor.

What will come of you and your legacy then, I wonder? Rumford, I have made an ally of you, but you would do well to recall what becomes of my enemies too. It is in our nature to help one another. If you will not play the cat's claw to my lion's tooth, my roar will shake you loose from the world and rattle you through to hell. What have I to fear from the likes of you? The lion does not
fear the jackal, though both may profit by the same swift kill.

You see, you have made me angry at you, ridiculous man, and I am all red in tooth and claw. Might we not set aside this quarrelsome misery and focus instead on our mutual gains?

The situation is quite as dire as I have let on, and I hope – if I am frank – that you will spare me your quips and get to the point. A banker's cheque for two thousand pounds would do much to soothe my wounded pride.

I am scarce two months a widow, and already out of pocket. His Grace was the proudest sort of peacock ever to walk the earth, and there's nothing to be spared from the estate's income – such as it is – for the simple needs of Coventry Garden. My own purse is empty – it could not be helped, His Grace scattered my dowry and I am not authorized to sell off his properties. Oh, that pleased my opposition; it did, indeed, and thank God Mrs. Mallory was with me or I might have behaved rashly.

You contend that you have given me all you meant to give, and that I have spent it poorly. That hurts me. Accounts had to be settled, Rum… needs must, and so it is done. Were His Grace even half as pragmatic as me, were he not too proud to speak as I do of the pound – simply and plainly – then all might have been avoided. I am not accustomed to asking for anything at length, my station has quite spoiled me.

I have done all that I can for myself. The properties kept vacant, those sad mausoleums to the first Duchess' memory, are now rented; the crofters are taxed as highly as they can in the new laws; any man of Leopold's who can be let go has been given notice, exchanged where needed for a more loyal staff; yet I find that I've nothing to mortgage, for the bankers will not trek with me on the White Hall credit, and I may not speculate, nor invest in factories, for the vulgarity of it sends the old Black Veils to fits.

The vultures of the old aristocracy are dusty relics of a by-gone age, and His Grace retained only the worst sort to vex me; if they do not respect me, then they will fear me, but for that I need funding. And, to add atop all of that, I believe His Grace's daughter seeks to marry before her majority, and – if you believe it – expects to be presented with a dowry. So, you see, I must go to London! I must go in style, and with all haste, for the weapons afforded me in the oncoming struggle are all connection, recognition, and niceties. Hairpins and collars are my engines of war, and I wield them masterfully. It is essential that I and young Master Henry make a lasting impression as the new faces of the Duchy.

You have always sought as ardently as I to be accountable to nobody, to be free from their fetters. We helped one another, once upon a time, and whole dynasties fell in our wake. Now, in my hour of need, are you finally so secure that you will not answer me? Are you unanswerable even to Cora's own little Gina, whom you once treated more kindly than anybody?

You owe me your fealty, and it is to both our benefit that you help me, but if you will not do it on the merits of good sense, then do it for whatever scrap remains of your human decency. Shall we not stir up a gale once more, for the sake of old memories?

I await word from you banker,

R.M.B.

XLII. μουριά κόκκινο

The clocks had been out of synchronization for days, one or two still chiming their best guess at the
hour, when Mrs. Lucas shuffled Belle off to bed, but – by the stout little timepiece in her quarters – she knew it was not more than half past ten.

"I'll send Ruby up to you, Miss," the hard-faced, unflinchingly kind matron said.

"Actually, would you mind sitting with me for a few minutes?" Belle asked, the words coming out clumsily and unsure. Of course Mrs. Lucas would remain if she insisted, though Belle knew as well as anyone that a servant's personal time was precious. Still, she had questions, and not the kind that Ruby could help with.

"What do you need, Miss?" she replied, tired eyes softening, and setting Belle at ease.

"I was only wondering if any post had come for me," Belle started. "I've asked Rum, but all he's got are letters from the companies he holds stakes in, and a few from friends…"

"Friends?"

"Well, maybe that's not the right word. From Lady White Hall, Earl Spencer… you know, acquaintances. But it's been nearly a week, and I wondered if the post carried any word from my father?"

"No, Miss, none that I know of. Ought there to have been?"

"Well, that's just it," she said, feeling the pricks of tears at her eyes, "I don't know. He might have washed his hands of all this, Rum… Mr. Gold says. But I'm afraid he's trying to protect me from whatever it is."

"You don't trust him?" Mrs. Lucas asked her, eyes critical. "I'm not saying it's unwise, pet, but I'd think on that. It won't get better with matrimony, and you can trust that."

"It's not that I don't trust Mr. Gold, really it isn't," Belle blurted all at once, the words rushing out, each syllable uplifting her from an oppressive weight. "It's silly, I know, I just thought I'd have heard one way or the other by now. I'd wanted…"

"There's no sense pretending this will be anything like a typical wedding, Miss French. Is he worth all that it will cost you? Can you be happy with him?"

"I love him," Belle answered simply. "But I love Sir Maurice too, and please don't think I'm blind to either of their faults. I think I know better than most what it means to compromise for love, I just…"

Mrs. Lucas' face softened again. "You're just not sure if you'd rather believe the worst of your fiancé or believe the man that raised you has shut you out," she finished with a sage frown. "It's a hard world, Belle. We don't usually get everything we want."

"Do you think he'll forgive me some day?" she asked, and her voice warbled on the verge of sobbing.

"A parent could forgive their child most anything. You do know about Ruby's mum?" It wasn't a question, not really, so Belle stilled her face and waited for the older woman to talk.

For a few moments, the silence stung between them. Then, Belle choked back her fears, met Mrs. Lucas' gaze, and answered in the affirmative with a firm nod. They'd never spoken openly of Miss Lucas' situation, only Vera and Margie used to gossip and tease Ruby, but they stopped when… Belle felt wretched to realize that they probably hadn't stopped, she'd only been spared their
company by her new duties, and Ruby refused to buckle under the brunt of it all.

Belle hated them then, the cruel gossips who made a little girl ashamed to want a mother's love, all because her mother had – in the end – been reduced to prostitution.

"That girl caused me no end of heart ache, and I don't pretend to condone what she did," began Mrs. Lucas. "But if she came back today, I'd scoop her up and never let her go. You're not some dance-house girl, nor a kept mistress, Miss Belle. You're set to be married, and I've got no intention of letting you ruin yourself. But people will talk, and they'll say every horrid thing Ruby's ever heard, but they won't corner you in the pantry like a couple of red-headed vultures. Oh no, they'll titter like proper Ladies and flit their fans, and then – in their tacky little parlors – they'll have a good dig.

"But I can say one thing for Rumford Gold: he doesn't give one fig for any one of those ladies, and there's not a single one of them that's rich and brave enough to refuse him if he came calling. So, if you love him, if you won't change your mind, then you buck-up and bear it. You hold your head up and you..." Mrs. Lucas' voice hitched in her throat, and Belle instinctively wrapped her arms around her shoulders.

For a moment, Ruby's Gran slumped against Belle, then – with a steely resolve – she righted herself, sat tall as any Queen on any throne, and soldiered on.

"You've just got to carry on. Even when the folks who scorn you are the ones who should only ever have shown you love, you keep your head up and know that you didn't do wrong. Your Papa will come around. Even if you'd fallen as far as my own girl fell, he'll come 'round. Even if... even if it takes until he's very, very old."

"I'm sure your daughter knows that you love her," Belle murmured when they'd both dabbed at their eyes and commented on the dust in the room.

"I hope so," Mrs. Lucas said, solemn. And, without another word, she quit the room.

Belle hadn't sensed the gruff Cook's hurt before, but now it stung her heart. She wanted to be a wife for Rumford's sake, but she'd been annoyed with Mrs. Lucas' meddling as much as (she suspected) he was. She hadn't understood... And she'd thought Ruby was doing so well, because she could read and write now, but the girl wasn't well at all, was she? She'd even started to say, if Belle had been listening properly, that she didn't see the point in learning when she was just... just what? Just the whore-born kitchen maid, granddaughter of the Cook.

Belle felt herself torn between selfish comfort and burgeoning guilt. She'd been teaching Ruby and Archie every morning, yet hadn't spared a thought for their day-to-day lives since she'd become engaged to Mr. Gold. So far removed from that world of scrubbing pans and mangling the laundry, she'd fallen complacent in only a week's time. No, it was before that – when she'd first become his clerk, after playing the eccentric valet.

It was not Rumford's fault, his attitudes remained unchanged, but her own deficiency. He ordered his servants' as suited his needs, paid them for their trouble, and he'd sufficient to see that all his demands were filled promptly, neatly, and without qualms. Even the dress she wore, a navy confection designed for simple evening-wear, had been started and completed almost magically, precisely as she'd described it to the tailors.

She refused to become the lethargic, preening coquette of his aristocratic lifestyle. Marriage was not something Belle had ever thought to want for herself, but she wanted that elusive, wonderful intimacy she felt with Rum to blossom into something more: a union grander and sweeter by far.
Belle had not agreed to be his bride for want of lands, fortune, or title, and he'd not asked her for want of heirs or dowry.

Rumford loved her, and he'd capitulated to her desires in the mode and manner of her habits and garments. This man, who was not accustomed to compromise with anyone, did not give her ample freedoms; rather, he never let her doubt that she was – in all things – the mistress of herself.

He'd have dressed her in what she considered ostentation, but which the seamstresses all insisted was the most elegant of fashion. Simplicity suited her, on the whole; the novelty of clothes that fit, even those bright indigo dresses she'd worn for so long, was not so easily forgotten. She'd come to him in a rag of a dress, re-fit and let-out golden silk that (as far as she knew) still lingered somewhere in the confines of her little, attic room. If he'd had his way, the whole of her new, navy dress would've been done differently, but she'd never thought twice of defying him. Had she perhaps dis pleased him in her refusals, as oblivious to his troubles as to Ruby's? And, if so, did that explain the sudden increase in laudanum consumption?

Perhaps she was ill-suited to marriage, as much as to friendship. She'd fundamentally misunderstood so much in her life time, would the simple fact of love overcome the deficiencies she was only now aware of?

Ruby found her in knots, and as the girl loosed her stays and helped her from the voluminous skirts, Belle resolved to right her past neglects rather than indulge in melancholy, of use to no one.

"How are you getting on, Ruby?" she asked, unpinning her hair from the comfort of her dressing gown.

"Very well. I read that poem, like you told me," Ruby replied, but the words sounded hollow.

"But how are you getting on the rest of the day?" Belle asked her, turning from her vanity to look the young woman in the face.

"Mrs. Hopper is mad…" she paused, as if searching for a word. "Mrs. Hopper is livid, which is a better word for mad, about the wedding, and she's still not too pleased with me and Archie doing lessons, but I got to run Warg through the meadow yesterday."

"What about the other maids? Are Vera and Margie…"

"Oh, who cares about them!" Ruby snapped. "They're mean and stupid, and they don't even know about fishing or shooting or skinning hares. Granny says not to listen to them, less the stupid is… end… endemic, or something."

"Well," offered Belle, as she moved to comb and braid Ruby's hair for the evening, "I thought maybe you'd like a day away from the other maids. If you like, you can come to town with me tomorrow? I know it's not as good as running around with Warg, but I'm being fit for my wedding gown, and I'd like the company."

"Really!?" Ruby asked, cheering immediately.

"Of course," Belle grinned. "I'd like to spend some time with you, just talking. Like we used to. Rumford – Mr. Gold – is good company, but I don't think he understands everything."

The next morning, Belle bid her farewell to her fiancé and left for the village with Ruby and Mr. Dovey. She'd told Rum, a little coyly, that she didn't know the first thing about marriage or weddings, so he ought to give the tailor orders for anything he liked.
The seamstresses went about with the usual amount of prodding and tugging, and Ruby had a disbelieving look of amusement on her face before it was all complete, but Belle endeavored to be patient. The style of gown most in fashion required a corset that left her faint, a cage beneath her skirts, and a thick veil of lace; the finished garment, of course, would not be ready for some days, but Belle bore it all with what she hoped was grace. She barely recognized the cinched, padded, draped thing struggling in the mirror to breathe, but she could tolerate the new shape for a single, festive day.

It was a small gesture, letting a husband choose a wedding dress for his wife, but she hoped it would help with any unspoken discontentment he'd been suffering. She didn't mind a lot of ribbons and ruffles, honestly, so long as he was happy, and wasn't it a wife's duty to spare her husband's dignity.

Belle certainly didn't know how else to go about becoming someone else's comfort, compass, and strength.
Chapter 15

This chapter contains graphic descriptions of domestic violence. Reader discretion is advised.

XLIII. Other Poisons

"Miss French, are you quite well?" Rum asked as his gaze strayed across the room. He almost hadn't recognized her when she returned from the tailor, her little silhouette stepping out of the carriage amid a sea of skirts that nearly swallowed her. She'd found something that suited her simplicity, he'd noted, resplendent with every trick the seamstresses had gleaned from the fashion plates coming out of London.

She'd been a girl to his jaded eyes when he met her, clothed in an outdated dress that barely fit her, but his Belle had blossomed as his prejudices wilted. To his eyes, she was more beautiful than her tales of Helen in the plain-cut livery and slender-paneled tea dresses that she preferred; in the most fashionable and luxurious evening gown, the clothing that she deserved, he could almost forgive himself for meaning to harm her.

"Only a little breathless," she replied, pressing an open palm beneath her bosom. "The gown is lovely. Thank you."

"Don't thank me just for clothing you," he begged her. He longed to escape the memory of her being switched in ratty silks, half-starved while he slept under thrall of laudanum. "Husbands are meant to do that much, at least."

She inclined her head of chestnut curls ever so slightly in assent.

"You're owed much in the way of finery, Belle, and I intend that you shall be denied nothing…" Nothing but her father, her friends and family to steal her away from him. He could not find the words to succinctly convey the depth and depravity of his selfishness, and the lie died on his lips.

"Thank you," she said again, voice still quieter than was her custom.

"You do look lovely, though. Lovely, but unhappy?" he asked, eyes critical. She'd eaten next to nothing at supper, and her gait seemed a little unsure, for all that he'd hoped to provide Belle with everything a lady might like, to reassure her security.

The garment was tailored precisely to her, silk dyed a tasteful mulberry color, with a subtle, slightly darker pattern of stripes. The limited bows and ruffle served to pad out her figure at the chest and sleeves, drawing upward and outward to accentuate her shape. She would be the envy of any twit in the Red Book, something he knew from experience would make even the most melancholy of spinsters happy.

"It's only the new corsetry," Belle grinned, a smile – he noted – that did little to brighten her face. "They tell me I must sleep in my stays to reduce my waist and practice walking with the cage, or I won't fit my wedding gown. I think you'll like it, the seamstress said it's just the thing in London, and I picked a lace patterned with roses, though the shopkeeper didn't much care for the look of it. I hope that will be serviceable?"

"You must please yourself, of course," he told her, finishing his first glass of whiskey and going to fill another. She must please herself in all things, whatever he could offer must be hers for the asking, and surely she understood that he meant to deny her nothing for all the patience and
sacrifice she'd afforded him?

Gold's leg pained him a bit, despite the cane, and he added a few drops of laudanum to his drink. Jefferson's laudanum had potency far greater than the mixed spirits more commonly imbibed, though it was still weaker than a dram of pure opium, and nothing at all compared to the numbing properties of chloral.

"I'm sure I'll get used to it. It's only the severity of the new, steel stays and the curve of the cut. My old ones were much more simply made, but not at all useful for a bride who wants to look beautiful for a husband."

It was on the tip of his tongue to declare her the queen of loveliness, to send her up to change, but Mrs. Lucas ruined everything – as was her wont.

"For God's sake, you two will give them fits in London! Listen to you, carrying on about a woman's under-things like a couple of moon-calves. Gentlemen ought not speak about such things, and certainly not to little maids. It's scandalously bad of you both."

"Corsets are hardly secrets, though, are they?" Belle asked, looking a little ashamed of herself. "Gentlemen do know that ladies wear them. They must know, or how else do our clothes stay up?"

"They know a fair bit more about them than that they're worn, I'll wager, but what's discussed between men at a club is certainly nothing you or I need to hear in a salon," Mrs. Lucas huffed, and the subject was closed with finality.

Rum glared at the woman over his cup. He knew more than enough of painted women in bright, satin stays and full, short skirts; he knew the impracticality of a wife who meant to have her husband perform his duties while she remained half-clothed; he knew the opulent, indulgent pornography of the so-called gentry; he knew the impotence of an opium-eater, and by equal measures the craven need and abnormal virility of one in recovery.

His wife, however, should not fear herself wanting in respect to any of them, nor feel that she might be discussed at Club like some Can Can dancing harlot. To envision Belle, soft and muzzy as he'd once seen her – barefoot, in night clothes, wasted in his fickle demand for a midnight cuppa – and think that he might kiss her thus, touch her crowing, curling glory, and – if he did not disgrace himself – perhaps hear her sigh contentedly, happy to find their marriage bed not so burdensome as a maiden feared it might be…

Gold spared a glance to the little, purple bottle full of Jefferson's newest concoction. He'd given up hope of a singular cure in the mayhem and strain of their hunting party. The powder dulled his hurts and invigorated his body, but it left him craven and weak, the joint intolerably swollen from exertions best avoided by old, crippled bastards; future doses, even in increased volume, failed to meet the same threshold of potency.

He might gain another burst of usefulness from the druggist's latest "miracle," though, and – whatever it cost him in pain on the morning – if it meant he might make some account of himself to his wife, if it meant that he could give Belle even one night untainted by the ungainly, damaged flesh for which he'd once blamed her, he would endeavor to deserve her. If he swallowed the little bottle's contents in a single gulp on his wedding day, he could hope to give her one night – a single memory – of a husband who was neither impotent nor broken.

Belle's voice drew him out of his reverie, back to the room, and he took another sip from his cup.

"Will we go to London at once, do you suppose?" Belle asked him, squaring her shoulders and
struggling to sit up a little more primly. "When we're married, I mean."

"Would you like to?" he asked, gulping down the second whiskey.

He hadn't given much consideration to a honeymoon, though he had some obligation to the Season, to purchase property or collect on debts in the gambling halls. This year he'd opted to remain in Sonnachdubh with Belle, rather than watch as Her Grace made a mockery of herself and tried to bankrupt them both. A simple act of Christmas charity had ensured that Lady White Hall found no quarter in Town, a simple problem, simply solved, but by the onset of '58 he'd been entirely too content in his lair, with Belle, for the mad pomp and profits of Town to draw him out.

A chime in one of his distant, discontinued salons tolled midnight, the last of the clockwork sentinels still struggling onward without regular winding; it was not half ten, by his own mantel piece, but the rest of the house had fallen out of harmony, most of the clocks now silent, until only one or two were left conflicting.

"I'm not sure. I'd like to see the Botanical Gardens, I think. And the British Museum, and the Royal Society lectures, and the Round Reading Room – they say they built it with room for one million books," she told him, and at last a genuine smile graced her face.

"But I'm not sure I would like to live there for very long. Everyone always remarked how dirty it was, and Manchester nearly choked me. And… I'm afraid I'd do something shameful without meaning to. Judge Frontland despised my country manners, and he was only a country gentleman himself. I'd hate to embarrass you, Rum. That, more than anything, I would hate. A wife is meant to be strong for her husband, and genteel under scrutiny, isn't she?

"Oh, but of course, I will try to adjust quickly! If you'd have me go to London, I'm sure I could find some instructive magazines to read, and perhaps we could employ a widow in need of income to school me?"

He could tell she was scrambling not to let her opinions irk his pride or disrupt his rank, and Rumford hated himself, then, for putting her in a position to feel inadequate, to curtail herself to one as wretched as he. It was the same fate he'd feared for Bae, and those old fears cut him to the quick, hurt so sharply he could scarcely breathe.

He poured himself a third measure of laudanum, watered slightly with whiskey.

For the rest of the evening, they chatted amiably about what may or may not pass in London, about what she could expect as a Viscount's Lady, and he tried to assure her that she could never humiliate him. His Belle was too good by half for anyone to capture her in matrimony, but he'd won her love – somehow – and he would not give it up for anything.

She departed with a soft kiss to his cheek, leaving him deep in his cups and uncertain if he'd frightened her or put her at ease. Of course they would not go to London if it displeased her; he might conduct his own business in a few, brief journeys. They would not remain at Sonnachdubh, either, where the stains of the past hung heavy over the place; he held townhomes and estates aplenty, she could have her pick of the Kingdom – of the continent, if she chose, and perhaps he might even bring home Bae.

Everything that saddened Belle, he realized, was done solely for his sake. She'd forfeit her family, her friends, and even – for a time – her dignity, yet she'd loved him. By some happy accident, she loved him, and it was almost more than he could believe. No person deserved even a fraction of the joy Belle gave him, and he'd taken that sweet, unassuming love and tried to squash it into a shape and contract that she did not want.
Other women expected jointure, trunks of fine clothing, the best furniture, freshly turned-out jewels, and every other manner of plumage to declare their new rank to the world. But other women did not love him, and he certainly did not harbor anything but wary suspicion for them. All of it was wrong, from the clothes she'd so plainly adopted to please him to the assurances about London, and more the fool him for not seeing it, for letting it carry on. From his hazy fog of poppy-laced Scotch, he found a sudden clarity before quitting the room for bed, feet moving mechanically down the labyrinthine corridors.

His dreams bit at him, showed his lovely bride crushed to death by her stays beneath their wedding bower, as surely as though he'd smashed his rifle stock into her.

Gold struggled to free her, to kiss the breath back into her lungs, as the wedding guests screamed and their little hands beat at him. The nightmare churned and kicked at him as he sweated through his clothes, but he found a way to bind it and finally passed out – with either a corpse or a bride to clutch and keep old monsters at bay.

XLIV. December 31, 1857

Mal,

I must apologize for quitting London so suddenly; it must have seemed the height of poor taste to impose upon your hospitality, only to vanish without so much as a word. It is only that I couldn't bear to spend the New Year in amongst those who scorn me.

You must have noticed that I did not receive a single card or call since coming to Town? I am snubbed, Mal. Snubbed, like some brazen slut of a girl caught with a hand down the Archbishop's trousers.

Your lot might have welcomed me into the circle of widows and dowagers, even so close to His Grace's passing, for all manner of sins may be forgiven in the name of charity, might it not? I'd thought to be free of His Grace, finally, and to shore up my strength; certainly that much liberty is not greed, but rather the right of one done with all manner of worldly suffering.

Only now, I find nearly a week too late, that he's made impossibly lavish contributions in mine and my horrid step-daughter's name that we might be excused to grieve privately. You've seen for yourself the intrigue it caused when I dared to step out the other evening – and so I cannot remain. We have our old acquaintance to thank for that, I think, and that is a hurt I expect him to repay three-fold.

You will find me at home in Devon, should you care to call, penned in by wet nurses and Lady Blanchard's beaus. The babe, at least, I will endeavor to love, for he is to be as my own son, now that his disgraced mother's been found worthy of the mad house.

As for the other, I must hope that Earl Spencer will demand that the understanding my step-daughter has entered with his sole, surviving son be broken; they are both equally destitute, after all, and the penniless cannot hope to marry for affection where only an income is wanted. Of that much, I am certain; that is one miserable tale whose ending I know well.

Speaking of such tales of woe, was there not a destitute gentleman's ward of some interest to you three or four months ago? I have had a thought as to who she might be, and I wonder if something might not be done for the poor, sweet thing.

Best of wishes to you in the New Year – do not be too long away from us in the South, Dover Beach in winter is lovely if there's a bit of snow.
Regrets,

Gina

**XLV. Pyramus' Blade**

Every stage of panic had been, gone, come again, and faded to exhaustion. She'd thrashed, she'd begged, she lie still and cried herself dry, only to accept that she was going to be brutalized for a few crushing hours of ennui before thrashing herself almost bloody again. Without her hands, she could not shift him, and those had ceased to burn and throb some hours ago, the circulation and night chill rendering them numb. The bruises she could see ran the length and breadth of her arms, and she sat in sick fascination, wondering if he knew his own strength or if she was merely weak.

For hours she'd done nothing but struggle and scream, finally attracting the Housekeeper's attention just as rosy-fingered dawn crept into the horizon. Mrs. Hopper had looked down on her smugly, sourly, then turned her back and shut the door. Belle knew then that no one else would come to help her.

Belle had nearly broken her own wrists trying to slip the make-shift bonds shackling her to the bed-post, but the full weight of Rumford's body pressing down on her own, in tandem with the satin sash of her dressing gown, offered no escape. The fierce and unexpected battle in the night left them both scratched and bruised, though Rum had yet to wake from his stupor; she'd known only panic as he stumbled into her bed chamber, wrestled her into submission, and tore the corset and night clothes from her body.

Disgust and terror choked her with equal measure when he wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled into her naked chest. Her pink-tipped breasts bore a heavy brush-burn from where his whiskers had worried them, and her bladder felt full to bursting, but none of her pleas could rouse him. Belle didn't know if she felt relief or revulsion, but she knew Mr. Gold was still breathing.

"Please, someone help me!" she shouted, loud as her cracking voice could muster. "Ruby? Mrs. Lucas? Anyone!!?"

There was no point to it; Mrs. Hopper had seen her disgrace, had assumed what Belle had feared before he passed out – that he'd come in the night to ravish her – and the cruel woman had washed her hands of the matter. If she could not free herself before he woke, would he continue to force her?

The man she knew and loved would release her; the man she knew and loved would not have attacked her.

He'd been drunk on more than spirits, she could smell it, had seen him drinking the night before. It was a stench so vile it nearly gagged her if she stopped to let herself think on it, proof that Demons lived in bottles, and that she'd done them both a disservice by ignoring it. He'd needed help – she knew it – and to spare his pride had left him to his own devices, to soothe old hurts in his own way, and now he'd ruined it all.

The exploits of drunkards were well known, but if whiskey had piqued his lust, then laudanum had rendered him immune to all but the lull of sleep, and now he would neither budge, nor rouse, nor hear her as she screamed. Surrounded by a house full of servants, abed with a man who'd once professed his love, Belle had never felt more lost.

Humiliation and shame brought her back to tears again as she lost control of her urine, and finally she lie – cold, wet, and broken – with only regret to console her.
Gold still did not relinquish his hold.

The sun hung low in the sky, the whole room ripe with the stench of their combined excretions, before he began to move against her.

"Rum," Belle sobbed, her voice raw from use. "Rum please let me up."

"'S warm," he mumbled, burrowing his face into her, and she lurched away from him, the effort setting every weary fiber of her body alight.

The places he'd rubbed her raw stung worst of all, and she tried again to wake him. "I promise I shan't be cross," she offered. "I – I promise, if you let me up now I… Please wake up, Sir. Please. I don't want this, please…"

"Belle?" he groaned. A pair of bleary, brown eyes came up, unfocused, and began to spin around the room.

"Please, Rum…” Belle begged him, finally breaking down into a helpless sob. She should have been stronger for him, but how could she now? Everything lie shattered around them.

Belle winced and clenched her eyes shut as he trembled over her, then her hands were free and she flung herself from the bed to curl up and hide in the corner. The room exploded around her, a shouting, frenzied howl that she recognized as Rumford, and Belle did all she could to make herself small and avoid contact with the beast.

The smallest speck of rationale not consumed by terror told her that he was not shouting at her, not angry with her, and she peeked out over her knees for a moment. It was funny: her memories of what followed played as a muted pantomime of shadow, but as long as she lived, she would always remember the setting sunlight streaming through the window, dust stirred up in the air, as one of the slowly dying clocks tolled out three o'clock from somewhere in the bowels of the house.

Later – hours, maybe, she was never sure – she finally found herself in a hot bath, being gently sponged by Mrs. Lucas, in a suite of rooms that were not her own.

"Is he…?" Belle asked, choking back a wave of nausea and fighting to remain upright.

"He's gone," Mrs. Lucas assured her. "You're safe, and he won't be coming near you again. You'll go home in the morning, back to your family, with enough money to do as you please. There was no blood on the sheets."

That signified something, Belle knew it did, but she just couldn't think. "I shouldn't have…"

"This was not your fault," the old cook snapped with a sudden vitriol that Belle had not expected. "That bastard regrets and denies it with all his heart, but it's him that's sick inside. None of this was your fault."

"No one came to help me..." And that was the crux of it. If it was not her fault, why had they all denied her aid?

"Nay," Mrs. Lucas murmured. "And I'm sorry. They had the nerve to lock us in the Servant's Hall and keep the truth of it from Mr. Dovey. If Gidge Hopper's still breathing by the time Mr. Gold's done whipping her, it'll be mixed blessing indeed."

"Stop him!" Belle begged. "Please stop him. It's not her fault either; she's only petty and mean. I won't let him kill Archie's mother to drive his own guilt away. Please, Ginny. Please. We've had
enough horrors today."

That request stunned the older woman, but she helped Belle from the tub and hurried down to pass on her plea. No blood upon the sheet. Let there be no blood in the whole of it, then; let it not end any redder than it already seemed.

She would go home in the morning. That was right, wasn't it? She could not stay, couldn't condone the kind of savagery she'd seen last night in a husband, even if the root of it was opium and whiskey rather than predation and lechery. She would never see him again.

Somehow, that made Belle angry. She had the right to see him if she wanted, didn't she? To tell him how very far he'd strayed, and to tell him what she thought of his medicine and justice for anyone else. He should have to face her accusations, make some answer for his actions, and make some recompense – even if she had no use for an apology. The dark bands around her wrists and marks upon her arms made dressing herself difficult, but Belle managed to don a shawl a loose tea dress and crept barefoot toward his study before Mrs. Lucas could return.

If rage was not prudent then it also was not patient, and paced like a caged lion as she waited to pounce. What she meant to say, what he might say in response, those things were immaterial. She had a righteous fury pent within her, and if she had not broken irreparably beneath his actions then he would not shatter from the weight of anything she might say.

Finally, the door pushed open and the two pair of haunted eyes met across the study.

Gold collapsed, before Belle could articulate even a syllable of her disappointment and pain, he fell, weeping, at her feet.

"Belle, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I am."

"You tried to rape me."

He sobbed and shook bodily. "Never, Belle. Never that. Didn't know where I was, only wanted to get you out of those bloody stays. I thought it was a dream, I thought you'd be pleased to be rid of the thing. I never meant to, please believe me."

"You bound me and bruised me, and thought I'd be pleased?"

"No! No, I… I always dream, and it's so real… it's so violent, sometimes. I thought I was keeping you safe! I swear I did, Belle. Please, whatever you may believe of me, know that I couldn't harm you for anything."

Belle felt compelled to either strike him or run away. She'd done nothing to deserve the horror he put her through, and now he cited his own horrors as the cause?

In a fit of frustration, she stomped over to the fire place and dashed one of the little, red bottles in the flames. They jutted and hissed, but in the end fire consumed everything.

"Your dreams aren't the problem!" Belle shouted as Rum looked up at her from his pathetic heap. "It's this— all of it. You think I don't see how the opium and whiskey change you? But you said… you said it was best to leave all this to you, and like a fool I believed!"

She dashed another bottle into the fire place, then rounded on him again.

"They make you sick! When I first came here, you nearly killed yourself, only I was too naive to see, and these last few week's you've vanished further and further into your cups. If you won't see
reason for your own sake, then look at what you've done to me!"

Belle shoved up her sleeves and bared her blackened wrists for him to see.

He winced, and when he would not look at what he'd done, she began throwing every medicine and whiskey bottle within her reach to the hungry flames.

"Stop," he pleaded, finally rising to his feet with the help of his cane. "Stop, please Belle. Dovey will flog me if you want, or we can call the police… I'll take any punishment you deem, only spare an old man his dignity. I cannae walk or think without… Stop it!"

"No! I love you, and you've hurt me more than words can speak, but I won't let you commit a slow suicide by poppy just because you've wronged me. I am saving your life, whether you like it or not," she announced, feeling as furious as she did vindicated, and threw the last, purple vial into the fireplace.

The little, sealed bottle went off like a rifle, spilling black smoke and sulfur into the room. She saw something break in Gold's eyes, and he lost himself in a rage.

"Get out! If you loved me, you wouldn't – you never loved me at all, you've only waited until I was weak to break me. I knew he was your father, and let myself be deceived, but bad blood will out. Leave!"

"Stop shouting and look at me, you coward! What's in those bottles does not mean more than your family, it's not more important than your son and me."

"Get out!" he bellowed again, smashing his cane into the blue-patterned tea tray, "I've no need of help, least of all from you!"

The smoke stung Belle's eyes, drawing forth bitter tears she hadn't realized she had left to cry, and she raced down to the stables, ordered up the carriage, and quit Sonnachdubh without a single good bye. Mr. Dovey saw her to the train, all the wonder and adventure drained from it, and only when she'd locked herself in her compartment and feel the spokes beneath her seat did she find the courage to set anger aside and let herself weep.
Chapter 16

XLVI. Lotus Eater

Hell slithered black from the hearth, choking out the candles, twisting like a leviathan round his chest. Gold – himself the lightning and thunder – devastated the safe harbor of his study in his bid to be rid of the monster, screaming at Miss French to leave him; she had to go, less they destroy one another.

He'd heard the echoes of Carlist rifles when the flames swallowed his purple bottle, mocking his dream, and if she had not gone then she certainly would have been destroyed completely. He was not an opium-eater. It managed his pain, kept the bloodlust and remembrances locked away, kept him upright and dignified – a man, rather than a bent and crooked beast – and she'd burned all his control away.

He was not an opium-eater.

Opium-eaters were the self-indulgent poets, flitting about the Lakes, sweating on shabby mattresses in China Town, off to dream of Kubla Khan and prance and dance with Byron. He was not an opium-eater. Opium-eaters accomplished nothing, and he'd built much. Opium-eaters craved oblivion, and he sought only to remove the bullets from the barrels of the firing squad that haunted him.

She was every ounce her father then and the last of Rum's sanity abandoned him. Adrift on the endless black-smoke sea, tossed, churned and drowning, he smelled the sulfur and the gunpowder, tasted weeping salt, and frenzied through pottery, papers, and upholstery in search of some reprieve. In his terror, the thing inside him hungered to rend his blue-eyed Devil to spar and jetsam; he'd kill her if he did not dull the pain.

He found the strength to bellow at her, to order her to flee, and all the light departed with her, a wounded bird on damaged wings. The albatross was dead, not coming back, and so it was in the world of the dead that he was left to dwell. That noxious thing unfurling within and without forced the air from his lungs, and he forgot how to swim.

He forgot how to breathe.

The room pressed close without Belle to steady it, the demons and drift-wood to sing, and then – in the furthest pocket of his writing desk, Rumford discovered a buoy to salvage him and repel the serpents. A half-empty bottle of chloral he'd kept for a rainy day, and it was storming this evening. Gold gulped it down, dribbling over his collar and face, then lie down to drown in fumes, to escape the tempestuous sea. If he drowned in vomit or smoke instead of salt-water, it made no never-mind to him; those already dead within had no need of the fresh, spring breeze.

Rum slept then, his new harbor secure even from dreaming, and paid no heed to the little hands tugging his prone form from the wreckage, dragging him to safety.

In waking, he recognized the dreary glow of another Scottish evening pushing into his bed chamber, at least one day dosed away, and better left forgotten. Men liked to forget, sometimes, but men like him had made a career of it. Gold contrived to tug the bell-pull for Dovey, ordered more laudanum for his leg, and abandoned the particular details of his surroundings; Belle was gone, had left him with an unbearable agony. He was not an opium-eater; opium-eaters did not have a tangible, medical need.
The damn woman nearly destroyed them both in her little fit of mercy. He needed his medicine; she'd no right to tamper with it. All he'd built and could ever hope to create had been possible because he managed his pain. He was cleverer in trade, more cunning in business, and feared nothing – not even his own propensity for destruction – with the laudanum lulled him to sleep. All he'd done, he'd done for Baelfire, and he'd suffer no one to take that away.

An inarticulate knowledge gripped him then, deep in his chest, and insecurity bespoke the truth too: he needed it for the pain, yes, but also to tame the rage roiling inside him, the fury he bore like a scar that no one would ever see. What might have become of her, already battered to bruising by his own hand, if he hadn't the presence of mind to banish her, to placate the rage with a serum of peaceful dreams?

He was not an opium-eater. All he'd done, he'd done to protect them. It was best that she'd gone, whomever's daughter she might be, and that she return home to her Sir Maurice Avon and his elegantly foolish, gentlemanly poverty.

Gold vowed to forget his Albatross entirely, and whatever omens she propended. He owed her that much, for all the indignities she'd suffered and any love he might once have borne her. She was, perhaps, wounded, but he'd survived the storm and now they both were free. And if the specter of her lingered in his home, if her scent clung to the drapes, then the stench of war and sulfur had scorched it from his memory.

He did not see her in the awful blueness of the sky, the Worcester cup he salvaged from the bin, the tight-laced gowns and rose-print lace delivered later in the week; it was impossible to have her, so he simply did not see. Instead, he busied himself with industry and whiskey when he dared to sleep. If he dreamed at all, it was of wounded birds and sailor-soldiers washed ashore from a tempest at sea.

"Mr. Gold, Sir? Mr. Gold, are you awake?"

Rumford managed to look up from where he was sitting, adrift with his thoughts; he didn't recall entering her library, yet he sat in one of the old, estate armchairs, and if he breathed deep he could almost smell…

"What do you want?" he growled, schooling his face.

"Miss French went away. I thought you should know that, if you didn't already. And my parents have gone as of this morning," young Hopper told him. "I'm staying."

"I think not," Rum grimaced. He'd had quite enough of Hoppers for one lifetime. His Housekeeper might've saved Belle, might have intervened, and things might have gone differently. "You'd best catch them up."

"No, Sir, I'm staying," the lad repeated, and he drew himself up into something like dignity. The gangly, long-limbed boy had a hint of manhood, Gold could not deny it, and saw no point in trying.

"And what use are you to me, hn?" He asked, speaking to the young man directly. He'd not pay good wages to a useless whelp with bad blood, not even for Baelfire's sake.

Gold had a good mind to send them all away, meddlesome Mrs. Lucas included. He might have locked him and Belle away without her hen-pecking, indulged them both in every luxury, and reduced his world to her, himself and Bae. They might have found some measure of peace then, lived out halcyon days in a bubble of tranquility, if not for his servant's meddling.
"I write and read. I know the grounds. I like working with Miss Ruby and Mr. Dovey, and I like serving Master Bae. Mrs. Lucas is staying too, but she was a long time deciding. Mr. Dovey's made her Housekeeper."

"We'll see about that, dearie."

"No," the little Hopper told him, drawing on steel that Gold found almost unnerving. It reminded him of Belle, and that – perhaps – was the worst thing of all. "Mrs. Lucas is the new Housekeeper, Miss Ruby's taking on my part as gillie soon as we hire in a new Cook and kitchen maid, and I'm managing the grounds. That's the way it will be."

"If you think any Hopper can presume to tell me—"

"I am only me, Sir," the boy replied evenly. "Miss French taught me that. She taught me and Ruby letters, numbers, and to say what as needs saying, because it's right."

And you nearly killed her. You sent her away. The words hung heavy, unsaid, piquing all the old haunts of Rumford's memory.

"No good ever comes from giving in to one's base nature; we are all exactly as good as we choose to be. It would be easy for us all to leave, even Mr. Dovey, and then you'd have nobody. Or we might have just left you to suffocate on smoke in your study. But you do need us, the estate needs us, and so will Master Bae. So we chose to stay, and those are the terms."

"Mrs. Lucas won't allow any of the girls up to tend you, and Mr. Dovey's occupied, so I'll be playing valet until he posts out and hires somebody. Do you need anything, Sir?"

The sudden change in the boy almost flummoxed him. But then, this was the lad who'd once denied him a loaded gun in a slaughter house. Perhaps it was his own nature to vex, and not the work of Miss French; he'd erase all the evidence of her tenure at Sonnachdubh, eventually, but could not survive a house where she lived on vicariously. That, above all, he could not tolerate.

At any rate, to believe she'd really taught Bae's ragamuffin's anything worthwhile drew bile to his throat and made his skin feel tight. She was wrong, a fool. Any exception to that verdict threatened to drown him in blame, and he was not an opium-eater.

"I'll make you a deal," Rum sneered, drawing himself and his cane up to his full height. He was not a tall man, wouldn't tower over the gangly adolescent for long, but he pressed his age and size as an advantage now. "If you can prove that she taught you anything other than insolence and how to spew ignorant bile from twixt your teeth, you may remain."

"Sir?"

Gold nudged a book at him, whatever was lying out at the ready.

"Read," he commanded, "if you're able."

The boy seemed to consider him for a moment, then opened the book in the middle and began reciting poetry:

Let us alone. What is it that will last?

All things are taken from us, and become

Portions and parcels of the dreadful past.
Let us alone. What pleasure can we have
To war with evil? Is there any peace
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?
All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence—ripen, fall, and cease:
Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dream… [1]

"That is enough!" Gold bellowed, taking the book back and snapping it shut.
"I did as you told me!"

"Stay if you like, then. I've a wayward factory to tend, and I mean to escape immediately."

"Shall I ask the grooms to bring up the carriage up?" asked the young man, uncertainty flagging him. Well, of course he was uncertain. He'd performed the task his master set him, and had been shouted at. Such were the joys of living.

"Tomorrow," Gold snapped, reeling from the proximity of the boy's keen, blue eyes. There was intelligence there, a seed planted by his little maid, and its blossoming chaffed him worse than the poetry.

"For tonight, see to my luggage and valise. And Hopper," Gold growled, "if you dare speak to me so insolently again, we shall both forget Bae and I'll give you the flogging that your parents deserved from me. Understand?"

"Yes," the boy peeped, his bravado failing, and the child retreated with all haste. He'd seen nothing but Belle in his frank, firm speech, and the reminder of her accusations had clawed at his sanity.

Gold stormed from the library, clutching at his cane, and let the stench of war and burning wash her away as he entered his ruined study. He snatched some papers from his desk, a few letters from Her Grace and Earl Spencer complaining of some foreman or another his managers hired-on in the New Year, and prepared to deal with the matter personally.

He hadn't meant to lend credence to their mewling, of course, but it was as good an excuse as any to get out from under the shadow of his injured Albatross. Whoever this new foreman was, he'd chosen precisely the wrong time to be noticed.

**XLVII. January 9, 1858**

The Right Hon. Lord George Nolan, 6th Earl Spencer, from the desk of HG. The Right Hon. Lady Regina M. Blanchard, Dowager-Regent of White Hall.

George, Salutations, Happy Returns, etc… Now, if we may dispense with the formalities and converse frankly, I believe that we two may be of some service to one another in the New Year.

The facts, then, without trimmings:

Firstly, you are in possession of a son in need of a dowry, and I a step-daughter who shall not have one. Second, your son has entangled himself with my ward, an alliance which I neither approve nor
endorse, and which must be terminated immediately. Third, you are in arrears to sundry banks, including the personal usury of our mutual acquaintance in Scotland, and I've His Grace's debts to settle. Fourth, as you loved your sons, so I love my own; know that I will meet you measure for measure in stubborn regard for no-one's interests but our own.

I've my darling, little Henry's future to look toward, and I've found – it's quite shocking to me, really – that I love and covet his interests as keenly as my own. You've your younger son, and my condolences for the loss of the elder, but I do not pretend for one moment that his being younger has made you any less zealous in your promotion of him. We must both, then, seek harbor from the jaws of poverty and look to shoring-up our legacies.

In the matters of the first and second orders, I am prepared to arrange a match between your surviving heir and any heiress you like in London – have your pick, only get him away from my household. That is by far the simplest arrangement I've written to offer you.

Simple though it reads on paper, I understand the boy does not easily heed your requests; the twin of the one you were suffered to lose, reared up away from inheritance so as not to crowd your heir, and plucked off the lines in Crimea when the estate was in need of a spare. You must make him end it – he was a soldier, so command him. Take bit and bridle as far as they serve the rider, but we've both known many a stallion in need of a good whip and a heavy heel.

You cannot afford for this flirtation to commence, and I will not allow it.

Allow me to reiterate: in any case, her father left no dowry, and if they dare to elope it will not matter – she shall still have none; if he will take her for nothing, he will take her on the run (of that you can be certain) and then we will both of us be left standing knee-deep in muck. Ensure any misplaced affection is set aside, he must sever the connection. No public understanding joins our wayward pigeons, there's no shame in annulling the fantasies they may or may not have concocted in their pretty little heads, and then the matter will be done.

As to my own half of this impossible match, I fear my ward has taken to hysterics since His Grace passed. I've arranged in the local courts to send her to hospital, to convalesce in a home for wayward girls (which enjoys my patronage), and – unless you've some joy in your only remaining son binding himself to an impoverished lunatic – any talk of marriage must be torn from their hearts and crushed.

Young love, you will remember, makes fools of the best of us.

If I may hazard a suggestion, there is a Miss Abigail King who will suffice; Miss King, as it happens, comes from an excellent pedigree, and will inherit in her own right some 70,000 pounds, in addition to a multitude of properties and an annuity of 1,000. Her father ails, and looks to have her wed while he is able enough to attend; she's dutiful, she will do as he says. Sir King and a mere Baronet playing at Rail Companies, but he offers her gilt as the Palace of Versailles ever was. This very autumn she will reach her majority, and I've every confidence that an understanding shall reached post haste – if I speak on your behalf, and if your son will curtail himself to her father's tastes.

And so the matter grows more complex. In exchange for this little miracle-match, I ask only that the matter with my step-daughter come to a swift close and that Parliament and the Courts take no steps to prevent me from institutionalizing the chit. Some friend of her father, or one of her mother's people, may object to my recommending her for medical treatment, but it is far more humane a fate than allowing the child to go on seething and gnashing her teeth at us. You would not like a stubborn nag for a daughter-in-law, raising your grandsons, George.
In the matter of the third order, how might we fatten our personal accounts? Supposing that we two can find an alliance in the non-marriage of our charges, I believe I've concocted a scheme that will serve the purpose. You command the ear of nearly half of the House of Lords and take supper with the others; I have caught the ears of all the daughters and Mammas of the Town, not the least of which count your powdered Lords as husbands; between us, the start of an Empire to rival Her Majesty's.

And so we've come to the fourth matter in common to us both, the grievous fault of loving our sons. Our problem comes down to gold, in every sense of the word. Gold leashes us, seeks to control us, and makes fools of us for the trouble. Gold is not my master, nor yours. Gold, my dear George, is an obstacle which we two can conquer.

Suppose, if you will, a philosophical utopia: a land without coin, or its inverse – a land with fat purses for all. Anarchy, Sir, is the result. An equitable society will rot, for wealth breeds power, the divine right of monarchies, and the noblesse oblige. How should all the little people cope without the examples of Lords and Ladies? The Lords and Ladies certainly bear the greater burden, and so – in the name of Progress and Modernity – is it not their principle purpose to overcome the fetters of Gold and achieve a more perfect autonomy?

Be careful that you fully understand me.

If the Almighty Pound were personified, I believe it would be a sneering old man with a cane, limping along, but always moving – always thinking, always cunning. The pound is no fool. Yet here our Lord Pound resides, atop a pile of gold, silver, jewels, and property, scowling down at everybody, answerable to no one.

Now, let us suppose that the wicked Lord Pound died.

Suppose it would be found a suicide, for these things do happen more often than, say, poisoning or murder, and it might be ensured that the physician took no steps to conceal it; Lady Society could not tolerate such a crime among the gentry, she might raise a fuss. Suppose again it would fall to Lord Law to manage those disgraced properties, they do neighbor his own, and all the Wives of Justice insist that something be done. And then, suppose the heir of wicked Lord Pound was still young. Might not Lord Law enjoy the spoils of Lord Pound's house for some time? And might he not – as is the duty of Law – give back to Society as well?

Law and Society, my Lord, are – perhaps – weaker than the Pound in their singular forms; combined, however, they quite neatly ensure that the gold remains where it ought to, to the mutual benefit of their children, grandchildren, and all the Mr. and Mrs. Littles in their employ. And if it turns out that Lord Pound's unnatural avarice has granted him, among other things, an unnaturally resilient and long life? Well, certain precautions might be taken so that Lord Law and Lady Society are no worse for trying.

You have one week to consider,

R.M.B.

XLVIII. Aeolus

"Take care, Sister," said the gruff rail hand.

Mr. Leroy had been invaluable to Belle, despite his coal-blackened face. He'd escorted her from
the spare, iron cross-beams of the Euston platform through the throngs of travelers in their fitted
clothes, and hadn't spared so much as a scowl for Belle's loose-fitted tea dress. She lacked even a
railway rug to conceal her, and wore the flimsy, Indian shawl that had followed her from
Sonnachdubh like a set of plate-armor.

Together, they'd crossed the Great Hall unmolested, avoided the worst of the carriages and hansom
cabs in the yard, and passed under a Doric Arch so great that Belle wondered how the Elgin
marbles could ever hope to eclipse it.

London, she'd always been assured, was a loud, dirty rabble; to her eyes, weary as they were from
crying, it still looked a marvel. She'd have liked to look about, to forget her hurts and aching heart
for a few moments in the sudden newness of it all – the locomotives hissed and sent up smoke
thicker than that of Manchester, yet somehow she didn't mind the smell – and every trunk and
railway timetable might be her oyster, every passenger her pearl.

Still, she was painfully self-conscious of her situation, and the few moments' respite with which
any girl freshly arrived to London might otherwise indulge herself evaded her. She hadn't even a
pair of gloves to her name, only her naked fingers now smudged from shaking hands with this
chivalrous day-laborer.

"Thank you, Sir," Belle smiled, attempting to overcome the defeated feeling threatening to
consume her. "I'd have been lost at the first turn-style without you, I am sure."

"Seen my share of good girls like you, ladies and the other sort, lost afore," he spared a pointed
glance for the bruises peeking out at her collar and wrists. "Wish someone'd thought to take them
in hand, that's all. And mind you're in off the streets before the work-houses let out, Sister."

She reached for her purse, light though it was with only the left-over coin from her Manchester
trip, and he waved her off.

"Now, now," he hushed her, grinning through his thick beard and soot. "You keep that. You've
your choice hotels here at the end of Euston Grove – The Victoria or the Euston proper. You get a
room and a meal in you, and that'll be thanks enough."

"You'll come no further?"

"Best not. Wouldn't do for the fine folk about town to see a woman traveling alone with an old
shovel-arm."

"Oh," Belle demurred. She hadn't thought of that. She'd never had much wit toward what was
proper; it was improper for a lady to travel alone and go about in the company of men unrelated to
her, but then – she was not even a gentleman's daughter. It was improper, also, she supposed, for a
valet to engage herself to a Lord, to sit on his lap like a little, French dog; it was improper for a
man to enter a lady's room and disrobe her against her will. None of Belle, not one inch of her,
would pass muster.

She was drawing stares now, from the women in their smart, Italian-straw caps and full-skirted
clothes, with their hair pinned up to perfection. Belle did not know what she looked like in her
state, but could not imagine it was favorable.

Belle spared one last glance to the Station, a marvel of engineering, before turning down the street.
The platforms she'd known in the country were only small, raised things comprised of lumber and
clap-board; Manchester and Glasgow had offered larger, more elegant versions of the same;
nothing she'd seen before had compared at all to the vast scope of London.
The Greeks, she supposed, worshiped Wisdom and built their temples and columns with thoughts of Heaven; for the souls of the Dark Ages, it had been buttressed, Gothic Cathedrals; and here she stood now, at the pinnacle of progress, amid an amalgamation of columns and support beams, in a time when men built with only the thought of getting places quickly, and sometimes of bringing back exhibits for their trouble.

She ought to be able to stand and marvel; it was pure folly that she could not for want of gloves, gown, and parasol.

At the end of Euston Grove, Belle found that Mr. Leroy had spoken well. She'd her choice of The Victoria or Euston Hotel; one looked the very image of traveling luxury, while the other advertised cheap rooms and rough board. Belle felt her little purse mournfully, having accepted nothing but the ticket and her remaining coins – equivalent to something like wages for the months she'd spent working – despite his offer of a hundred pound note to her.

There was still the cost of the next Railway to consider, London was the southernmost destination on the other, and the cost of her toilette, for they would hardly let her board if she neglected her hair and garments much longer. Factoring in the cost of lodgings and a meal, Belle was not entirely sure she'd have enough to cover her return.

Well, she didn't require a first-class ticket, nor a private compartment in the rail-car. And she certainly was accustomed to sleeping in spare chambers with little to eat for supper. A new dress, though, that was unavoidable if she didn't want to run afoul of the truant officers. What might they think of her? She could have one cheap, made of cotton and bought straight from the store with no need of a tailor, that would reduce the cost some more. Still, though, she'd refused to be bought by Rumford or his people. He'd good as purchased her once, and she'd all but thanked him for it; he would not have her forgiveness for a mere sum of gold, though. Not for the wrong he'd done her.

Decided, Belle stepped toward The Victoria Hotel. She'd take the cheaper room, if they had one available, and on the morrow she'd worry about the rest of her expenses.

"Excuse me, hello, do you need help?" asked a prim voice from above her head.

Belle twisted about in her slippers and looked up at the sound. A very well dressed lady in a fitted travel suit of pink and lavender silk looked down from her phaeton; behind her, Belle spotted a foreign-looking girl wearing an Oriental-cut red gown.

"Only you were blocking the road, and I thought you might be lost," the lady carried on, her face schooled to an indifferent sort of calm.

"No, thank you," Belle replied, attempting a curtsy. "I was just crossing to the Victoria, I apologize if I disrupted your cattle."

"Oh no!" gasped the lady in the pink silk. "You mustn't stop there, that is only for working men and their ilk. You're not, uh… a working girl?"

"No," Belle answered, unsure how it mattered in the least if she'd worked for her bread before. "Oh, no! No, of course not," she blurted, realizing that the woman had meant to ask if she made her coin as a prostitute.

"The Euston, then," said the woman with finality.

"Oh, I…" Belle clutched at her little purse and looked back to the nicer hotel forlornly. "I might try a little further down the Grove, then."
"Don't be foolish," the exotic woman in back replied in an accent that spoke of the East. "It's all mud-ruts and lumber slats down there, there aren't even any cobbled streets. If you cannot defend yourself, it is not safe."

"Have you any trunks or bags?" asked the first woman, reigning in her horses a bit as a cab passed them by.

"No," Belle confessed.

"And no friends or family with whom you can stay?"

"None in Town, I'm afraid. I'm passing through to Devon in the morning."

"I should think not," the woman replied, brandishing one of Bradshaw's time-tables at her, produced seemingly from thin air. "They'll be boarding for Plymouth at Paddington, and we've heard reports that a stray cow's caused a fuss. It might be two or three days before the route returns, why don't you come with us?"

"Oh, I couldn't impose on a stranger…" Belle blushed, feeling silly. She hated to be ignorant of anything, and this woman behaved precisely as her idea of a Londoner ought.

"I am Miss Phillips and this is my companion, Hua. To whom have we had the pleasure of speaking?"

"I'm Miss French. Miss Belle French, of—"

"Of Devon, yes. From whence are you originating?"

"I've come from Scotland, a little town off Loch Sonnachdubh."

"Nearer Glasgow than Edinburgh, I'd assume?"

"Yes, the West-Country. I'm afraid I left in quite a hurry…"

"There's no need to apologize for your state," snapped Miss Phillips. "I patronize all the charitable societies, but what use is a woman of quality if she cannot recognize one of her own and offer aid?"

"Do you this is wise, Aurora?" asked Miss Hua, sitting up a little further to look at Belle's ramshackle dress.

"Where would I be if you hadn't stopped to help me? Still lost in Beijing and stranded in the middle of the Opium Wars. Climb in Miss French, there's room for one more, I'm sure."

Belle offered the women her thanks and stepped up, into the carriage with Miss Hua's help. She tried to apologize again for her lack of gloves or cap, but Miss Hua seemed not to hear and Miss Phillips prattled on about an old dress she owned, and that she hoped would fit her.

Belle snuck another look at the startlingly beautiful Asian woman sitting opposite her, and Miss Hua snapped up a fan alongside her face, blocking Belle from her view like a horse with blinders.

"You studied with the Imperial Army?" Belle gasped, looking at the characters so expertly written across the white silk. If that were true, then this woman might be the better of any bare-knuckle boxer in the city.

"I trained in the Forbidden City; my father was an official in service to the Emperor," Miss Hua replied, looking intently at her. "You know Chinese?"
"I read a little," Belle confessed, and she thought for a moment that Miss Hua looked a little impressed.

"A little is more than I can attest to knowing, but not for lack of Hua trying" Miss Phillips supplied, turning them down a street packed thick with town houses and little gardens, with neatly cobbled streets.

"Yes," Belle allowed. "It is a very difficult language."

"It is," said Miss Hua. "Difficult, ancient, and elegant. The calligrapher who painted this spent many hours in contemplation. The characters are beautiful, yes, but they also have many deep thoughts and feelings. When the artist writes, he makes it appear easy, but appearance can be deceiving. That is the meaning of this fan to me."

"I think you, Miss French," said Miss Phillips over the sounds of the street, "will be another case of appearances deceiving. Once you've dressed and rested, won't you please share your story?"

Belle stopped to think about that before promising anything. She couldn't tell them of her last few days with Rum, if she spoke of it the dam within her would break, and she would lose the fragile strength of necessity keeping her sane. Now offered the luxury of Miss Phillip's hospitality, she'd have liked nothing more than to crawl into bed, close the drapes, and not come out for a week.

"I will tell you a story," she answered at last, and even though it pricked at the corner of her eyes, she thought that Rum might be proud. She'd chosen her words wisely.

[1] The Lotos-Eaters by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1832), Lines 90-98
Chapter 17

XLIX. One Thousand Yards

Gold's newspaper told him that it was May the twentieth, that the Whigs were in Parliament, and that young Mr. Hopper had not thought to press-dry the ink before passing him the pages. It stained his fingers, a black smear spreading over the knuckles and nail-bed, sooty and ashen in a way somehow appropriate to travel by locomotive. It was the least of his stains, though perhaps the most obvious of them; a thin mockery of the bruises he'd left on another pair of hands all too recently.

It seemed a life-time since then. Miss French would be home by now, certainly, and well rid of him. His own situation surpassed evaluation, and indeed – it pleased Rum to set sorrow aside and pick up the golden thread of salvation: his factories.

The blasted gentry could not comprehend so simple a truth, but – as with when he'd returned first from Spain – Rumford despised idleness. To work, now, even on so simple a problem as a floor-manager who'd drawn Lord Spencer and Her Grace's ire, would set him to ease. There were other manners of ease a crippled, roguish war survivor might turn to as well, but Rumford Gold insisted that he was not an opium-eater.

All around him in the coaches little pick-pockets and hussies plied their trades; he had not the fortitude for a private car, with nothing to distract him from turning inward and dwelling in sorrow, and so he glimpsed over the edge of his smudging papers to take in the crowd. The Midlands were no place for the country gentleman, and one of them was about to lose his pocket watch – and very possibly his billfold – to a rather ingenious eight year old. Rum did not interrupt; the theft was a good one, clean.

Down the car, a huddle of middle-aged women lumped together under travel-carpets studiously ignored the activities of the gentlemen; a little further on, a lone female without so much as a shawl to cover her collar chatted engagingly with a youngish-looking fellow. She'd corner him on the platform, if he wasn't careful, and demand to be paid less allegations of his improper conduct be made.

The Rail was every bit as filthy within as without, dust and muck kicked up in the name of progress, disturbing the natural balance of things, or so said the aristocracy. As far as Rum was concerned, they were all unclean, and the brief specks of light, the beacons in the night, all quickly yellowed and greyed from the effort of remaining alight. It reminded him how fortunate he was to have Bae and Miss French well away from it…

Rum snapped himself violently away from thinking on it. He'd a job to do, albeit a petty one. At his age, he hardly administrated the daily intake and output of smokestacks and cotton mills personally. Rather, he owned controlling shares in his enterprises, and left the day-to-day to the foremen and nominal owners. It was no business of his how they used their people, though he did demand weekly reports of the profits, a summary of the local political climate.

No one lied to him, he'd ensured it. A man had rather report three fires and a net loss than be caught showing one shilling more than was accurate, and – with Rumford tugging mercilessly at their strings – business was flourishing up and down the country.

When he arrived, saw to his case, and hired a cab, the sun was still high in the sky. He saw several men searching frantically for their property and struggling to avoid the car's enterprising women,
and made for the factory with all haste. They did not know to expect him, and that – Gold decided – would play to his advantage.

Mr. Andre was a decent sort of man, if memory served. A towering man, he was nearly Quaker in his devotion to the wholesomeness of work, and never one to shirk his share of manual labor in event of a general strike or an outbreak of illness. What more, he was in no thrall to royalty and would keep a known ruffian in his employ, so long as the work was done right. He'd flog a man who earned it, too, and with such a terrible strength – arms that could hoist a bale of cotton all on their own – the workers were careful to avoid giving him cause. Gold had found, quite soon after procuring him, that he begrudgingly respected the huge, soft-spoken man.

It almost seemed a shame to trick him.

Rum stopped the cab several streets from his destination, leaving instructions for his things to be borne to his hotel in his stead, and swapped his frock coat and waistcoat for a simple linen shirt. A few handfuls of dirt over his trousers, the removal of his hat, and he almost looked the part of a working man. He picked up a pie from a peddler with a cart, scuffed his shoes on the axel, and shook his hair loose from where it was slicked back. He'd gone quite out of the mode with his collar-length hair and darkening beard-scruff, but London held little sway over him. He'd pass undiscovered, and in doing so discover for himself what sort of fuss Mr. Andre's controversial hire had started.

All around the city work-house whistles blew, and the men and women fortunate enough to obtain positions with humanitarians like Mr. Andre filed out into the yards for a brief luncheon. The division of workers was palpable. Stout, tight-suited fellows clumped up on whatever plinths were to hand – palates, bales, and the occasional stairwell; the women kept to themselves, along with a few of the older men, and the bucks – the hard-working, back-breaking powerhouses upon whose sweat all of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales grew rich – broke off into friendly segments. Adrift among them, lost as little governesses stuck between the classes, the floor managers and leaders circulated, and it was one of these middle-men whom Gold sought out.

He settled himself into the shade of the cast-iron fence and took it all in.

"Where did you serve?" a friendly voice asked him.

"I beg your pardon?" Gold muttered, not taking his eyes off the crowd.

"You've got that thousand-yard stare in your eye," the man who'd intruded upon him said. "The kind soldiers get. I can always tell, saw some good infantrymen fall to pieces in hospital from the battle fatigue. It's the same thousand-yard stare on all of them."

"You're an impudent one," Gold cautioned. He didn't have time for unwelcome memories.

"Nonsense, certainly two ex-militia men may speak to one another without making the formal introductions. Major Nolan, from the Crimea."

A hand thick with callouses and dirtied by labor reached out to shake his, and Gold's eyes snapped up to look at him. He was fair of hair and blue-eyed, spoke better than a working man could, and bore all the marks of the mid-foreman. It was the face, however, that astounded him.

Without speaking, Rumford extended his arm and shook the man's hand. The mystery was solved – this man's face was one that Gold knew well from opium dens and gaming halls, though the expression did not express the dispassionate boredom and appetites which had used to be its custom. This was Lord George Nolan, Earl Spencer's son – his second son – the twin sent to foster
with some dowdy old aunt. Little wonder, then, that he'd been petitioned so forcefully by the Earl. But what did Her Grace have to do with it all?

"Left-Tenant Gold," Rum said, "Spain, First Carlist. You'll forgive me if I don't salute-and-sir."

"You were an officer?" The Nolan boy sounded surprised by that fact.

"As you were."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course, but I'm something of an oddity, they tell me. Are you taking a position with Mr. Andre?"

"Have you? A Major's pension is hardly something to scoff at, is it? Nor an officer's education. Certainly you're qualified for more gainful work than this?" In point of fact, he was qualified to sit on his ass and watch as his father pissed away all his money, or to help him piss it away if he liked.

"No one else would hire me. But Mr. Andre's a good man, he knows I can do the work so he pays me to do it. Nothing simpler."

"But why?" Gold demanded, uncomprehending.

"To support my wife, of course."

"Yes. Yes, of course," Gold hedged, holding back the sluice of questions that were half-drowning him.

The whistles blew again, and the workers began their slow migration back to the machinery. Mr. Nolan took his leave, nodding curtly, and Gold hobbled off to find Mr. Andre. He looked down, noting the gold-pommeled filigree of his cane, and wished he'd thought to bring a plainer one. If the boy was bright, he'd have made him at the gate. Stupid. Sloppy. It was too easy to make mistakes like this with Miss French still haunting him.

Of course, if George's wayward son were half-so-simple as his twin, he wouldn't have noticed if Gold had appeared dressed in harem-silk and hair pins. Well, he might have noticed that, Rum allowed, or at least stopped long enough to look for tits.

Frustrated with himself, the world, and everything in it, Gold limped his way to the gigantic manager's offices.

"Mr. Gold, sir, is that you?" asked Mr. Andre, plainly shocked to see him. He'd been one of Cora's hires, early on, but Rum had poached him. The man had seen him in worse kit than this, not always of his own choice, but he wouldn't be pleased at anyone – not even his financiers – consorting with his workers on matters of business.

"It is. I've just had an interesting discussion with your man, Nolan."

"Ah," replied Andre, grim, as he settled into his chair. Gold took the one opposite him, leg too stiff to stand, and began quizzing him.

"So I suppose you'll be the next one telling me I've got to sack him. He does the work right, whatever his pedigree. I'm only sorry I had nothing better to offer him. Aint there some way you'd let me keep him? His missus is a lovely girl, no matter what them English aristos said, it'd be a shame to send the pair of 'em off begging again."

"Why the hell have they come to Scotland to work in the factory at all?" Gold asked, demanding
"Oh, well, that's the reason you're here, aint it? There's nothing the likes of you or me can do about an elopement, Sir. They're married, if the Green'll do for God, I reckon it ought to do for me."

"So you thought you'd jab the hornets' nest and hire the lad against his father's wishes," surmised Gold, half-grinning.

"And her mother's, too, if the pile of letters from White Hall is any judge of it. I can't see what it's got to do with them. If a man wants work, if he can do the work, if there's work to be done, he ought to get paid to do it. It don't sit right with me to turn him out over some fussy prisses down south."

"Indeed not," Rum sighed. Well, that was a lovely kettle of fish. George's spare son had run off and married Her Grace's ward, against both their wishes, and now that they'd taken work and supported themselves as mere laborers – once it became clear they wouldn't return cowed and shamed to beg a reprieve – the pair of them had taken to fits. What a mar on the family heraldry, what a scandal. It made Gold positively giddy.

"I see your point, Mr. Andre, and I commend your independence. You'll see that reflected in your salary. But I can't have the pair of them making trouble for us. If they took it into their heads to be a bother – a real bother – I assure you, it would be a long, unpleasant siege."

"You want me to sack him, then."

"I want you to sack him," allowed Gold. "And then I want to hire him to come and work at Sonnachdubh for me."

"Sir? I thought we didn't want them bothering us."

"I'd rather not deal with a Society boycott, on the whole, though it'd cripple half the country to do it. My holdings are quite impressive. No objections could be raised to a gentleman employing a gentleman's son, though, and I find I've quite the appetite for a spot of intrigue."

L. February 25, 1858

My Dear Mrs. Mallory,

My patience is wearing thin.

Whatever strange loyalty you feel you owe to our G., let me disabuse you of it now. The man has never made a friend in his life. He does not make allies, does not keep faith; rather he bullies and bargains his way into favorable exchange, and the fools thank him for it as they stand by, penniless, while he carries on ruining them with his damn factories and cut-throat trade.

The closest that man ever came to loving anybody was my own mother, an ambitious woman, Medea to the teeth, and that is – surely – a generous description, for it comes from her own daughter – the one person yet living who cannot help but love her. He sends his own son and heir away, cannot bear the boy to be in his sight; he ruins good families out of spite; some even suspect he poisoned his own wife. There is nothing goodly there to find, nothing to deserve your loyalties.

With whom does G. associate? You mentioned a druggist and physician once, I think, and I'll have the make and cut of them as well. You noted also a certain little maid, one who is of particular interest to me now. I'll have her name, yes, but also her look, manner, speech, and interactions with the household.
Is he fond of the girl? You had a suspicion to that end once before, and that – I'll admit – puzzles me. Can it really be the case? Recite all of it, Mallory, and do not spare me any ounce of speculation, for I will not spare you a single ounce of my venom if do not.

You wrote once of patience, of cutting losses and renting out His Grace's homes. Of knowing one's place, insofar as it can be known, of choosing one's battles, and talk of nothing but "could" and "should," like some Oxford Don. I've tried. God knows I've tried, but there's no other path to peace for me – for us. No other assurance for my dear, sweet Henry.

He coos, and I think he means to send his love to you, his Auntie. It will pain me greatly to tell him Auntie cannot come any more, that she is but a tragic figure of his early history. They say how brave you little, Yankee soldiers are, how the small, American army overthrew Crown and Country, and that it makes you bold, but there's a funny thing about war stories: people only care for the version that the victor tells.

And when I won, as I must if you force my hand, what sort of story do you think I might tell?

There's a very good one that I heard recently, about a St. Louis schoolmarm. She vanished from her old life, taking with her a rather recognizable scar just below her left breast. The scar was from a knife-fight, you see, which it is my absolute pleasure to detail for you now.

This little woman, they say, murdered a man in cold blood and vanished into the night with his billfold. Some claimed she was an innocent, of course; the would-be-victim of a brutal scoundrel living in a kill-or-be-killed world, but a good constable found her dress – ruined with blood (his and hers), but ultimately recognizable to those who knew her – and one hardly needs witnesses to fill in the rest.

So much blood could not come from a simple act of self-defense, they said, but from vile, premeditated murder. That dress was dyed the most hideous shade of red, yes, except the police found that only one small smear had come from our Murderess. It bore a cut across the bodice, one which must have left a scar, and the rest… well, the rest looked as though it had been used to sop up a mess on the abattoir floor. So the hunt for that mysterious woman bearing the Mark of Cain commenced. Even to this day, I believe they offer a reward, and mean to hang her by the neck.

That same year, as these things often go, a cunning Madam appeared in a California mining town. She had a trick she'd do, unfathomable to a Lady – unprintable – but they called her Le Dragon for it, and her reputation spread. It was said of Le Dragon that her beauty was rivaled only by her wickedness and wit, that she'd shoot a man as oft as take his custom, that if she drew her pistol she was sure to hit. It was said, too, that she was unmarred – a rarity of fine, straight teeth, bright eyes, pale hair, and a total absence of the pox. Unmarked, all but for a little cut on her ribs. A scar.

And then, under circumstances best left between herself and God, she came to own a little mine in the mountains. A gift from a man who frequented her brothel, no doubt.

Well, what could a scarred, aging dragon want a mine shaft for? But therein lay the crux, you see, for – like all the great wyrms of myth – her little mountain proved to contain a treasure heap. She sold it at an alarming sum to a crooked, little man with a funny accent and a cane, and turned to speculation, the only trade more vile than prostitution, and her comfortable fortune grew exponentially obscene.

So, that's a seemingly happy end for Le Dragon. She escaped her crime, came into money, got lucky in trade, and vanished, suddenly, nevermore to be seen.

That would have been between '49 and '53, I think, before we were so blessed to receive you in
Society. Perhaps you chanced to meet her once? Our eccentric Mrs. Mallory, who wears feathers in her hair and keeps a brace of pistols in her garter…. I wonder if she might not prove very interesting under scrutiny?

I am no matronly phantom at Lourdes, the kind of which has been so recently written up, whose visage appears to frighten the little Catholic girls into the confessional. I've claws, my dear, and new allies as well. Do you think Derby won by accident this past Sunday? Forces which one of your rugged, American sensibilities cannot possibly comprehend have been brought to a point, and you must bow to the necessity of progress or lie broken in its wake.

His is the losing side, Mal. You, who answer to none, save him, shall answer now to me. I insist upon the unabridged account of it, even if I must claw it from you bosom myself: his habits, his mode of dress, his demeanor, likes, reticence… Everything you may have noted when you last parted in the autumn. Has the fiend changed at all? It is in his very nature to be mercurial, cunning to a fault.

It is his own hubris which has brought this about, no fault of my own. He disparaged my overtures and pleas when I appealed to his charity, not to mention that ungracious business in Town at the start of January. He has used me deplorably to secure his own place in Society, and will not consent to call now that I've need of gold.

Do you know it has been nearly a twelve-month since I saw him last? I had the great displeasure of happening upon him in London last spring, when I was – for a few days – able to make my excuses to His Grace and slip away. You know what a sneering, foppish cretin he becomes when he's got a captive audience greedy to gamble for a scrap of his wealth. It sickens me.

R.M.B, but St. George if need be.

LI. Sirens

"Come," said Miss Phillips, guiding Belle up the clean-swept step of her impressive town house. The grooms had taken her phaeton from her almost as soon as she'd turned onto the street, a staff of two or three men, from the look of them Chinese.

Belle followed her host into the foyer, decorated to perfection with ornate furniture and brocade, but Miss Hua remained to speak with the men.

"You have a lovely home," Belle said, unsure how to proceed. She had never been at ease in the Judge's home, reliant though they'd been on his charity, and desperately wanted to avoid one of the innumerable offences she'd given him. Nothing she'd done could please him; how, then, to please a fine lady in Society?

"It was my father's residence," Miss Phillips replied, shrugging off her fitted pelisse. "But now it's just Mama, Hua, and me."

The fine detail of a brooch at the collar of her dress, previously obscured, caught the light with a ferocity that told Belle it was not mere paste. She was rich, then, but unmarried and past the age of a governess, and still in possession of a fine property even though her father was dead.

"Oh, I'm… I'm so sorry," Belle said. She didn't know what she'd have done without Sir Maurice.

"Don't be," Miss Phillips replied snappily, and escorted her into a parlor already set for tea.

A maid, this one English, bustled in with a tray of macaroons and sandwiches, all stacked neatly on a three-tiered, silver tray. Miss Phillips thanked her, and then asked for a trousseau of dresses to be
made ready as they sipped their drinks quietly.

"I'm sorry if I gave you an offense just now," Belle offered. She might not be wholly couth, but she understood the value of an apology.

"No, no, of course not," Miss Phillips assured her. "My father, you see, is something of a sore point in this family, and not one for whom we are accustomed to feel sympathy. I ought not to have snapped; only I forgot – you wouldn't have any way of knowing about it, would you? We've both got our stories, I should think, and you deserve to know the truth about those who harbor you. I'll tell you a sad one, while we wait for Hua, and then… perhaps you will tell us something?"

Belle nodded, agreeing. She'd hear anything these women had to say.

"Will I need to call for the smelling salts, Miss French, or can you tolerate open talk of scandal with your tea?"

"I think that I can tolerate almost anything."

"Good," Miss Phillips replied. Her brown hair crowned her head so perfectly that Belle could hardly imagine her with so much as a strand out of place, yet her eyes had a firm resilience to them that spoke of unfathomable hardship. It was steel that she shared with Hua, a look they both mirrored.

"My father, you see, was a good man. He loved my mother very much, but he was an officer and she a Lady. She gave up everything to marry him, and the two of them were happy. They had me, a little money, and a little home in the country where she stayed when he was away. We were content.

"Then, when I was not quite fifteen, my father's fortunes changed. He was sent to China, became something of a prodigy in the language, and it elevated his rank considerably. We found ourselves the wife and daughter of an ambassador; our lives surpassed comfort to become luxury. The room you are sitting in, Miss French, the house itself, was a gift from some patron or another of the East India Company, to thank my father for his indispensable advice.

"We began to move in the best circles of London, and I was even presented at Court once. Mama was a sensation, born to it, and returned at last. Nothing could have been more perfect, it quite spoiled me."

"What happened, then?" Belle asked her, curious to the point of folly.

"An American widow seduced him. She made herself his mistress, took him away from his family. Mama hated them both for that, so she snubbed the woman publicly. It spread, of course, and the other Ladies took note of it. It happened that she had the public's sympathy, and – I think she quite forgot herself. She made such a scene one night, I can't imagine what she might have been thinking, but that was the turning point.

"That spiteful, American cow tired of my father eventually, but even after they'd done no one would come to call on Mama or me. We received no cards, no invitations, nothing, and my mother never recovered. Her illness keeps her abed most days, she needs her sleep."

Miss Hua joined them, then, settling in on the settee with a feline grace, and Miss Phillips continued her story.

"It became such an infamous scandal, and there was nothing at all that I could do for her, and father was sailing east again… so I insisted that we be permitted to join him. Anything to get her
away from Society for a while, I thought it might help to escape. I bid my suitors good bye, demanded that my father behave honorable, and all of us were shipped off to China, post haste. My father's work kept him busy, and Mama and I remained totally isolated, but she did improve a little… she will come down to tea now, sometimes, if all is right in the world. Still, we would surely have perished there, if not for Miss Hua to guide us."

Miss Hua took her friend's hand, squeezing it gently, and then began to speak in her lilting, accented English. "It was a bad time for the English to be in Beijing. The authorities seized the Arrow, and loyalties were questioned. My father was also a diplomat, and he believed that the Opium Wars were starting again."

"Yes," Miss Phillips agreed. "A very bad time, indeed; they arrested my father – executed him, probably." Miss Hua gave a grim nod, affirming that possibility. "My own father, too. And I helped Aurora and her household escape the city. They are still fighting, it was a wise retreat."

"So, you see, I have been lost and in need of rescuing. I know something of sacrifice. We couldn't simply leave you stranded in the streets," the brown-haired woman concluded, eyes misting.

Belle could only nod mutely and dab at her tears. She knew the siren song of sleep that had claimed Aurora's mother, the appeal of fading into a darkened room to revel in silence and forget her misery. Misadventures in love and marriage could destroy someone. She wondered, for a moment, if it was not the same siren song that held Rum in such thrall to the poppy, but thinking of him – even that much – threatened to overwhelm her. She could not – not so soon – and yet, she owed them a story.

The maid re-entered the parlor, informing her mistress that the required gowns had been readied, as well as a spare bedchamber, and Belle was spared the need to look at her hosts as she spoke. From behind a dressing screen, careful to conceal as much of her bruising as she could from the maid, Belle was fitted into Miss Phillip's old dresses and given an opportunity to bathe.

She felt almost like a shadow puppet, animated by a series of grommets and strings. Her concealment gave her strength, and she began to speak.

"I was also raised in the country, and my father – my guardian, I should say – always treated me as his beloved daughter. In reality, I was his ward, the orphaned child of one of his Eton chums – I don't know much. We were never rich, but we were happy, only…"

"Only, he fell on very hard times. My father is a kind, goodly man, but not a wise one. He invested where he ought to have saved, and was becoming a little desperate, I think. I never knew the extent of it, of course. Not until it was too late. I never thought to marry, either. I'd have nursed him all his life, if he'd let me, and I'd no dowry to speak of, but an arrangement was made and I became engaged to a friend – the son of a friend of the family."

"He was a dutiful man, and I a dutiful daughter. I would have made a dutiful wife to him, so please – please don't think me some silly, love-struck runaway. I never could have resented the match; we were at least acquainted with one another, though it would not have been my first choice.

It's just… a man came. And he offered to rescue my father from bankruptcy, if only I'd come and…" Belle struggled for the words to explain her transformation from scullery maid to fiancé. Best to skip it entirely, for who could possibly hope to understand such a thing?

"If only I'd come and be his wife. He loved me. He said he did, and I thought that I loved him. It
was a mistake. He released me from our arrangement, and I came to London that very same night on the train. I am going home to my family."

"You quarreled?" asked Miss Phillips in the same breath that Hua stated, "He hurt you."

"Yes. There was a misunderstanding, and a darkness I'm not sure I can forgive. In the end, he released me."

Belle touched the ligature marks around her wrist, yellowing at the edges. He swore it had been done accidentally, a misguided attempt to spare her discomfort, but that did little to ease the humiliation and hurt of it. He'd done it because of the laudanum – would never have done it if he'd been in his right mind, she was sure. Bruised wrists and wounded pride were a small price to pay for that knowledge, but it was sickness of the heart that hurt most of all.

She should not have been blind to his faults. But if he would not give it up or find some way to curb his reliance on it, then she could not stay. He'd erupted the very moment she tried to throw his little row of poisons away. Had she been wrong to do so? No, Belle decided, tugging at the sleeves of the second-hand gown. She'd only done as much as was necessary to cure him; the problem lie in the fact that Rum did not want her sort of cure, he wanted the sort of cure found in a bottle of laudanum.

Belle didn't know where she found the strength to say what she did next, hidden though she was behind the screen.

"It was opium," she confessed. "It made him dangerous. I thought it was medicine before, or something poets drank, but it just made him careless and unthinking."

"It is better that you escaped, then," said Hua, with no doubt at all. "Poppy is red for blood and fire, but black at its core. It signifies death."

"What… what does that mean?" Belle asked, stepping out to look at the other women.

"Soldiers are killing for it in my country right now. It is illegal in China, except for medicine. Having too much can kill a man slowly, but then so will having none."

"Having none?" Belle asked, her stomach churning.

"Yes. I have bundles of poppy that can put an elephant to sleep with a sniff, a wonder of Ancient medicine, but at what cost?"

"They tried to stop the men from smoking it 300 years ago, but they went mad with want of it. Their bodies craved it, and they did not survive, so the Emperor – in his wisdom – banned it. Your country sees the poppy fields in China as a prize to win, a game of war to play, and I say let them have it. For every measure of comfort, it gives out an equal measure of hurt. Then your soldiers will see what it they are really fighting for."

"I… I didn't know…" Belle staggered, the siren song of sleep calling to her once more. She'd burned it all, every bottle. Could she have killed him?

She hadn't meant it like that, but could not deny she'd done it as a desperate act, against his wishes, without consulting anyone but herself. The guilt of their parting and the hurts they'd done one another brought her near to swooning.

"No," said Miss Phillips, uncomprehending. "The dress will do. I'll have the maid raise the hem on the rest of them, and you'll take them on with you."
Belle could not collect her thoughts well enough to protest.

"We'll leave you now," she continued. "You look positively exhausted, I'm sorry – I hadn't realized how the journey must have tired you."

Belle managed a tentative nod, and they left.

She dressed herself sluggishly, every movement an ache and every ache a memory. Her hair needed tending, but the heaviness of her arms prevented her from braiding it properly. She could not understand, beneath the weight of it all, how the rest of the world remained upright – and London a marvel. It was as though they'd plugged their ears to the lullaby of sleep, leaving only her to hear Morpheus' invitation to escape. It would be easier to abandon herself entirely, to never confront reality, but even a decision as simple as surrender lie fathoms beyond her capacity.

Finally wearing a linen night dress that was far too long for her, Belle crawled into the bed clothes and gave herself over to the siren's call.
Chapter 18

LII. Battle Fatigue

"I'm not certain I understand you, my Lord," Mr. Nolan remarked with a worried brow. He had a smudge of gear-grease on his nose, but was otherwise blonde, fair, and every epitome of the country gentry. Gold found him jarringly out of place amid the dun-gray faceless crowd of laborers.

"On what terms do you offer us this living? My profession was the military, I'm no clergyman to shepherd your locals, no scholar to tutor your children."

"I should hope not," Gold scoffed. "And I doubt very much there's anything complimentary to say about your business acumen either, if you're anything like your father. You'll manage the farmland and crofters, if anyone enquires, though frankly I don't give a damn what you do, so long as you live within the means allotted you."

"You want to keep us under-thumb, living off an allowance like children," he surmised. His voice sounded neither surprised nor accusing - evidence of a level head.

"I want to keep Her Grace from making us both ridiculous, and – perhaps – to irk Earl Spencer. What you and your wife choose to do with yourselves is entirely immaterial."

"I decline, my Lord, but thank you all the same for your offer," Nolan replied, clipping his heels together and coming to attention as though it were simply a force of habit with him.

It was easy to see how he'd excelled in the military, fit and strong, a modicum of justice in his heart; it was easier still to envision how this 'spare' son must have devastated Spencer's ambitions to manufacture a Prime Minister. Where Sir James Nolan shifted and squirmed to accommodate the whims of those useful him, Mr. David Nolan would not budge. Surrounded by the white tufts of cotton that wafted from the looms, he looked almost Biblical – manna-dappled in his resolve.

"By all means, as it suits you," Rum totted, bowing mockingly low as he leaned on his cane. "You may collect what wages you've earned and take your leave of us."

"You're dismissing me," the young man gaped, "because I refuse to be kept like a prize hound?"

"Aye, as it's my factory, I think I will. You are, of course, welcome to seek your biscuits and kibble elsewhere. I believe there's an estate in the highlands that will be posting-out for a manager quite soon, but I'd raise my ambitions if I were you. There's your family to consider. What opportunities does a factory-hand's wife possess; hers is the way of poverty. An estate manager might make an honest fortune for himself, though, if he laid-by his pennies."

"It seems I have no choice, my Lord." And there was that resignation to duty so necessary in the soldier-class.

"There's always a choice, lad," Rum replied, dropping his voice. "Always. Some of us are simply more blessed in the terms made available to us. You will accompany me tomorrow morning, on the seven o'clock train. A stipend will be provided to your wife to close up her household and transport it all at her leisure. I'll send word to the bank-clerk to draft a note for you, and Mrs. Nolan may join us as soon as convenient."

"Yes, Sir," Nolan replied. The gentle, resigned way in which he articulated the words cut through
"Dammit, don't sir and m'lord me, boy. We aren't in London with a bunch of puffed-up Englishmen, this is Scotland. And we aren't fucking soldiers, either. Gold is my name, save your m'lords for a few more years and give them to my son."

"As you like," Nolan sighed.

The two of them quit the factory, and Rum made arrangements to travel in the morning. It would be a superb advantage to keep the son of an Earl and the daughter of a Duke in his pocket; the thought that any such person of their rank and position would take employment – any employment – was a scandal. It simply was not done. A whisper of the Spencer heir dirtying his hands in common labor would send them to fits in Town, their parents must have gone to quite extraordinary lengths to keep the affair from the papers.

Yet here he stood, half-crippled and miserable, with the Earl of Spencer and the self-styled Regent of White Hall each indebted to him for at least one favor more. It was no fault of his if they'd neglected to mention what should become of the eloping lovers following Mr. Nolan's dismissal, and – really – they must have been desperate to involve him. His bureau at home held several weeks of letters, demanding that he sack the young Nolan, and he'd done it.

It felt comfortable, in the wake of so much sorrow, to yank back on both bits and bridles for two of his most bothersome means-to-ends. Her Grace had her uses, though she flirted with ruin like the Parisian harlot, and Spencer – though destitute in practice – had retained all the ears and eyes of Parliament. Well, his would not be the last great family to run afoul of rocks; if they did not modernize and continued to live as their fathers and grandfathers had used to do, the whole countryside would be peopled by pauper-Earls and their trade-bound sons.

Spencer, at least, served a purpose. If this latest lapse into Whiggishness was not one of his devices, then Rum could not guess how it had come to pass. Certainly not through an honest and accurate election, the fanciful, little minority government would never see its sophomore sessions.

Her Grace presented a more drastic problem. Nolan's wife had no grounds on which to inherit, and Lord White Hall had left little enough behind to tempt a man to take her. The prestige of wedding and bedding a Duke's daughter dried up somewhat with the influx of wealthy, finishing-school fortune diggers into London. Still, for all that Rum condemned Town, he played his part – the villainous Viscount – with cunning and aplomb. Lady White Hall greased the machine, allowing him to pass muster and do as he pleased – though if she carried on flaunting her new-found liberty, she'd eventually be of no use to anybody.

It was tempting to consider the implications of installing Mrs. Nolan into her seat. At a purely hypothetical level she might cause him less head ache, though he'd have a rough time convincing the appropriate channels that a woman who eloped before reaching her majority had any business holding an honorary title. Daughters could not inherit their fathers’ fortunes and properties, but she might make a better Regent until the White Hall heir came of age.

Leopold's daughter would never be obedient, though. Not the woman who ran off to play at poverty while her Lord husband dirtied himself in factories. In the middle classes, such a slight would be unforgivable; in the aristocracy, it might pass for eccentricity, but an eccentricity of this magnitude would still prove wholly embarrassing. If Mrs. Nolan did not fear scandal or poverty, she could prove fierce indeed.

Her Grace, for all that he'd been the one to give her the first lessons of politicking, for all that she'd grown fangs and faces rife with the venom of a dozen exotic snakes, at least liked to be liked. She
liked to be praised. It made her easier to manage, the very hallmark of Lord Henry Millcroft's reliance upon indulgent nurses and Lady Millcroft's lackluster mothering. Cora, Rum recalled, had been equally fearless and ambitious too; the bastard son of a Viscount had not been enough to tempt her.

Cora rejected him in his rage, his wife despised him in his duty, he sent Bae away before the child could learn to hate him in kind, and Belle… Belle took one look at the tainted, wretched thing that remained and tried to soothe it with a cup of tea. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps he was cowardly.

Her Grace had proved useful to him on several occasions, and understood the principles of a mutual exchange. Best not retire her too hastily; he owed Cora nothing, but if her daughter proved half so troubling it could prove a long, bitter day. Mrs. Nolan might be of use to him, on such a day. Rumford had no use for the willful step-daughter immediately, but he recognized – at least – that he'd stumbled upon a valuable chess piece. Miss French, he thought, would probably not have cared for the analogy.

The next morning, Rumford brought his cab up along-side the let house where the Nolans resided before the sun had crested the skyline. It was not as run-in as he'd expected; foolish of them to take so grand a place, even one with blistering paint and dirtling whitewash. They'd not have maintained themselves for long in this neighborhood, on a hastily-discharged officer's pension and a manager's salary, even if the Lady had foregone servants, furniture and tailors. He was certain Spencer would have seen to it that no line of credit remained available to them, an obvious first step to take.

From his seat in the street, he waited to see the signs of life - a light in the window, a flutter of the drapes. Finally he spotted a pale shape through the panes.

Rum's leg ached in the spring air, and he dreaded the quick jaunt from the carriage and up to their landing, but it could not be avoided. Leaning heavily on his cane, he adjusted his neck tie and made the journey. As he'd expected, there was no servant to admit him. Instead, a woman who could only be Lady Mary Margaret Blanchard – the fiery Mrs. Nolan, greeted him. The woman had thick black hair that paled to his memory of chestnut curls and pale-milk skin that could never flush to please him, but she was over-thinned. Gaunt, even, as though she'd skipped meals on more than one occasion. Their time in the North had not been kind to Mrs. Nolan, but then poverty was no friend to anyone.

Gold idly wondered if her husband realized that she'd economized their household at the expense of her health, given the bread-winner the greater share of their penny-loaves. If he hadn't yet, he would have done soon enough. Desperation was rife on the air around the woman.

"My Lord," Nolan's wife started.

"Mrs. Nolan," Gold nodded in return.

"You'll forgive the irregularity of our introduction, won't you," he continued. It was not a question. "I've come to collect your husband. He's apprised you of the situation?"

"My husband apprises me of nothing, we make our decisions in tandem. Mr. Nolan will not accept your offer without my consent, and I will not consent without further discussion. Won't you come in?"

He'd been quite right to think she'd be a disobedient one. Gold did not move to cross the threshold.

"There's naught to discuss, madam. You are starving, or will be; I offer a shred of respectability, a
salary, and lodgings. I offer a living. You will both end in the poorhouse if you do not accept my aid, and your husband knows this to be the case. Unless you've come to hate him since marrying, there can be no objections raised."

"I love my husband! That will never change, not in bounty or in misery," the woman bristled, and Gold caught a glimpse of that familiar bravery. He could see the fairness of her, and the naiveté. All these brave women, loving their men into early graves, set his teeth to grating.

"Love," Rum sneered, hackles rising, "is a disease, more deadly than malaria and three times as cunning. Your husband will have only love to fill his belly with you to mismanage all his money."

"How dare you speak to me this way!"

"I dare, madam, because you have dared to provoke me with nonsense and stupidity. Will you let that damnable Blanchard pride that stops you from accepting help from anybody slip by the wayside, or shall I take my leave?"

She struggled for a few moments to compose her face, every inch the Lady. Belle had the same sort of quiet dignity.

"Mr. Nolan will be down presently," Mrs. Nolan managed, closing the door in his face.

Gold had already retreated into his cab by the time Mr. Nolan arrived, fighting the urge to sleep. The labor of forgetting was utterly exhausting. His leg hurt too, and there was nothing for it but a sip of poppy, barely enough to wet the lips. He was not an opium-eater. He was not, and he needed to remain awake, to work at the art of forgetting, to conquer remembering.

Mr. Gold thought he had rather re-live a hundred thousand nights in Spain than recall a single moment of their parting.

"You gave my wife quite the fright," Mr. Nolan said, lifting himself into the carriage. Gold had not seen him approach.

"Your wife is over-proud, I think." Over-proud, spoiled, and foolhardy. That they were willing to do what was necessary for the sake of liberty spoke well of them, to Rum's thinking. That they'd executed their escapade as well as any member of the aristocracy indulged with macaroons and feather duvets could have done spoke of reality. A sensible girl brought up with nothing, like Miss French, would not have been so silly.

"If you continue in that manner, we will quarrel, Sir. I'd have thought by the look of you that you'd done enough fighting for three life-times. Aren't you tired of it?"

"Not yet," Gold glowered, and the lie felt hollow on his lips. He was tired of everything, and direly needed a rest. Yet there was no rest for the wicked, at least that was the saying; at least, none without poppy.

"Snarl all you like at me, then. I will not tolerate rudeness toward my wife, not even from my patron. It was damn ungentleman-like."

"Boy," Rum sighed, massaging the flesh above his knee, "there is nothing gentlemanly about me."

LIII. March 15, 1858

Mr. Jefferson,
It is our happy obligation to inform you that your wife has been selected personally, by Her Grace, the Duchess-Regent of White Hall, to benefit from a position in Her Grace's Charitable Home for Wayward Girls. Mrs. A. Jefferson has been transferred to our facilities in Devon, where she will be privileged to receive the most modern, progressive treatments available for hysteria and criminal insanity in Britannia today.

Especial dispensation from the District Court has been granted in this case, and the remainder of her mandated treatment commuted to this new, private establishment. Lady White Hall has consented to offer her personal note of congratulations, enclosed, and wishes you many happy returns.

Kindest regards from all of us here at Prestwich,

Dr. F- - - - - -

To Mr. Jefferson of Manchester, Druggist, from the desk of HG the Right Hon. Lady Regina Blanchard, Duchess-Regent White Hall.

My dear sir,

I apologize that we two could not have met in person to discuss the particulars of your poor Alice's case. Instances of insanity triggered by the loss of a beloved child, most remarkably those such as your wife whose symptoms are well-documented in the press, are a terrible affair, indeed. I know that I should be devastated if any harm befell my darling Henry, and so it is with a mother's sympathy that I have intervened.

There is no need to thank me for my benevolent generosity; it is no more than my rank and duty demand of me.

You are welcome, of course, to visit your wife by appointment at our facilities, though I admit the distance between Plymouth and Manchester puts you at something of a disadvantage in the arrangement. Still, my doctors inform me that, for the truly insane, a progressive regimen of regular medication and hydro-therapy to dull the passions is generally considered best practice.

And, of course, should Mrs. Jefferson's afflictions prove curable in the course of her treatment, it would be within the discretion of our physicians (by edict of the Justices) to remand her back into your custody, wherever you may happen to be. That, I think, is an occasion which you have long been desirous to see.

It strikes me now, as I am writing, that you are yourself a master of the new pharmacology; that there is, possibly, an elixir or tonic of your own device which may prove most advantageous to us. Of course, one must never be too cautious with the exploration and circulation of new compounds. Dalliances can be deadly. Mistakes in the formulas are often made.

We must speak of these mistakes, of strict, best practices, when you are next down to visit your wife in my end of the country. In fact, I would be remiss if I did not offer you accommodation on the White Hall properties – we've an abundance guest rooms, and – of course – the house is hardly more than a brisk carriage ride away from the asylum on a good day.

You will visit when it is convenient for you, of course, though I think your wife's convenience demands that you travel with all urgency. I do not wish to be indelicate, naturally, but the first exposure to hydro-therapy can be rather jarring, and my staff assures me that they will have need of sedation and heavy restraints without a member of the immediate family present to moderate.
I am so very pleased to have been of service to you and yours and – indeed – to all of the little people,

Lady Regina Blanchard, Duchess-Regent White Hall

LIV. Charybdis & Scylla

The struggle toward wakefulness proved to be a half-mad, hefty labor, worthy of Heracles. If not for Miss Phillips and Hua's generosity, Belle was not sure she could have faced the day. That first journey from her dressing gown to Miss Phillips' dress presented an almost insurmountable obstacle, but Belle simply refused to accept defeat.

Knowing the finer details of Miss Phillips' tale, and with the benefit of reflection, Belle could see the sadness writ large over her face, and Hua carried herself with the almost resigned determination of one who expected to die young, living boldly. They were all of them tired, hurting in their own ways, but undefeated for all that.

They'd seen the nadir, Belle realized; they'd seen it in Mrs. Phillips, still abed well after tea, and Miss Phillips had recognized it when she'd rescued Belle on Euston Grove. It was goodness, nothing more or less, and it gave her courage to proceed.

Belle had never known what it was to be brave; she'd feared for her very life the night that Mr. Gold took her away, but it was a worthy sacrifice. When she ransacked his study, it had not been bravery. It was fear, anger, resent for his rough treatment of her, unintentional though it was, and she could not do as Rum did, as Mrs. Phillips did, and lie in dreams until the enormity of guilt and shame melted away. Between the swirling vortices of guilt and the looming, many-faced visage of hate, she would have to make her own way. There was no grand gesture or sacrifice to ease the passing - only responsibility, the obligation to make amends one day.

It was, she decided, these little, every-day acts of bravery that made the world a livable place. Epics and ballads always set so much store by scope, made everything grand, raised the stakes, but reality was small and sad; it was down to her – determined to be the heroine of her own story – to discover and keep the things that made her happy.

Rum had made her happy, once. She couldn't hate him for it – she did not think she could hate anybody – but that did little to take the sting away.

And she hadn't meant to harm him, though her common sense (with the benefit of a little sleep) now assured her that he should not have died for want of a druggist. He'd only to send out for Mr. Jefferson or any one of the sundry physicians within easy riding distance. Besides, it would have been in the papers if he had not.

It was strange to think of it now, in London; Sonnachdubh and marriage felt life-times away. Ruby, Archie, Mrs. Lucas, and the rest of them… even the taciturn Mr. Dovey, felt remote. They had made her happy too, eventually.

"Off wool-gathering?" Miss Phillips asked, pulling Belle from her reverie. She stood with a card in hand, and a small, folded note.

"Just remembering," Belle confessed. There had been nothing light or woolly in what she was thinking.

"I've just had word from the rail company's clerk," Miss Phillips continued. "He assures us that the Paddington line to Plymouth will be operational on the morrow, and that there was really nothing
much to worry about, nothing wrong at all, extraordinarily ordinary maintenance needs. It's the same with all men, I think; nothing to worry the ladies, nothing to fret us. You'd think we'd shatter but for the army of atlantes hoisting up unpleasantries, as if we don't know the roof could collapse at any moment."

"They are silly things," Miss Hua agreed.

Belle thought there might be some truth to that, maybe not for men, but for human beings, generally. They covered up their struts and columns with unnecessary pretties, carved telamones and high-relief, but none of it lasted an eternity. Marble lasted, and the pyramids; lies were just stick-built eddies, covered over with plaster and paste, like the follies she'd gawked at outside Euston station. And for those trapped within when the plaster flaked? Belle rationalized that she already knew what that looked like.

"What shall we do with your last full day in the city?" Miss Phillips enquired over their morning tea.

"Pardon me?"

"If you're feeling well, we might take a ride through the park. Tour the Thames, before the stench of it becomes overwhelming, or marvel at the Lord Nelson's column. A greater eye-sore you've never seen, but as they went to all the trouble of building the thing…"

"The Marbles," Belle said at once, rousing herself from melancholy. "I'd like to see the Elgin Marbles before I leave, something that was built to last."

"I don't know why not," Hua replied. "They are on display in the Museum, if you don't mind Ottoman-sanctioned pillaging and vandalism."

"However they came to be here," interjected Miss Phillips, "the point is that they are here now. Of course we can go to see them, if you like. I think they are being cleaned, presently; perhaps I'll take my opera glasses, we may spot Westmacott scrubbing them if we're keen."

Belle laughed at that, despite her generally sour thoughts.

“I did read in the papers that they were awfully dirty,” Belle allowed, “but I'd still like to see them anyway. However they come – it’s the closest to Athens I’ll ever be.”

“Do you like to travel?” Hua pondered.

“I don’t know,” Belle confessed. “I think I’d like it – I like the rail well enough, and I’d desperately love to see the places in my books one day, but London is the only place I’ve ever been.”

“And Scotland,” Miss Phillips reminded, kindly.

“Yes,” she answered, remembering those few perfect days, the easy winter at Sonnachdubh, and her errand in Manchester. “Yes, I suppose that was something of an adventure, in retrospect.”

On their circuit through town, Miss Phillips planted firmly on the box of her phaeton, they procured a ticket for Plymouth and a schedule for the train. She would leave at nine o’clock, May the 24th, and arrive later that same day. Her hosts would not hear of Belle repaying them for the cost of it, and Belle thought she’d never met two more generous-spirited people.

They arrived at the British Museum before the sun had passed its zenith, though the fog – soot,
Belle corrected – kept the brightest rays from reaching them. Ladies with fine, lace gloves and parasols marched up and down the stairway, while men in tweed coats and spectacles tarried on the pavement beneath.

Hua remained stoic as they approached the columns, Miss Phillips close at her side, and Belle lost herself to the massive columns and relief of the Greek façade. It was so new – so modern – yet styled by the same sculptor now responsible for cleaning the sculptures she’d come to see, drenched in history. It was entirely beyond reason, at that moment, to imagine that every beautiful thing was nothing more than a plaster reliquary.

Whatever her troubles might have been, she felt blissfully happy. The Round Reading Room, second only to the Pantheon, the Greenville Library, the West Wing – full to bursting with Egyptian antiquities, and the newest displays from Britain’s own history entirely consumed her grief. The only possible improvement would have been if she’d come to this place with her husband, happily married.

Belle felt a little ashamed to be so enraptured by an outing she’d planned to share with Rumford, but she was not guilty, not grieving. The snarling sea monsters that had threatened so recently to swallow her down seemed small and almost petty in the presence of so great a masterpiece.

She could see right away what had been meant by calling the sculptures “dirty.” The grayest of them bore a thick patina, but the craftsmanship and detail was unrivaled. The whitest of the marbles, those most recently cleaned, seemed almost to be lacking something. Was that the price of remaining pristine, a loss of the creator’s fidelity?

It was incorrigible. These were no mere follies, built up to resemble ruins, no plaster pediment meant to add gravitas; they were the original creations of a bygone era, and if they were grey – if they were bruised, a little – then that was also part of their story. Even dismantled and taken far from their home, scrubbed of their history, the ruins had dignity.

“Miss French? Miss French? Belle, please… you are crying,” Aurora whispered, petting her shoulders. “Is everything alright?”

“It’s nothing, I’m fine – really. I only just realized something.”

“What is it?”

“When you build something strong, something that’s not merely pretty, it won’t always be sparkling. But it will always be.”

“You mean your fiancé.”

“Yes. I… I can’t excuse the wrongs done me, but I think I can forgive him. Some day.”

“The things you love are always worth fighting for,” Hua said, speaking for the first time. She grasped her friend’s hand tightly. “Will you return to Scotland now?”

“No, not yet. I want to see my Papa, and I need time to think. I hate to ask another favor of you, but is there any shop nearby that might carry current literature on the Cristino conflict in Spain, and a general section on medicinal botany?”

“I’m sure we can find something,” Miss Phillips agreed.
"It's a beautiful estate," Mr. Nolan complimented, as Gold settled himself into his favorite seat. They'd spent their day touring the farms and blackhouses, evaluating the cottages, and reviewing the accounts. He wasn't sure what he'd expected to find in Earl Spencer's wayward son, but the lad seemed determined to execute his duties – whatever they may be – honorably and intelligently. Rum supposed it diluted the sting of accepting what Mr. Nolan called "coerced charity."

"It's a shame the house is left to ruin, though; the estate makes more than enough to refurbish the place and modernize some of the plow-shares. Not that you couldn't afford it out of pocket." Rum found it awkward to hear a man of his breeding speak so openly of money, but then, he'd been a soldier and a factory hand – both circumstances bound to teach even the most frugal of souls the worth of a coin. If his father could have learn the same as a younger man, he'd have been happily secure in his ever-increasing age.

"Watching this rat-warren crumble around me is an unparalleled delight," Rum countered. "Do nothing to impede it."

"You deny that improvements are necessary?" the fair-haired man asked him, confusion plain in his wide, blue eyes.

"I deny that improvements are wanted," Gold responded. "I possess homes up and down the country, in the continent, and even in the States. This house is neither wanted nor valued, but as I was deprived the joy of spitting on my father's face, I find the slow, stagnant ruin of his damn building projects quite suits me."

"And yet you've hired an estate manager for it?"

"I've made it quite clear that I don't care what you do with your time and salary. If you insist upon earning your keep, do it for Bae. That's my boy. He'll inherit all of it, one day, and wouldn't like for the crofters to suffer too much, probably. Let him knock it down, burn and gut it, and build whatever he likes when he comes of age. The family seat ought to reflect the head of the family, don't you think? It's just another of the infamous Lord Sonnachdubh's stripes, a warning like a poison snake."

"With all respect, Sir, you're not much like what the stories say. My father always called you an uncommon dandy, mean as a caged beast beneath all the trimmings."

"If you saw me in London, you might agree. I am a Viscount, which is a pointless thing to be, worthless as the monarchy, but I enjoy the benefits of my title – when it suits me. It is irrefutably better to be powerful than weak, rich than poor, and cunning than stupid. I am a powerful, rich, cunning man, Mr. Nolan, and I hate the bastards in their self-appointed glory as much as I hate anything."

"So your contempt is a parody?"

"That's unexpectedly astute of you," Rumford agreed. "But we are not in London, not even in England. Here I am merely Mr. Gold – and if I am fearsome, it has nothing to do with the advantages a title affords me."
"That is… not especially comforting," Nolan hedged.

Rum only sneered at him. "It wasn't meant to be."

"I've seen men like you before, you know. You won't bully me into doing nothing for something, I'm going to do my level-best to execute the responsibilities you've given me."

"Dearie, there are no men like me. You'd have better luck looking in the tiger-pits, or finding some country club where they still allow bear-baiting. I won't show you kindness for trying to befriend me; you're my little treasure, a small insurance policy, hidden away while the sycophants in England plot and scheme against me."

"You said this position was –"

"An opportunity!" Rum grinned, letting all the showmanship of the Viscount he so often portrayed come to the front of his face. "One you had to accept, if you loved your wife half-so-well as you pretended!"

"Do not insult my wife in front of me, Sir!" Nolan shouted back at him.

Gold thought the younger man might have punched him, had he not been a cripple, seated, and growing old; Rum liked him for that, at least – and might have liked him better if he'd done it.

"What does a snarling brute like you know about love, anyway?"

"More than you'd think." Rum responded, absentmindedly. Already his head was spinning, craving his medicine, but he wouldn't allow himself to lapse into bad habits. He was not an opium-eater. If he was, then she…

"You loved somebody? Who was she?"

Gold could tell he'd envisioned an old, cross widow with more schemes than beauty. He wouldn't understand, and Gold couldn't face the memories.

"No one I'd care to discuss with my employee," he snapped back, guarding even the thought of Belle jealously.

"Then tell me about your regiment instead, then. I've had a long day, I could use a drink." Without waiting for an invitation, the young man made his way to the side-bar and poured himself a whiskey. He handed Gold half a snifter, evenly measured, and took a seat – not Belle's seat, thankfully – before Rum could object to it.

"Soldier to soldier," Nolan grimaced, "what was it like?"

Rum did not answer him.

"Come now, you've got that thousand-yard stare in your eye again. If I'm to work for you, protect my wife, and be your chess piece, you ought to at least indulge me. I used to get a bit sour in the head myself, before Mary found me. You'd never know it to look at her, but she demmed-near put an arrow in me on the garden at White Hall. Sent it right past my face, and I saw red, but then she looked at me… she looked at me, and she said 'Mr. Nolan, whatever you're so frightened of all the time, you'd better tell me, because I've got your life in my hands now.'

"So I told her, about… about Crimea, and father, and losing James, and she told me about her father, and her step-mother, and it got a little easier. Not much, just a bit, but every day we'd break
away and chat – and I’d barely known her before, we only met for a moment on the Edinburgh platform, but I was in the area and wanted to pay my condolences – but even if I hadn't loved that spoiled, head-strong girl, I did when I knew her.

"And when it became a question of elopement or letting Her Grace lock Lady Mary away, well… I wasn't frightened at all. I was brave. Imagine that, would you? The sour-headed officer force-fit back into civilian life, running off to Scotland to work for a cotton-weaver. It's absurd. But so it goes. I do believe I could find happiness with her anywhere in the country now, like a blasted homing pigeon who doesn't care if it lives in a box or a castle, so long as there's room for the both of them. I suppose it's not very romantic at all, the way I tell it, but then soldiers are rarely blessed to turn a phrase."

"And do you propose to woo me?"

"Be serious, man!" Mr. Nolan scoffed at him. "I know the look, that's all, and I've seen it destroy good men. It might have destroyed me. You're determined to be a bastard, that much is obvious, but you might as well be a bastard with a story."

"I think not."

"Suit yourself, then," said Mr. Nolan. He set aside his whiskey, glass only half-empty, and rose to leave. "But I'll ask again. It doesn't suit me to have sour, old soldiers around Mary. They're not known for their patience, or their predictability."

"Aye, then perhaps she should attempt to be less provoking."

"And maybe the Queen will take to bathing naked in the Thames."

"God save her if she tried," chuckled Rum, despite himself. "I think even her German husband would object to the parfum of all the toilets in London."

LVI. April 18, 1858

My Dear Mrs. Mallory,

Please, please don't be cross with me, Mal. It is my duty, now, to protect the Duchy, for the sake of little Henry. Any price demanded must be paid, for his sake as well as mine; a mother will do anything for the happiness of her child, and I could never deprive Henry of anything the way my own mother so viciously deprived me.

You saw what it was like before His Grace died, felt the necessity of my actions. You helped me, counseled me from the beginning, and if your zeal wavered toward the end of the scheme then it is forgiven, forgotten entirely. Let us both put the ugliness of the past months aside. You cannot think that I resent your origins, or the circumstances that brought you to London. The truth of these matters served my purposes, reduced your obstinacy, but they have done nothing to lessen your endearment to me.

Do not be afraid, not of me. We will never mention that other, separate woman again, if it pleases you best that the lot of it fall quickly from memory. I understand – of course I do – that your reticence to speak came from a misguided notion that you could spare me some future indignity. They say the path to hell is paved with good intentions, and I do think that you intended only to rescue me from the windmills of Don Quixote, but those fears are the phantasms of an over-active imagination. I have seen my true enemies, and tilted at them.

Our mutual friend in the North is not as impenetrable as you think. His rage is terrible, yes, but
soon enough even a sallow scowl will be beyond his means. There's no need to shy away from the
deed, to deny its necessity – we do not scold the hunter who slays the beast, do we? Yet, there is
undiably blood on his hands. But for the blood of a beast we call him a blooded man, and the
rest of the tweed-coated ninnies hoist him up on their shoulders to celebrate the victory.

I'd have you with me, Mal, for soon we will both have cause to celebrate.

As to the other matter to which you cautioned me, I admit that I might have been better served in
taking your counsel. There, you see? I am sorry for denying the wisdom of what you told me. It
was very bad of me. My step-daughter and Sir Nolan did escape, faced with what they perceived as
a common threat – me – to spur them onward. My men afield tell me they have eloped to Scotland.
The pair vanished weeks ago, to say it plainly, though of course Spencer and I have kept the whole
thing hushed-up.

That's not even the worst of it, Mal. I made it plain she'd have no dowry, no living, and no idyllic
cottage on the moors, but the head-strong goose went mad with envy. You recall, of course, that
the girl has a certain propensity for hysterics and criminal insanity from infancy – a vile liar and a
murderess. Mr. Humbert was tasked to escort the child quietly away to bedlam, arranged just so
with all due justice and procedure – but still, to be handled delicately – and I am now meant to
believe that she overpowered him and escaped.

Well, you and I are both intimately acquainted with the prowess of the man in question. What do
you think?

I find his version of events entirely unlikely. It's all so very disappointing, not the least of which
being Mr. Humbert's loss of faith with me. I had… well, it will sound silly now, but I had thought
that he would serve me well, because he loved me. That, I confess, has been a bitter-sweet
revelation, though I still keep him close to me. Friend or enemy, he's privy to entirely too much
sensitive information for me to ever dismiss him, and I do so enjoy his company. Love (in the
sense that a man is capable of loving) is not a necessity.

Some head-strong stallions can only be broken, but never trained. They perform well enough, of
course, but then kick and bite like common destriers the very moment the rider shifts in her seat.
My hand – I think – is heavier and surer than any mount anticipates, and a broken gelding still
looks lovely in the park on parade. The horse will not love you for breaking him, no, but he will
always obey. Yes, always.

I've written, as has Lord Spencer, to put an end to the pair of love-birds. The marriage can certainly
be annulled if it was not consummated, and I am sure that my doctors will find that it was not. Or,
perhaps they will determine that the bride has been such a harlot that she cannot have been
considered marriageable under the law. In either case, I imagine that the pair of them shall either
acquiesce or starve, and an empty belly may yet convince young Nolan to divorce her.

No one shall harbor the pair of them, nor offer them suitable work – though I admit, the thought of
Lady Mary reduced to playing the part of a governess does amuse me. What an outpouring of
vandals and cretins we would have on our hands if she were given access to some unknowing
gentleman's daughters! And, of course, the strapping Mr. Nolan was given an especial discharge
from service, without commission, so that he could shore-up the Spencer legacy; they'll have little
to nothing from the military. George worries that the head-strong whelp of his will shame them
both by looking for common labor, though I'm not sure even Lady Mary could countenance such a
scandal as that would be.

It's all a mess, Mal. I've allies, serfs, and enemies all around me, some of more use than others,
some demanding payment, and some who will thankfully not burden us over-long now. A child is
a wonderful but terrifying responsibility. I hadn't thought I would adore him, Mal. I hadn't planned to dote so. If I fail, I fail the both of us, and I think I would die of sorrow if I ever disappointed my son.

He misses his Auntie, I know he does. His Mamma misses his Auntie as well.

I wish you would come down to visit with us, as I cannot yet return to London. When I think of how that miserable wretch undermined me last winter, I am still near to seething, but it's done now and we all have to live with it. Imagine me, barred from London, wearing black a full twelve-month where nobody else can see it. I might as well drape myself in pastels or jewel tones for all the difference it makes now. It's insulting, almost nauseating, but nothing more can be done for it except to bear the isolation and wait.

And it is isolated. The faces and bodies melt in and out of our lives because they must, for the sake of wage, advantage, or duty. It's not real; it feels like the worst reel ever danced at a ball, yet the quartet soldiers on, stuck repeating the chorus over and over like some Hindu mantra. The only honest one here is Henry, and he's a babe yet.

Certainly you must know that you're my only friend, Mal?

So don't be cross, don't be angry. I have done only what was necessary, and would never damage your reputation simply for the sake of cruelty. I haven't a cruel bone in my body. Please won't you come and ride out with me again, and keep me company?

Your friend,

R.M.B.

P.S. I have a little errand in the northwest at the start of May, but I hope we may meet for a few days – at least – before I depart? If not, you will certainly find me at home after the twentieth, possibly with cause to celebrate.

Gina

LVII. Ithaca

Miss French spent her final evening in London sitting quietly with the Miss Phillips and Hua, studiously avoiding the books she'd purchased earlier that afternoon. She felt all the usual academic eagerness to open them at once, but a certain sense of decorum and trepidation gave her pause. They enjoyed a light supper, and when Belle retired for the night.

She thought she heard, in the still of the night, a pair of bare feet padding up and down the halls; these could only belong to Mrs. Phillips, making a rare sojourn from her chambers, and Belle dared not disturb the ailing woman's excursion. That living shade – broken, miserable, or both – haunted the house so palpably that Belle had almost forgotten that she must have any number of equally human needs. Perhaps she would eat, or deposit her chamber pot for one of the maids; perhaps she would slip into her daughter's quarters and press a kiss to Miss Phillips' pale cheek. In those few, twilight moments, Belle thought that she could weather anything, and it made her brave. She may have been cast away, but if she simply refused to buckle and bend under the strain, when the storm cleared she would still be upright. It might not have been possible for her alone, without help, but Belle had never seen the shame in needing to reach out for aid; she'd been fortunate, aid had been offered freely, and they'd salvaged her. Certain as she was that the sun would rise in a few more hours, Belle knew that she would have been lost without Miss Phillips'
and Miss Hua's reprieve.

Words could never thank them adequately, but she penned a few anyway and left them on the bedside, where they might be discovered after she took her leave.

The wisp of Mrs. Phillips vanished as the dew settled onto the window panes, and Belle slept with the knowledge that she would wake in time for the morning train. She would not and could not succumb to the drowsy sadness that had so recently threatened to capsize her.

"Are you sure you feel quite well enough to travel?" Miss Phillips asked, passing Belle a small valise for the journey.

Bell assured her that she was. The platform at Paddington stood beneath a series of gaunt, iron girders, lacking all the niceties and follies she'd observed at Euston. It was better, she decided, that a place showed its true purpose – a fusion of form and function, spare but strong, and suitable to the rail industry – rather than masquerade in a plaster over-coat of mimicked marble.

"Well you must write to us," Miss Phillips carried on, "and let us know the moment you settle in at home. I'm sure I won't stop worrying until I am quite certain of your safe arrival, so there's no use trying to mollify me with empty words. The rail can be dangerous, especially to a head-strong, stubborn woman who insists that she can travel alone." Aurora gave Belle a playful glare, while Hua merely looked exasperated.

The pair differed on their preferred modes of conduct; Belle had learned that simply by observing them. Miss Phillips did not look to remove herself from the comfort of chaperon and escort, whereas Miss Hua took a more pragmatic approach. As the pair of them had scarcely separated for more than half an hour in the few days Belle knew them, it seemed unlikely that their differing opinions amounted to much. Miss Hua escorted Miss Phillips, and Miss Phillips was happy to engage in any outing that interested Miss Hua. Their arrangement could not have been more elegant in its simplicity, nor their friendship more cherished, not even if the two of them had been husband and wife rather than a pair of unmarried ladies very near to becoming spinsters.

"Thank you," Belle smiled, eyes prickling. "I will write as soon as I can, and I will find a way to repay your generosity toward me. You have been so kind—"

"There is no need for thanks," Hua countered, as though that put an end to things.

Belle thanked them again anyway, waved good bye, and took her seat.

It was not until the bleak gray of London faded to a light, country rain (paired, Belle realized, a little disgracefully with silent tears on her own cheeks) that she dared to examine the two, slim volumes in her valise. The first she set aside, resolving not to alarm herself with talk of opiates and laudanum without the benefit of a medical textbook to fill out the gaps. It would do no good to lose herself in the clammy panic of incomprehensible jargon, to fret in a loaded passenger car when she knew full-well there was nothing she could do about it until she arrived at home.

The second was more a pamphlet, browned with age, than a proper book, but it contained a very informative treatise on the situation in Spain (or would have done, when it was current – Belle guessed that would have been in the mid 40s from the discoloration of it.)

It began with an iteration of the most basic histories, the ones that Belle loosely recalled from the conversations that had taken place around her as a child. The Cristinos fought for the Queen Regent and her daughter, Isabella II; the Carlists fought for the late-King's brother, Infante Carlos. At its heart, it was a Civil War not so very different from the War of the Roses, and regardless of
which side won, a King or Queen from the house of Bourbon would sit the throne.

The author was quick to point out that the battle among the Bourbons was hardly the spirit or back-bone of the conflict; the problem lie in the looming shadow of Napoleon, the French Revolution, and the enlightened thinking of federalized government. The Carlists sought a tradition of Roman Catholicism, to avoid a repeat of Robespierre, and aspired to a monarchy set in place by divinity. The Cristinos, or Liberals as the English sometimes called them, wanted the kind of secular monarchy-republic hinted at in the Americas. Both sides were peopled by soldiers – one-time allies – who'd fought side-by-side to rid France of its last Emperor, and so a conflict in political thought fell to the idle hands of men accustomed to killing professionally.

"Ungentlemanly warfare," the author called it. And so it was. Kindred turned against kindred in the spirit of reform, and in the spirit of tradition. No two causes could have been so likely to provoke the passions of a nation – for the author remained convinced that each party stalwartly and sincerely believed that they had the best interest of Spain at heart. By the time the Liberal armies conscripted English to help them, Lord Eliot's Treaty – dictating the standards of conduct owed to all war prisoners— had failed in all but name.

The horror, reported the author, was in the fact that neither side took prisoners because neither side had the prisons in which to hold them. They fought a mobile war, from the trees and ditches as much as the roads and dales, applying with gruesome precision all they'd learned from doing battle with the likes of Napoleon. Rebels (any man, woman, or child near a battlefield not declared for the nominal victor was a rebel in Spain) were bayonetted in the fields, bodies butchered like fell animals, or more civilly executed by firing squad by the hundreds, every bit as cruel as Madame Guillotine. There was no middle ground, only thousands of brothers murdering brothers as the nation wept.

Belle could scarcely contain her tears. War in books was so very often gallant and bold, the Epics of Homer or the building of Rome contrasted to the gallant redcoats in India and the Crimea, or to her father's generation – the great Evil of Napoleon, vanquished by Lord Admiral Nelson. The truth, she knew in spirit, would not have been so clean; still, reading the first-hand accounts of death by torture and wounded men left festering in village pigsties, awaiting death or the rare luxury of a prisoner exchange made her want to wretch.

How could the ones who survived it bear to look at the world again after so much needless destruction? How did they not see men strewn across every barley field, in the red of every sunset? And Rumford had been one of them, wounded and very likely left for dead, expecting to be gutted in the darkness or jabbed with a bayonet.

He was afraid, she realized with a clammy, cold dread. He was always afraid of those invisible soldiers finding him again, and when he couldn't bear it a moment longer, he drank his potions and he slept, just as Mrs. Phillips did, though the cause of it defied all logical reason and sense. If a soul could be shattered from the inside out, without a single mark upon her, what might happen to one relegated to limp about with the physical proof of fear seared into his limbs? The enormity of it nearly broke Belle in half.

Yet they'd been happy, once, for all that, hadn't they?

Even as the yellow shadow of her bruises remained, Belle knew that she would find it in her heart to forgive Mr. Gold one day. There was goodness in him, and darkness – fueled by a desperate need to escape, to always be safe. That was why he sent his son away, where he would be protected from everything – including himself. It was why, Belle realized with another lurch of bile, he'd tried so nobly to send her home. She could doubt much in his demeanor as the laudanum
transformed him, but never again could she doubt that he'd loved her. She knew, in her soul, that he still did.

Belle rose on unsteady legs, made still unsteadier by the barreling pace of the train, and stumbled toward the back of the car where she might take a little air.

It was clearer there, with the chill May breeze to center her: clearer, and easier to recall that – for all her suspicions about the man's temperament – he had shown her potential for kindness and mercy. He'd gentled toward her, given her books and lesson times, taught her the subtle science of keeping ledgers, and – if she was brave enough to take him at his own word – the indignities and terror she'd suffered had been unintentional. It was not the sort of behavior that could be condoned or allowed to continue, but it was the sort she knew – irrevocably and forever knew – that she had the strength of heart to forgive in him.

She loved him, and if he could be saved then she was going to try to save him. More gently this time, voicing her suspicions without near-killing him from the ravages of poppy withdrawal. He must have his own say in it, and if Mr. Gold rejected her again, it would be enough for her to know that they'd parted in the spirit of compassion and honesty, rather than hurt, shouting, and choking on black smoke.

Beyond her nauseating comprehension, external to the rigors of thought, the English country-side tore past at nearly thirty miles per hour. The cows, fences, and cottages along the line seemed fleeting impressions of themselves, yet somehow less dizzying than her thin, aged pamphlet on Spain. It was more of the world all in one place (if the rear-platform of a locomotive could be considered relatively stationary) than she'd ever experience on that first, frightful carriage ride north.

If the British Museum was a sampling of the globe, then the railway was a sampling of the nations, and one day – perhaps – as the rails advanced and museums expanded, perhaps the world would know enough of itself and its brethren to put an end to wars. It was a nice thought, one that she knew to be entirely girlish, but that she cherished all the more in her heart.

Like all reconciliation, it must start with reparations between individuals. It wasn't much more than a notion of something larger than herself, but it still gave her cause to hope.

"Are you quite alright, Miss?" an unkempt gentleman with the look of several, hard travelling days behind him said, interrupting her on the cusp of some sublime revelation.

Belle's heart jolted at the sudden nearness of him, and she was painfully aware of how vulnerable she'd made herself. They were alone, unintroduced and unchaperoned, outside the train car where no one else could see or hear. The impropriety of his address to her might have passed unnoticed in the girl she'd been before, but this woman (so nearly broken) knew better. It had been foolish of her to venture here alone.

She pressed her lips together, spun primly on her toes, and moved to push past him without a word.

"Now, Miss, there's no need for that. I've only come to see you're well and tended. Come along, now, and have a sit with me and the blokes. We'll look after ye." He would not step from her path.

"Please excuse me, I'd like to return to my seat."

"Only it's unfortunate, a lovely lady such as you left travelling alone."

"I'm quite happy with my book. Please let me through."
"A book's no substitute for a gentleman, lass," he sneered down at her. The man easily towered a foot above her, and his breath stunk of stale wine.

"If I see a gentleman, I'll be sure to make notes and compare. As there is no gentleman here, I must insist that you let me pass. Immediately."

For a moment, she feared he would force the matter, but he seemed to think better of himself and moved aside by a half step. Passing him required Belle to press almost the full length of her torso against his, but she paid the forfeit and rushed away as quickly as she could, blushing red as the troupe of men in question burst into laughter at her expense.

George’s father, the Judge, had used to do things like that. He'd take a rage at her for the smallest imperfection of conduct, yet his own closeness had always discomforted her. Rumford's shy closeness never had, and once they’d become engaged she’d enjoyed all of his small touches. She didn't think herself so innocent as the ladies in Mr. Dickens’ novels; she knew what a husband and wife were meant to do, in principal, and had some concept of the mechanics. Judge Frontland kept Japanese prints in his locked-up writing desk, and she and George had used to sneak looks at them when they were still too young for differences in the sexes to affect their friendship.

That it could be pleasant, she'd found out from Rum's soft kisses, and with the application of a single ounce of common sense; that it could be a painful, shameful affair, she'd discovered through unwanted experience. For the first time, Belle began to feel apprehensive of returning home.

It had been a simple thing, in the wake of their violent parting, to remember her childhood home as the perfect idyll, heart of happiness. She'd longed to return there for so long, and had wept when Sir Maurice would not respond to her wedding announcement; she'd quite forgotten the unpleasant parts of life in their little home on the sea.

Going home would entail certain restrictions of her liberty, certainly; ironic that, as a servant, she'd felt herself more free. And perhaps the expectation that she and George would still marry? But she loved her Papa, wished him happy, and she'd been happy there too – hadn't she? It was hard to say. The best memories she had now were of a darkened study in Sonnachdubh, of being held close and feeling Rum's breath upon her nape.

She was too far grown for childish things, had been for years, and was not so far behind Miss Phillips and Hua in the making a spinster of herself, but it had taken the gentle, unsure, half-frightened courtship of a snarling Lord to make her see it. Belle had not been a whole year from home, and now – with the outskirts of Plymouth coming into sight – she wasn't even sure what 'home' was meant to mean. Could one word stretch to encompass the old and the new? And, if it could, what did it say that she felt somehow wrong in returning to the home of her childhood?

Belle swallowed her doubts and resolved herself. A visit to Sir Maurice was the right thing to do; the urgency she felt to return to Sonnachdubh would have to be tempered by further study of opium anyway, no matter how keenly she felt the impulse to run north again. It was what she'd wanted, wasn't it? To see her father, make amends, and begin the research she needed to do. She had to at least know that he was well, his needs tended to, and to see what small comforts her bargain had bought him – even if the man himself would not forgive her.

The machine beneath her began to hum and slow, calling out its arrival with a deafening whistle. It was decided: she was going home.
LVIII. Calypso

As Belle exited the train onto the platform at the Plymouth engine house, she felt as though she had not stood upon her own two feet for the better part of a lifetime. She had, of course, changed rails two or three times since quitting London, and had been walking the length of the car before that ruffian accosted her, yet she'd not felt so grounded – so capable of controlling her own path – not even when she had been happy, together with her love.

Visiting her Papa would be difficult now, especially if he was cross with her over the engagement announcement, but it was the right thing to do before returning north. Belle's sudden sureness of foot and surety of purpose fitted her like a suit of armor, and made her braver; she must, she would, and she could. He'd been her guardian all her life and she did not even know if he was well or poorly, a thought which would have reduced her to weeping only months ago. Her place may no longer have been with Sir Maurice, but she missed him – missed his quiet encouragements and easy companionship even as she condemned his ease of spending and debt; it would be unkind not to see him, now all that divided them was a carriage-and-four.

She smoothed her skirts – the red dress Miss Phillips gifted her ballooned and blazed in the sunlight, more magnificent than she'd remembered – and waited for the porters to unload her things amid the small throngs of travelers who were also waiting. There seemed to be an argument of sorts, sending men running from carriage to carriage, until finally the conductor began making rounds, announcing a slight delay due to unforeseen circumstance.

Belle didn't mind the wait; the men in livery looked smart along the enameled rail-cars as trunks and cases began to appear at a snail's pace. It gave Belle a chance to observe the station. The man who'd spoken so crassly to her had given her a wide berth, she was glad to note, as he busied himself in conversation with the baggage handlers; there were women clad in brilliant India-silk and damask, and still others clad more simply, in hues of calico-brown; still more men, like Mr. Leroy who'd been so good to her in London, moved like specters through the crowd, slicked black with sweat and soot. There was no place more egalitarian, nor perhaps more cruelly modern – caring only for the loosely regulated comings and goings of passengers – than the train station.

Finally Belle's case appeared, after nearly one and a quarter hours, so she collected it, along with her valise, and turned to leave. There would be coaches in the street nearby, she'd come to expect that amenity, so Belle picked her way toward the road facing the town center, making a valiant effort to maneuver her cases expertly. In all, she thought she rather resembled some great, lumbering beast – over-burdened and clumsy – and was relieved when a driver leaped from his seat to help with them.

"Where can I take you, Miss?" he asked her.

"How much to Avon-by-the-Sea?"

"No charge, Miss. No charge. Compliments of m'Lady."

"I think there's been some sort of mistake," Belle hedged, sure that he could not possibly have been meant to collect her. He'd simply confused her with another traveler.

"No mistake at all, dear," said a familiar, feminine voice from within the carriage. Belle looked up to see a thick, black veil covering an occluded face.
"Mrs. Humbert, this is hardly necessary… I couldn't possibly… how did you ever find me here?"
Belle asked, an edge of panic prickling her hairline.

"I saw you from the street, of course, and had dear Claude stop. It was really very good of me, don't you think?"

"Yes, of course. But why are you here? Don't tell me you're on the way to Avon…"

Belle inched away from the coach, heart racing. Something was the matter, but she couldn't think what it might be. She knew, though, that Mrs. Humbert had been the one to tell her that a woman was meant to be a man's guiding light, his governing morality – and experience had taught her that that was a dangerous way of thinking. Intent was not meaningless, nor was it forgiving; Rum had never meant to hurt her, but no amount of goodness on her own part had prevented him from doing it anyway, and though Mrs. Humbert's outlook had not been maliciously destructive, it had left a bad impression – on the whole – within her heart.

Now her cases were confiscated and Claude was attempting to offer his arm to help her up – all of it happening too quickly – and Belle recoiled from some violent, primitive instinct. She would not go with Mrs. Humbert.

"Darling, whatever is that on your face?" the widow asked her, changing suddenly.

"I don't…"

"There's a smear of soot on your nose, oh my. Here, child, wipe it away." Mrs. Humbert offered her a lace-trimmed handkerchief from the cuff of her sleeve, and before Belle could think to object she had reached her arm out of the door and was dabbing it over Belle's face.

She wanted to shout at the ridiculous invasion of space, to rebuke the liberties taken, but the smell of the cloth – so familiar, one of Rum's medicines without the addition of whiskey, perhaps – left her head reeling. Belle wobbled, buckled, and dropped into a dead faint.

The world colored and bled around her, swooning to the clop of hooves, hazy as the midnight smoke-fog of London. When Belle came to her senses, she lay on a fainting couch in a lavishly trimmed room. Mrs. Humbert busied herself at a large writing desk, veil, gloves, and cap removed.

She was young, Belle realized; not many years over thirty, not quite forty, and wore an alarming amount of rouge and kohl – a respectable woman who did not conceal her face in mourning would not have dared more than a smudge of the stuff.

"I believe the busy platform quite overwhelmed you," the painted woman said, her unnaturally red smile like a bloody wound upon her face. "Not to worry, pet; you're safe here."

"Where am I?" Belle asked, still muddled from the cloth, as though she were over-tired.

"You are my guest, this is my home."

Belle struggled to stand, but her legs would not bear weight, and she nearly collapsed onto the floor, but a firm pair of arms caught her about the middle.

"There, there, now, lass, not too fast now," the man said with a touch of the Irish brogue.

"Thank you, Mr. Humbert," the woman said, waving him off. "You can go now, Graham."

"Yes, Your Grace."
"Your Grace?" Belle asked, grasping at a thread of comprehension through her daze. The woman's name was supposed to be Mrs. Humbert. But she'd just met Mr. Humbert, who was certainly not dead, nor was he her son, if Belle was any judge. A step-son? No, not that either.

"Yes, dear, you've caught me out. I fibbed a little, but no matter. You have been rescued by the Dowager-Duchess of White Hall, but please – call me Regina. I insist. And of course I must call you Belle."

Belle felt as though she might be sick.

"Thank you for intervening, Your Grace…" she began. This woman had hunted and drugged her, kidnapped her like a common criminal, but she was a Duchess – above the law, even in this. Perhaps, if she refrained from openly accusing Lady White Hall, she would be set free at the end of this interrogation.

Belle chose her next words with caution: "It was very kind of you to help me. I'm feeling much better now, and my father is expecting me… I'm afraid I must take my leave soon, before I impose on your hospitality."

"Child," Her Grace smiled, "we both know that that's not true; we have all the time in the world, Miss French, and I do insist. So, tell me, when he died, what was the state of him? I imagine it was awful, full of vomiting and ugliness."

"Who is dead?" Belle demanded, frantic. She'd almost managed to draw herself to her feet again, but the dizziness of Her Grace's questions blew her backward again.

"Lord Sonnachdubh, of course – or Mr. Gold, as he fashions himself when he's feeling churlish: the man who abducted you. Was it simply ghastly? I'll admit, my eyes in the house seem to have vanished on me; I've not had a full report yet."

"Mr. Gold is dead?" Belle gasped, tears hot as smelted metal prickling at her eyes and a twist of cold-iron taking root in her chest. She'd killed him. He'd died, and all from her temper and ignorance. She should have gone straight back to him, and now she'd missed her chance.

"Isn't he?" Lady White Hall asked, her voice suddenly dangerous. "You're here, so he must be. My agents notified me the moment they spotted you in Plymouth, my little canary in the mine shaft, and then delayed the train until I could arrive. He must be dead! There is no other way you could be here, that cretin has you in an iron-clad contract, bound-up so tightly that Parliament itself would have a challenge unmaking it. There are no alternatives!"

"He… he was alive when I left him," Belle wept. "I didn't mean to kill him, please, Your Grace. I only wanted to rid him of that horrid medicine."

"What medicine?" snarled the Duchess, rising quickly to her feet.

"All the concoctions from Mr. Jefferson. They were making him sick, so I burned them. Please, you have to believe me, I never knew that stopping them all so suddenly could kill him, or I wouldn't have… I wouldn't… Please, Your Grace, let me go to him. I love him."

"You stupid bitch!" she screamed, catching a clawful of Belle's hair in her hands and yanking it so that they came face to face. "The purple bottle, the one I watched you purchase in Manchester – did he drink it?"

Belle's brain stuttered and stammered, trying to think. She could scarcely remember the details of it. "N-no, not when I was watching. I- I think I burned it. Yes. Yes, I remember now. It made such
“an awful mess in the fireplace.”

The Duchess screamed then, a shriek of rage so overwhelming it forced Belle lower into her seat, and then the woman shouted for Graham again. The young man appeared even as Belle struggled to flee, catching her easily and forcing a reeking cloth back over her face. She inhaled despite herself, and felt her consciousness slipping away.

The room was dark when she woke again, but Belle could hear voices from the next room.

"I must admit, Your Grace, I'm impressed by the efficiency of your methods," said a man's voice.

"Don't flatter me, it will garner you nothing. I've half a mind to keep the meddling creature, she may be of further use to me," said the Duchess.

"I'm afraid I must insist," the man replied. "I've come to claim what is owed me." Belle could not place his voice; it was English, certainly, but beyond that…

"And what would you propose to do about it if I didn't? Do not forget your place."

"Three times I helped rid you of… annoyances. When you asked my help a fourth time, you knew the price."

"And yet Mary-Margaret escaped."

"That's no fault or concern of mine, Your Grace. You've quizzed her, and now I'm taking her with me."

"You will—"

"I will do as I see fit!" the man roared back at her. "Or perhaps you'd prefer that the orders confining a choice trio of patients to your sanitarium be examined in the press?"

"What are you going to do to that girl?" Her Grace asked him; Belle thought that she sounded scared.

"Nothing you need concern yourself with."

"It is absolutely my concern when old men prey on little girls!"

When she heard that, Belle tried to stand again, but her limbs were bound at her sides and all she could affect was a clumsy tumble onto the carpet.

"Having a sudden burst of conscience, are we? It's too late for that, and you know it."

"My marriage was—"

Belle heard the sound of flesh striking flesh, and strove to free herself.

"Don't you even compare the vile viper's nest you called a marriage to what I have with Miss French. Don't forget, Your Grace, I know the truth. You're nothing but a temperamental child pitching tantrums without me, and it's time you remembered that."

Hard, heavy footsteps fell upon the floorboards as Belle thrashed against her constraints. She could not find the trick to loosening them, her mind and body refused to cooperate, and all at once the footsteps stopped. She could see a pair of boots, the old style, coming up to the knee, and when Mr. Humbert moved to scoop her up, she began to scream.
"There, there, ma belle," a soft voice crooned as gentle hands petted the side of her head. She must have fainted, or else Mr. Humbert had drugged her again.

This room was different, she could tell. The shapes seemed wrong, somehow, and it smelled of wig powder.

Warm hands guided her into a sitting position, and her head lolled. It was heavier, as though her hair had been piled up and added to, the way Ladies used to wear it in the portraits around Sir Maurice's home. Looking down, she saw a sea of ribbons, ruffles and lace adorning a dress she'd never worn before, and the gown's flat panels and square neck pushed her breasts onto display, showing the first pink shadow of her nipples.

She tried to wrap her arms around herself, to preserve what little modesty remained to her, but a pair of wrinkled, leathery hands stopped her.

"Don't hide yourself, ma belle," he told her.

She gulped back bile and felt a sudden chill distance from herself. Ill to her very soul, Belle raised her eyes inch by inch over the neo-Classical costume and cravat – cut to match her own – to a familiar, pointed face. Judge Frontland's watery blue eyes met hers, head crowned by a white wig that concealed his silver hair, and his breath crowded in toward her. There were no windows, no visible door.

Thin, chapped lips worked over hers, even as she turned herself to porcelain, unfeeling. When the tip of the Judge's tongue asked to probe her she acquiesced, steelied her nerve, and sank in her teeth; Rumford might be dead and she might be trapped, but now it was the Judge's turn to scream.

LIX. May 27, 1858

To the Honorable George Frontland, Justice of the Peace, from the desk of HG Lady Regina Blanchard, Duchess-Regent of White Hall

Honorable sir,

I must admit, you have surprised me lately. I remember how eagerly you helped me dispose of the man who killed my husband, aided the ailing chemist's wife, rehabilitated the unwed mother, and moved to protect my own renegade step-daughter. I especially remember how eagerly you offended me to claim your little prize the other night.

You have honored her with your ardor, and she has honored you by removing the tip of that fabled silver tongue – or that's how your physician tells it. Did you really tell him you'd tripped down the staircase? How positively un-original of you. Your kitten has turned into quite the hell-cat, has she? That's Gold's influence for you, I'm sure; and she'll never stop fighting for him until you cure her of the illness, I know the sort.

It's all very interesting. You and she both know something about biting the hand that feeds you, I should think. Rest easy, duckling; you've proven that even the proudest, most honorable of creatures will come crawling back to its betters, begging forgiveness, given the proper incentive.

Of course, I would be honored to perform a small favor for my friend, and – of course – my honorable Judge will go out of his way to repay me. Yes, you can bring the girl to the sanitarium. They're quite adept at transforming willful, violent girls into dulcet little dolls who let old men rut between their legs – a blend of treatments modeled on all the latest science, and my own input. It is so nice when great families like ours are able to engage in this sort of philanthropy, don't you
Additional arrangements will have to be made, you know; even if her father's twice the foolish little sheep you've made him out to be, he'll eventually go looking for answers. I was sadly unable to prevent the freight that Lord S. sent down from being delivered to his home – I admit, I presumed him dead and (even if your light skirt hadn't ruined everything) I'd never have taken him to be such a charitable man. Still, any parent would surely wonder why he's got trunks of clothing with no daughter to fill them – so something must be done with Sir Maurice, and Gold.

I insist, of course, that you give me the honor of fabricating our ruse. However wickedly he ruined your girl, whatever temptations and depravities she practiced there, you cannot hope to avenge them without me. If you could have overcome his rank to punish him, you would have done so at once, wouldn't you? Yes, you cunning wretch, I think you would have.

I do have to ask, though, what can you possibly see in the girl? My own spies, and even those I had in Gold's house, all confirm that she's nothing more than the unwanted daughter of some French whore – all this nonsense about guardians and wards… is the village squire's bastard really such a prize? I found her uncommonly simple and plain. And was she not engaged to wed your son before her departure? Perhaps you ought to make a gift to him, of her, and honor the younger generation. Though it strikes me, even as I set pen to paper, I am woefully ignorant of that young man's future. How long is it, again, since you had a letter?

I think you will honor me with a story, sir, and soon.

I'll admit, having Miss French as collateral has done much to improve your standing with me. You love her, and it's made you weak; now, since you cannot control her, you need me – because, of course, nowhere else in the country comes close to fulfilling your rather… peculiar tastes, does it Your Honor?

All you need do is honor us with your presence at the asylum, any time after even-fall on Saturday; you may even leave your own orderlies and hire-in your own doctors, if it suits you, though I cannot over-praise my own staff's efficacy; Dr. Keith Reeve has been a particularly quick study. She will have a private room of the make and mode that you requested, near to our dear Miss S and Mrs. J (if you remember them) and – of course – Mr. G is not permitted out of his rooms to see or speak to anybody, so there's no need to worry on that count. She'll not be murdered. Quite the contrary, she may prove useful to me, and I expect you will honor me with her presence whenever I have a need.

We will see you on Saturday, as the full moon wanes. Oh, and one more thing Frontland… if you ever strike me again, it'll be her hand I take.

Ta,

White Hall

LX. Evil Souls

June arrived in a cool highland shower, the barest hint of a storm, promising long days, golden fields, and fat cattle with no small measure of thunder to come. Rum's newest acquisitions, Mr. and Mrs. Nolan, had settled quite happily into the old Hopper house, and it was nothing to move the lad – Archibald – into a spare corner of the servants' quarters. He'd been camping out in Mrs. Lucas' pantry, on a palate of flour sacks, unwilling to enter the abandoned cottage since his parents quit it – and no wonder, the state of it was horrid.
Gold disliked the thought of Gidge and John Hopper at liberty, but they'd already done as much
damage as he could conceive, and if they decided to turn informant on him, well… he supposed
that's something they would already have done too. Let them tinker their way across the country,
then; no one else would ever hire them, and he'd honor Belle's request not to harm them.

Belle's requests, simple though they were, weighed him down even without her to enforce them.
She would not see Gidge Hopper beaten, and the woman was not beaten; she would not see him
lost in a daze of opium, and he'd scaled back his consumption – desperate to prove that she was not
right about him. Even in the throes of nightmares, drenched in sweat, with his leg afire, he wanted
Belle to be wrong; opium eaters were contemptible, impotent creatures, and he might have – they
might have – if she had not…

The force of rage required to blame her for all the ills between them, to hate her for the wrongs
he'd done, simply would not come. She would be home by now, safe with her father, and because
she was good and kind, she might write to him one day – tell him of her children, maybe ask him to
play godfather. He could do as she'd asked, for the distant hope of that unlikely future, and if it
helped him to bring Bae home… No, he could not be trusted with Belle, had ruined it all like he
knew he would, and he could not be trusted with his son either. Perhaps, one day, but not yet;
Baelfire was best left where he was, locked away at school.

He had settled into a sober pattern of mercenary trade, with the promise of a future to stay his
appetite for the poppy, when Lady White Hall's letter came.

Nolan found him later, slumped into his favorite chair, in front of a cold fire place, with the drapes
closed and none of the candles lit. The constant soldier took it upon himself to light a few tapers,
and the small licks of flame set shadows dancing all around them. On the low table in the center of
the room stood a chipped cup and a crumpled, half-burnt bit of paper.

"It's dark in here," he remarked, carefully taking a seat. It was their routine to go over the day's
work after supper each evening; Rum hadn't realized that it was so late.

"It's dark everywhere," Gold replied.

"You've got that look again, if you don't mind me saying," said David, and then he paused as
though waiting for a snappish reply. It never came. "Do you want to talk about it? It really does
help if you can talk about those nightmares…"

"I'm not afraid of Spain," Rum answered. He was shocked to find truth in the words as they left his
lips.

"Tell me about something else, then; don't sit here brooding. That love of yours, was she pretty?"

"She was… the flicker light in an inky-black void. Her and my Bae."

Yes, she was the light; one he'd snuffed out in his cruelty. There was a good reason that no one
ever asked what would have happened if the princess had loved the Minotaur instead of the man
Belle always chirped about in her Greek stories, but Rum hadn't wanted to admit it to himself. The
beast would have ruined her, as surely as that young pup in gleaming armor had done, and that was
the truth – whether he had a bull's head or a golden helm, he'd failed her again.

"Was that Bae's mother?" the other man asked, drawing Gold back to the conversation at hand.

"No. No, of course not; I lost Bae's mother long before that."

"Where is she, then?"
Rum hated and envied David Nolan – with his fearless wife waiting at home – in equal measure at that moment, but he could not bring himself to lie. Not about Belle, never again. There were more frightening truths, now, than war, and no amount of pain would ever make him crave the sweet oblivion of opium if it meant he'd have to forget her along with his hurts.

Somewhere in his empty heart, Rumford found his voice: "She died."

**End Part II.**
Chapter 21

LXI. Harpooning

"Call me Jefferson," the chemist instructed, removing his over-large top hat (a signature advertising trick he employed in Manchester) with a flourish and flopping down onto his host's settee.

"As you like," Dr. Whale sighed, swirling his whiskey in the glass before gulping it down. Whale looked uncomfortable in his own study, formal protocol having failed him the moment Jefferson took into his head to invite himself in for drinks.

Jefferson loathed the stuffy structure that gentlemanly Dr. Whale always tried to foist off on him. That was the difference between a man and a gentleman; one didn't have time for trivialities.

The Doctor's study was an assortment of old books, specimen samples and brass hardware cramped too-tightly into a room designed to support only half so much luxury. Jefferson thought it looked a bit like the old Nans he'd grown up with, who left their vases and pottery out on every available surface to show it off, half of it irreparably chipped from toppling to the floor of an evening. If Jefferson didn't know the man so well, he'd think the good Doctor had gone quite mad.

"May I ask what brings you to this frigid, cultural waste, Jefferson? There's no card game to be had, and despite what he may tell you, my home is not one of Gold's opium dens. I trust you're not just wasting my time with nonsense and quackery again."

Whale despised him for his "quackery" almost as much as he despised being kept on call for the Sonnachduhb estate, but there was nothing the one-time prodigy could do to escape his obligation. He'd fallen from grace and into the hooked claws of Gold, refusing even a trumped-up salesman who spewed dog-Latin and dealt in poppy was beyond the means of a convict.

Jefferson had never realized the scope and infamy of Whale's experiments, but then he'd never had previous cause to look so closely; if he was right, Whale's was the missing piece that would set everything to rights. Noting the new jacket and boots the man was sporting, Jefferson knew his suspicions were founded, and he grinned a crescent-moon, sinister in its simplicity.

"Nothing of the sort, Doc!" Oh, that would make his skin crawl, Jefferson knew. Doc: brilliant bit of cheek, and bless the Americans for it. "I merely have a business arrangement for you," he continued, brandishing a small, purple vial before the other man's eyes. Whale was never impressed by Jefferson's showmanship or prestidigitation, but that had never stopped the chemist from employing trying.

"Jefferson, you are trying my patience," Whale snorted. "I have no interest whatsoever in endorsing a mixture of cat piss and wine vinegar for you. Doctor Whale's Miracle Elixer will simply have to wait; I think we are both progressive enough to admit that miracles are the work of idle, superstitious minds. If all you wanted was to waste my time, I'll bid you good evening."

"Are you going to listen to me or pontificate? If you insist on being petulant, we'll both be stuck sitting here all night."

"I could have you thrown out, you know."

"You could try," smiled Jefferson, coyly.
"What is it, then?"

"Have you ever set out to solve a little problem and found the solution to an entirely different set of obstacles?"

"No. My solutions are efficient, come to the point."

"What if I told you that I have in my hand the key to both our problems?" Jefferson asked, sitting up a little straighter and leaning forward.

It was important to build suspense. They'd circle the topic a little longer, he was nothing if not a salesman, and Jefferson had to time the attack precisely... had to wear the other man down, only to rile him up and then wear him down a second time. It would be worth it though; mutually assured destruction might be sufficient to secure himself an ally.

"Have I got a problem, Jefferson?" the Doctor asked, defiance in his eyes.

"Several, I should think. For starters, I know you've taken money and a promise of patronage from a certain Great Lady to falsify documents, and see to it that the morgue never gets a crack at old Gold's body."

"Is he poorly?" Whale had a good face for cards, as great a bluffer as ever there was, but he'd turned white and pale by the lamplight, and Jefferson knew that he had the man in range to strike.

"No, but I think you expected that he might be."

"What are you trying to imply, you two-bit, jumped-up—"

"Nothing, nothing! Only that it might have been quite profitable, quite tempting, to declare old Rum's sudden death a suicide. It wouldn't take much, would it? Someone snuffs himself on laudanum and whiskey every fortnight, some of them must do it on purpose – wouldn't you say?"

"If there was no note—"

"But there would have been a note, wouldn't there Victor? From that same Lady. And it would not have been a suicide, accidental or otherwise."

Victor started at that; he leapt to his feet and spittle flew from his mouth as he raged. "If you have come to my home to accuse me of murder, Mr. Jefferson, then perhaps you ought to reconsider what you say to violent criminals, alone at night, in their own studies! You'll not get a penny out of me, you sniveling, black-mailing—"

"Don't be absurd, Doc. I never said you would have murdered him. That little chore fell to me."

Whale stilled then, the sullen look of a hunted man awash in his eyes. "What are you saying, then? For the love of God, speak sensibly or leave."

Jefferson had to chuckle then. "Victor... I'd have thought you knew by now that there was no love of God in me. I know that Her Grace has bought you off to declare Gold a criminal if he should suddenly die; I know that you agreed, because why shouldn't you? Your patron would be dead, and she'd give you a position in the Royal Society. No, don't deny it, there's no point in trying to hide it from me, because I am also guilty.

"I slipped the old brute a dram of poison, you see. At Lady White Hall's behest, in exchange for my wife's liberty; he thought it was medicine, would have been a clean, painless death, and then I'd
have had my Alice with me. You know about my wife, certainly? And I'd do it again in a heartbeat, but damn it all if Gold's little Miss French didn't manage to thwart me."

"If," began Whale, emphasizing the hypothetical, "we were ever guilty of such a conspiracy, and if Miss French has, as you said, thwarted the thing, might we not simply bow our heads and carry on silently?"

"We might," Jefferson agreed, "if Her Grace had not lied to me, and threatened to expose me to Gold if I did not do precisely as she asked me in perpetuity. I won't trek with the creature, not again. Not after what I've seen.

"It's no fault of mine that her scheme came to nothing, but she refuses to remand my wife into my custody, keeps her in the most abominable conditions – do you know how they treat the criminally insane in this country?"

Whale gulped and nodded, but Jefferson continued to speak anyway: "The doctor there, a man named Reeve, is a terror and a drunkard, but that's not the worst of it. They feed them on a steady diet of antimony, reasoning that the nausea keeps them docile; they pelt them with freezing water to induce shivers and dispel rebellion for the more... manual therapies; strange men strap my wife to a gurney and rub between her legs until she weeps, all in the name of your fucking scientific recovery... it's inhumane! And for that... for that, I will see Her Grace hang. I will make her bleed, or die trying, and I'm taking you down with me."

"Gold will kill us if he finds out we—"

"Not if we give him a better enemy."

"Wh... what do you need of me?" Victor asked, pale horror writ large across his face.

"You are going to use your particular expertise, Resurrection Man, and help me set them free."

"Them?" Whale gulped, and Jefferson grinned. He'd caught him, and whatever the result of their little expedition, the Doctor had resigned himself to the fact that their fates were intertwined.

"I don't pretend for a moment that you and I have any chance of facing a Viscount and winning, never mind a Duchess," he replied, settling back into his seat again. "But I saw something peculiar on my last visit to the madhouse: I think she's got Miss French locked up near to Alice."

"Miss French is dead... Gold had me help confirm it when I visited the city; she fell from the platform and was struck by a train... it held up the line for two days."

"So they say. Then again, some say a cow wandered onto the tracks and that an uncommonly pretty girl left Plymouth by carriage two days hence. It's a mystery, but we're gambling men, aren't we? I can tell you, with absolute certainty, that there's a woman who bears a striking resemblance to Miss French in a private room near Alice's, and Gold would forgive us anything – even trying to kill him – if we brought her back to him. And if he takes that temper of his to bear on Her Grace's powdered face, well... I can't say I'd regret it."

"You can't know that," Whale gasped, running his hands through his hair. "You can't know that he'd protect us for the sake of his maid."

"Open your eyes, man! If that bastard can love anything at all, she's it. They were bloody engaged to be married before it all went to hell!"

"That's... I didn't know. I didn't think he'd seriously..."
"Victor, you're a brilliant physician, but sometimes I think you're one of the single most stupid men I've ever had the pleasure to meet."

The Doctor scowled at him, schooling his features toward reserved dignity. "So how do you propose that we orchestrate this escape?"

"You're a learned man," Jefferson preened. He flashed the small bottle of purple liquid at him again. "How do you feel about employing one of old Bill Shakespeare's strategies?"

LXII. Brother Lawrence

Belle had come to hate the stench of wig powder and potpourri, finding the cloying sweetness almost as nauseating as the vile syrup they poured down her throat before Judge Frontland visited her each evening.

Her entire world consisted of four walls, a high, barred window that admitted only enough light to count her fingers and toes, and a door with a latch where they slid in food and another where they spied on her. All day long, she sat stagnant, fearing every footfall and rolling trolley would arrive at her door and that it would open, that they would come for her. It was the most grotesque and elegant kind of torture, waiting for days on end for the heavy, iron bolt to shift, dreaming of escape, only to see Dr. Reeve, one of the nurses, or worse – Judge Frontland himself – come to strip away what little remained of her sanity.

If the people in the asylum had not been mad upon entering, Belle reasoned, the better portion of them most certainly would be upon leaving. Supposing, of course, that any of them would ever go free. It had been weeks, months perhaps – the serums they fed her kept her head swimming for days at a time – and Belle had come to realize that none of the patients were being released. Not one, not even the little blonde girl with wide blue eyes and short-shorn curls who looked every inch the figure of sanity (barely fifteen if she was a day) could leave. Belle often wondered what it was that the physicians thought they were curing.

Just beyond lie the hallway, a cold, damp stretch of smoothed pavement lit by flickering gaslights and dotted with heavy iron doors like her own. They never opened, unless Her Grace summoned up the little blonde girl – though Belle supposed it was ungenerous to call anyone who had endured this place a child in any respect – and the girl was the only living creature Belle had seen who did not return nightly to taunt her in her dreams.

She read, in their few defiant glances, that they had a sort of camaraderie. It was that camaraderie which started the screaming. Belle could hear the girl through her cell, biting and clawing at the orderlies when they were nasty, and Belle returned the bally three-fold on her next "outing."

Hearing sane women behave madly was a brave sort of hope, rife with desperation, but nonetheless inspiring for the irony.

They only ever took her one of three places, and it was for those three reasons that she winced at the sound of approaching footfall. First they would force her under a bruising spray of freezing water, until she collapsed to shivering and all her limbs turned heavy. Then the examination room, where thick syrups and fizzy potions left her head reeling and eyes bleary, but those both (at least) required The Judge's agents to be present, lest Dr. Reeve take liberties. The third place, the little parlor fitted with gilt furniture and stuffed full of snuff boxes, vases, and trinkets spanning the past century… that chamber was the true meaning of la Terreur.

Judge Frontland would meet her alone in the third room, after his orderlies had folded her into an antique gown and piled her powdered hair upon her head. He would rise to greet her, dressed in regimental reds, buckled shoes, and a powdered wig, with icy blue eyes reflecting candle light and
longing that Belle could not and would not requite. His hands would ghost over her as she struggled not to faint, a banquet would be laid on the central table, and they would be lost to his fantasies for the evening.

Did la belle dame like the beef? She could barely breathe under medication and corsetry, never mind speak or eat. Did la belle dame take claret or cabernet? Nothing he gave her had any taste. Would la belle dame consent to marry? If she would, la belle dame might leave the hospital that very evening… For that inquiry, Belle would find a voice – often small and trembling – because no, monsieur, la belle dame would never consent to marry, and it was time for her to retire for the evening.

Though he kept her as a child kept a favored doll, Belle refused to bend. Perhaps she would shatter like porcelain if a fit of petulance took him, but she rather thought that there was enameled steel beneath her gowns and curls now. He visited her at seemingly random intervals, for weeks and weeks until she was sure the world must have shed its golden summer and turned to a mournful sort of winter without her ever having basked in its sunlight. Instead, she existed in darkness, an unwilling participant in a twisted masquerade.

There were small mercies in being the Judge's poppet, she'd discovered. Frontland would not allow Dr. Reeve to fondle her as he did the other girls, the ones kept above-stairs, whose stories she heard whispered in the halls. Nor was Reeve permitted to perform any ministration which might lead to passion – a torment she had not known to fear before barred windows and locked doors became the sum of her world. The Judge wanted to train her to respond only to his own love-making, but he took no steps to touch her so long as she played the part of the disinterested and lofty lady.

The wigs and powder began to smell like war paint, when she realized that illusion and delusion were her sole protectors, and Belle imagined it was very much the same wrenching sensation that Rum had sometimes complained of when exposed to gun powder. She was sick of fighting, and of needing to. It smelled less like vomitus powder and more like fear and shame.

She wondered, sometimes, if the whole world hadn't been powdered white since her capture, freezing and filthy with dust and snow. She had no way of finding out, and that was worse still.

Belle was counting specks of dust upon the air when she heard the footsteps approaching, and she braced herself – which was, at heart, a polite term for wincing. They might not stop at her door. If they did, she would have to fight – to create a stir. Blue eyes and blonde curls depended upon it, and if they didn't then Belle still depended on the defiance of one young girl – the sole savior Her Grace's asylum had shown her. If they stopped, she would suffer; if they passed, she would atrophy a little longer. One was not preferable to the other.

The ominous steps stopped outside her cell, and Belle steeled herself once more. Whether to spring out or cower, she never knew until the very moment it was upon her – only that she hoped it would not be to cower. Do the brave thing and bravery will follow.

Her door pushed open, and a visage Belle had all but forgotten stood before her.

"Dr. Whale?" she whispered, scarcely daring to believe.

"It's alright, no need for alarm…I've only come to consult with Reeve here. We can't have his patients expiring of bedsores and fleas, you know – terribly bad trouble when the county inspectors come round."

Dr. Reeve, looking gaunt and greasy behind him, slumped deeper into the shadows of the corridor.
"It's my hospital," he complained, sounding sullen as a spoiled child. "I don't know what business the county has in private hospitals."

"Can't be too careful, though, chap," cheered Whale, pushing into Belle's cell and smiling down at her. She had never quite got the measure of him, always sensing something clinical and sinister beneath the surface, but hopeful and intelligent as well. She drew in breath to scream, just as he winked at her.

For one full second the entire world hung on that wink, and then Belle exhaled and stilled herself, waiting. A wink could mean anything.

"Though I won't complain, of course, if the madhouses produce a few more specimens for the laboratories. There is no price too high for the progress of science, wouldn't you agree Mr. Reeve?"

"Doctor Reeve," the other physician corrected. "I am a medical doctor, sir!"

Belle thought his voice sounded exasperated and afraid, as though he'd corrected Whale before and had now descended into anger, verging on panicking. Had it been almost anyone else in the world, she might have felt sorry for him.

"Yes, yes, of course. Dr. Reeve, naturally," Whale prattled on, taking Belle's vital signs and making no sign that he'd come to do anything out of the ordinary. "And how much do they give you at the local university, if you don't mind me asking? It's just we're rather short of anatomical subjects in Edinburgh at the moment, and I imagine I could do you a fair deal, if you'd take cash and see to it that the paperwork didn't become fussy."

"Cash for what now?" asked Reeve, interest piqued.

Whale scoffed at him.

"For the deceased, man – no offense meant to the lady," he winked again. The charming joviality of his conversation appeared so alien to the serious man Belle had met before that she'd no doubts remaining – Doctor Whale was up to something.

"Don't tell me you haven't been selling them on? It's no wonder you can scarcely afford to wash the bedclothes, letting the crown come in and seize your best assets and ship them out to London… these country universities are all starving, never mind us poor sods stranded in Scotland – no offense, Miss."

"My patients are not prone to dying, Dr. Whale," Reeve snapped back, though to Belle's eyes he looked greedy and calculating. "Our patients are at the height of health, apart from their damaged faculties, as you have seen."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure. This one's looking like she's got signs of plague – just look at her!"

"Plague! What do you mean plague?" Reeve gasped, nearly falling over himself in retreat.

"She's gone thin and pale, with dark circles and splotches all up and down her arms…I don't suppose you've inspected her for buboes lately? No, well, you wouldn't with all the bedsores in this place…"

"Those are only bruises!" Reeve championed, and Belle saw Whale wince before resolving his adopted persona.

"That's what they all say, Dr. Reeve, and then it's too late. Bodies start dropping all over the place,
with no warning at all, and before you know it there's an epidemic in the hospital. You can blame
the Chinamen for that; we'd all but eradicated the disease in civilized society before they started
shipping over in droves. I saw three more cases in Edinburgh just last week. Best dispose of your
carriers quickly, before it causes an outbreak – you'd be shocked at what they turn up when
Parliament sends in builders to sanitize the place. Absolutely shocked. Filthy, disgusting
sickness… though of course their scientific value post-mortem is still admirable. Maybe twenty
pounds each, if you ship them off quickly."

"Forty pounds, you say?" Belle simply tried to steel her face, lest she inadvertently ruin the ruse,
whatever it was.

Just as her nerves were reaching their breaking point, a flurry of shouting and footsteps came
charging down the corridor, distracting from the grin she couldn't stop from breaking onto her face.

"You've killed her, you bastard!" roared a familiar man, never stopping his sprint as the nursing
staff huffed after him.

The lean, tall figure in a foppish coat and hat bull-rushed Whale in a frenzy, and Belle leaped back
into her cell as the fisticuffs between Dr. Whale and Mr. Jefferson came to a head.

"Dammit, get off of me! Get off of me!" roared Whale as Jefferson pummeled him.

Reeve seemed at a loss, and the orderlies pried them apart after a few moments of gnashing
knuckles and elbows.

"What the hell is going on?" Reeve demanded when the two brawling gentlemen were finally
restrained.

"My Alice was fine before this monster got at her and started talking about plague! She was getting
better, and now she's gone—"

"A patient has escaped?"

"She's dead, you ninny!" roared Jefferson, nearly breaking free of the men holding him.

"Call the constable," Reeve sneered.

"No, no, that won't be necessary," cautioned Whale, shrugging free of the hands holding on to him
and shocking the assembled crowd by slugging Mr. Jefferson square in the face. "I believe he's
learned to respect his betters, don't you think?"

Reeve appeared ready to object, but Whale pressed his point. "Go and see to your patient, Dr.
Reeve, I believe I can finish up here. And… if the lady has expired, if you're at all inclined to that
business arrangement we were discussing…?"

"Oh… yes. Yes," Reeve agreed. "Twenty?"

"Don't perform any autopsy, then," Whale cautioned, turning his attention back to Belle as she
struggled to absorb the scene. "We need them pristine."

"I am taking my wife with me!" Jefferson howled, and Whale spun on his heel to chin him again.

"The bodies of the criminally insane are forfeit to the sciences, sir," sneered Reeve. "Gentlemen,
escort this animal outside, please."
The orderlies dragged Mr. Jefferson away, struggling every inch, and it was all Belle could do to keep from calling out to him. A wink – two winks – could mean anything, she repeated to herself, hoping the situation was not as wretched as it seemed. Reeve retreated too, presumably to Mrs. Jefferson's body, leaving Dr. Whale and Belle alone in her cell.

"You nearly ousted me there, Miss French," Dr. Whale whispered, flexing his bruising fist.

"You surprised me," Belle replied, tears forming on her cheeks. "Mr. Jefferson's wife…"

"Will be fine, he assures me," Whale nodded, his severe and serious nature surfacing now that there was no audience to witness his play. "You need to drink this," he continued, producing a small, purple bottle from his coat sleeve.

"That's poison!" Belle gasped. She remembered that bottle, and Her Grace's rage at discovering it had been burned in the fire place.

"Of a sort, yes. Though not the kind you're thinking of. He made this one by mistake, in the process of devising the one he sold to you."

"You're asking me to trust a murderer."

"He wouldn't murder his own wife, Miss French. All of this was for her sake, the man had no choice, and Mrs. Jefferson's already had her dose – as you've seen. Believe that, if you'll believe nothing else. And believe me when I say that there is no force of nature which could prevail upon me to forsake my oath and knowingly cause you harm in any way. I'm not typically one to advocate for dog-alchemy, but he truly has managed a brew that will make the body appear outwardly deceased in every way. For an hour or two, at least."

"And then… I'd wake up?"

"That's… complicated. It takes a few days, but the test results were all very promising. I won't tell you there were no risks at all, and if there were any other way…"

"I will never leave this place still breathing. They won't let me. That's what you mean to say."

"Yes. The illusion of death won't hold up to scrutiny past an hour or two, so we must act quickly. The body undergoes too many changes as it decomposes, it stiffens and cools, but this will induce a rather convincing coma with almost no pulse, not unlike an immediate passing. The symptoms persist for a few days, but never progresses to full necrosis. It will last long enough to get you out of here and take you home."

"Then I suppose you will have plenty of time to pray for my swift revival," Belle hedged. She hadn't spared a thought for Mr. Jefferson, even after she'd discovered there was truth to her poison conspiracy; she hadn't the time nor energy. Now, all at once, it seemed an impossibly big leap of faith.

"Yes, I will pray if you like," Whale agreed, and Belle knew then, despite what he said, that the Doctor himself remained unconvinced. Dr. Whale was not they praying type, he valued Science not God. What choice did she have to trust and hope?

"But what about the rest of the people? There's a little girl, she's—"

"There's not time enough for that, Miss French!" Whale urged her, his voice a more sincere and impassioned sound than she'd thought him capable of producing. "We have to act now, before our window of opportunity closes and we are discovered. Please… please."
"You said you would take me home?"

"To Gold. I'm sorry about that, and I won't pretend I'm not. Back to Sonnachdubh, if that's where he is, as soon as that jackal sells me your remains. When you wake, you must remember to tell him that it was Lady White Hall who captured you. Lady Regina Blanchard, Duchess-Regent of White Hall. You will remember, won't you? I'm sorry for it, truly I am, but he's the only one who can—"

"That's good," Belle assured him, taking the bottle from his hand as he stilled. She hadn't realized how uncharacteristically animated he'd been, fidgeting with nerves. Belle tried not to let that uncertainty frighten her. "Home with Rumford… if he'll have me. He's well, then? Did he send you?"

"No. Well yes and no, respectively," Whale replied, baffled that she'd asked something so obvious.

Belle didn't know what to make of that, so she simply absorbed the information. "You're certain Reeve will let you take us? I'm not…"

The enormity of how abnormal her imprisonment was, the ruthlessness of the Judge, and the grotesqueness of his little parlor could not be articulated simply. Trying to do so might break her.

"He will if we don't give him time to think it through," Whale assured her, taking her silence for doubt. "Reeve is greedy and foul. Her Grace will be furious you're gone, so we mustn't let him think better of himself – it's best that he swiftly rid himself of two plague victims, and thinks it will avoid a public outcry. There's a train and two coffins leaving the station this evening; I don't wish to cause you any undue alarm, but we must be on that train in three hours if this plan is to succeed."

"Then there is no choice but expediency," Belle agreed sadly. "And then I'll come back, when I'm well, and tear this place down."

"That's admirable, but—"

Whatever Whale's opinions of her aspirations were, Belle couldn't tell. She decanted the little vial into her mouth, knowing – despite every proof to the contrary – that Mr. Jefferson loved his wife, the woman in the cameo, more than anything. If she was here too, Belle had to trust that love and her own to see her through. With a light taste of berries and a slight fizzing, she faded to nothing.

LXIII. Penelope

London in autumn, before the Season took its toll and the early winter rains washed the sewage into the Thames, was a warren of liars, dodgers, cheats, and gamblers looking to shore up their fortunes before their fussy wives arrived to spend it all. It was a brief window of opportunity, to be certain, when the gentlemen left their card tables and let the wild pheasants alone to congregate in Clubs and Halls without the women-folk.

It had been on such a night that Gold demanded payment from Sir Maurice for his notes. He could hardly come to terms with the abrupt cruelty of it all – his own cruelty toward the girl, the long winter of awkward smiles over tea, and a few fleeting memories of the warmest soul in the world wrapped up in his arms before he'd acted the fool and sent her away.

If he had not been so unkind, she would still be alive – maybe married to the hulking Mr. Frontland with a babe on the way, but living, and for even that shred of solace the world could be a brighter place. Gold's world had gone dark now, save for Bae who finally, after years of trying, seemed glad to be rid of his father. He never wrote. And all Rumford had left to do was grow his fortunes
"Rum," Lord Spencer greeted him, too familiarly, as they passed in the foyer. The older man was heading in to the Club, and Gold had already donned his coat to leave. "What a shock to see you about town already. One might have thought you'd given up the ghost – you've been so quiet lately."

"Unfortunately not, dearie," Rum replied, voice icy. He rather hoped he'd taken the ambitious Earl's familiarity and slapped him back into place.

George grimaced, bristling for his little collection of sycophants.

"I'll give your charming son my regards, shall I?" preened Gold, pushing past. Let George Nolan feel the bit, and recall who among them held the reins, to borrow a metaphor that Her Grace favored from time to time. Gold found it suitably apt.

His leg throbbed from the brief jaunt down the stairs from his Club, but he could take the pain if it meant a swift exit and forgoing the carriage for a few blocks. He'd have a new coach made, the old one carried too much of her ghost – curled up and freezing while he glowered at her. He hadn't been prepared to face so much and so despairingly little of her all at once, drawn so close and grave.

It would not have been within him, even a year ago, to don the pomp and bombast of Lord Gold, Viscount Sonnachdubh, without a bracing gulp of absinthe and poppy, but it came easier now. A masque, a part to play. Nolan liked to prattle on about the freedom of a gentleman no longer afraid, embracing memories to learn from them, but Rum knew better. All but one of his worst fears had come to pass, and desperation was truly frightening. There was nothing, now, which he would not do for Bae, and it was high time that old George Nolan was reminded of that.

"Come on now, m'Lord, there's a cockfight in the alley – lots of fine gentlemen wagering today," interrupted a smallish urchin in a moth-eaten cap. The creature had tucked straw-blonde hair up onto its head, striving to look like a boy, but Rum knew her for a little girl instantly. The streets were hardly safe for children, but doubly so for young girls growing into ladies, as this unfortunate wretch was no doubt discovering.

"There's a hot chestnut man down there too! For half a penny I'll show you!" she tried again.

Gold considered throttling the cretin with his cane, putting on a show for Spencer and his floundering cronies, but he thought better of it. Belle would not have liked it, nor Baelfire. In fact, the girl was a bit under-fed, but she might be about Bae's age.

"Go on home before it gets late," he grumbled, fetching a coin from his breast pocket and tossing it to her. Then Gold turned to leave.

"I wouldn't go down that way, sir," the girl cautioned, clutching the coin close.

"Why not?"

"It's not a cock fight," she whispered, suddenly ashamed. "Just a pair of mug-hunters with barkers. They said they'd give me a penny if I brought in their mark. And you gave me a whole shilling, just coz. It ain't right."

"What's your name?"

"Zimmer."
"Well, Miss Zimmer," said Gold, eyes already trained on the thugs too large to be common brigands. He began to walk onward with her. It wasn't a new hustle, they were the sort of bruisers who cost good coin and made regular salaries. Nolan's probably, though Gold certainly had other enemies.

"You take this and have a hot supper," he told her, passing four sovereigns to her. "And come around this address tomorrow if you want to make some more. I could use a new pair of eyes and ears, it seems. Do you read, girl?"

"I'm not a girl!" she huffed, snatching the calling card from his fingers.

Gold merely cocked his eyebrow at her.

"Yes, sir."

"Good girl. Now get out of the streets, do you hear me? And come tomorrow around noon – a man called Dovey will answer the door, he'll expect you."

"I ain't even said I was going to come, have I?" she retorted, cheeky.

"You'll come," Gold replied, and he knew it was true. The girl vanished into the crowd as he hailed a taxi, leaving his would-be assailants unsatisfied. From now on, when he went out, he would take Mr. Dovey.

The cab driver looked more than a little incredulous when they arrived at his townhouse, but Rumford paid him and departed – largely without speaking.

Unlike Sonnachdubh, Gold's London home was pristine. Bae would inherit the place, and might choose to make use of it someday – it stood in a more than fashionable street – so he was careful to maintain it, always paying for the upkeep. For his part, a chair by the fire place would do as well in Scotland as it would in London; it was always cold and empty, no matter how many logs or how much coal was burning.

"You have a guest in the study," Dovey informed him, taking his coat and hat in the entry way.

"Bugger," swore Gold, his weariness sinking bone-deep. "Couldn't you send him away?"

"It's Dr. Whale, sir," Dovey replied, as though that explained everything.

The old tomb raider probably wanted to be kept on retainer in Town, as though he might possibly be of some use here when he'd failed so admirably in the country. Gold had half a mind to go to bed and simply leave him waiting. Assassins and scheming M.P's tended to leave him with a headache these days.

Still, conversations with the pedantic Dr. Whale never failed to amuse him. In only his waistcoat, Gold made his way up the stairs to see the Doctor, if only to tell him to leave. He usually made an effort to appear every inch the dastardly gentleman in London, but with Whale there was little need for ceremony.

"What do you want, Victor?" Gold asked without so much as looking at him. He made his way to the bar and poured himself a small whiskey.

"Amnesty," Whale replied simply. Well, that certainly caught his attention.

"What have you done now?" Gold asked him.
"I… it's complicated. Strictly speaking, I haven't done anything. It merely came to my attention, and the attention of Mr. Jefferson, that we might be of service to you in exchange for… shall we say…"

"Amnesty?" Gold supplied, befuddled by the man.

He'd had a large crate carried up, the top pried open and left cock-eyed to conceal the contents. It had strewn all manner of straw and dust upon the carpets.

"Yes. It's… well, I suppose you ought to open this up," he concluded, gesturing broadly to the crate in front of him. "I think you'll be quite shocked."

Gold seriously doubted it, but when he shifted the lid and looked down to see a closed coffin, he thought better of himself.

"Who's dead, Victor?" Gold demanded, teeth bared.


"What have you done?" he breathed, sinking to his knees despite the pain and almost daring to brush a lock of hair from her face. The woman in the box had been powdered and starved, wore only a thin shift and bore more bruises than he could count, but there was no denying it – from the small scars she bore of the hound's bite to the gentle curl of her hair – she was real.

"We rescued her—"

"We?" he snarled, lest he weep.

"Jefferson and I. It's all very… she was supposed to be awake by now, and Jefferson's gone on to the continent. I'm sorry, I wasn't prepared to explain…"

"Awake?" he asked, scarcely comprehending.

"It's only a tonic that Jefferson made, to help us escape. She shouldn't… she's alive. I swear she's alive."

"What kind of sick game— You liar!"

"It's not a lie! I swear it! We thought you might forgive us for our part in the scheme if we… Jefferson gave the same concoction to his own wife! He wouldn't have risked her life, please – please!" Whale screamed, but Gold did not heed him. He struck the man with his cane. Then again. Then a third time, and was lost in wave upon wave of violent rage.

"Stop. Stop," he heard a little voice saying, and brushed it away. Whale would pay. There was no room for reason, only fury and regret and pain.

"It's your fault!" Gold roared at him. He'd been screaming it over and over again, he thought, but couldn't think what else to say. "It's your fault, not mine! You!"

"Rum, stop," the little voice begged him, and he looked down to see a small, pale hand brushing his leg. If her fingers had not left a fine white trail of starchy powder in their wake, he would not have believed her truly awake.

In an instant, he abandoned his cane, sunk to his knees, and wrapped his arms around her. She was
small, so tiny – how could she be so small when he remembered a fierce warrior, the hero of one of her stories, seven feet tall and carved from ivory?

"Belle," he sobbed, pressing his face to her neck. She smelled of perfume and oranges, but there was a pulse, warming arms, and the distant scent of her own somewhere beneath the floral mix. Dovey was already seeing to Whale, whose arms and shoulders seemed to have taken the brunt of the beating, and Rumford simply let himself dissolve into the impossible miracle taking place. He'd protect her this time, if she'd let him. He'd be careful. And he'd never impose on her good nature, nor keep her locked up in a drafty castle… She'd have the world, and all its pearls and oysters – alone or together, but he needed this moment of closeness before the pure wonder of her impossible return destroyed him.
Chapter 22

LXIV. The Red Room

Belle could smell smoke, tainted by the stench of charred hair, and she wept. Rum had always liked her hair. She remembered how a stray curl could catch his eye (even as they'd spent their winter in companionable quiet, she'd known he found her hair lovely) and despised herself for her petty vanities. The little girl with the pretty golden curls, as fastidiously preserved as Belle's own, would want her to be brave. But how could she be brave when the flames consumed everything?

Somewhere in the distance, men were shouting, but the smoke pressed down on her chest and forced her eyes shut, commanding her body to remain at rest amid the inferno when all sense and desire demanded she awaken. She didn't know where she was, except that it scorched her to be there, and – for a moment – feared waking to see Dr. Reeve and the Judge more than she feared immolation.

It was a cell – not her own from the hospital, but cell all the same – and in place of padded walls and Spartan mattress, the room had been painted red by fury and flame. But there were men shouting. When Belle thought of her hair burning again, and of Rum, she could almost imagine that one of the voices sounded like his. She was supposed to tell him something, Dr. Whale had been very particular about it. Something about the woman in black, about the red room that wasn't really red – but more a greying sort of ecru, and about the scent of citrus *eau de toilette*.

She did try then, forcing herself deeper into the blaze as every lovely feature of her skin turned black with ash – how would Rum recognize her? – seeking him out, wherever he hid. That was the way of it: seeking him out as the world devoured her, but she'd heard him (she knew she had), and loved him still. That was a revelation to Belle, that there was still room for love after so much self-imposed numbness for the sake of survival.

He was hitting a man. He was hitting Dr. Whale, and he needed to stop that immediately.

Belle knew what she'd have said to him in her nightmare, if he could hear her screaming from the burning room she'd tell him to stop. Stop, please. She didn't think he'd heard her at all before he dropped to his knees and drew her into his embrace, and the fires slowly began to fade.

"Careful," Belle mumbled against the top of Rumford's head. "Fire's hot. Sorry."

His body quaked all around her, it was a marvel that the plaster on the ceiling didn't flake down around them, and she thought she heard him say yes. Yes, it is hot, darling.

Well, that was alright. He knew about the fire, and the rest—the rest slipped from her mind. But he knew the world was burning, and he'd be careful now, wouldn't he? Just that much would be fine, and she closed her eyes to sleep.

"You're burning up," he told her, pressing his lips to her forehead.

"Yes," Belle replied. Everything was burning, but Rum could be too stubborn to see the world as it really was sometimes. He'd thrust his hand into the fire to spite her if she didn't make him see the flames. "Mustn't touch. Hurts."

He was roaring then, louder than the crackling fury of the red room, and it was keeping her awake. If they'd simply let the fire have her – ashes, ashes, we all fall down – maybe that would be
enough, and the red room would go away.

When Belle became cogent again, she awoke to find herself three-quarters submerged in a barrel of drinking water, somewhere in the pantry. That was silly of him; he’d have to order in more for drinking.

"I want clean water and ice – none of that shite from the Thames," Rum was saying. His arms wrapped around her from behind, but his voice was too far away. "Enough to fill her bath and keep it chilled for the next fortnight, until this fever breaks."

The servant he addressed seemed to make some slight noise of objection, but Rum's snarl sent the poor soul scurrying away.


"Belle!"

She could feel her thin shift sloshing up higher on her limbs as he struggled to lift her clear of the barrel, and a sense of relief when Mr. Dovey intervened, sparing Rum's bad leg.

"Thank you, Dovey," said Belle weakly. The hulking man's blush told her she ought to take some precaution of modesty, certain her every peculiarity must have been on display beneath the clinging, sodden fabric, but she simply could not muster the energy.

Rum had her wrapped in a Turkish towel the size of a cot sheet before the next thought could fully form in her mind. She was so tired, and part of her still feared that it would all prove to be a dream.

"Belle… Miss French," Rum corrected, though she could plainly see that doing so had caused him pain. "Are you well? Do you know where you are, Miss French?"

It was with a sickening sort of dread that she realized she did not. Belle shook her head.

"We are at my town home in London. It is November. You are safe. Do you remember how you got here?"

She could see the struggle, the twitch, in his hand, as he struggled not to cosset her, and it shamed her. She'd ruined everything, and now – it seemed – she'd returned to him too late. Belle thought, if her arms ever transformed from char and lead to flesh again, that she'd very much like to chastise him for that. How dare he, after embracing her in her fever, draw away in her lucidity?

Yet it was important that she tell him, even as her teeth threatened to chatter, all that had occurred. She'd promised Dr. Whale, and she'd promised Mr. Jefferson. What could her own losses be to his, whose wife had suffered treatments the likes of which Belle had only heard whispered? She had to tell him everything.

"From the asylum… they rescued me. Gave me something to sleep. Please – not their fault. Rescued me. Please."

"Yes," Rum replied, wincing, but at least he agreed.

Something in the despondent misery of his tone sent her reeling; he sounded like another man. Belle forgot the horrific, phantom scent of fire, and remembered the suffocating fury of orange perfume and powdered wigs.

"It's not safe," Belle gasped, head reeling. The Judge would come for them both, drag her back to
the room of antiques, and she'd rather throw herself on the pyre than return again. "I'm burning."

Rum was saying something, then shouting, and all Belle could do was smile up dumbly as the cool, dark room began to blaze. The Judge wouldn't dare tread here; fire consumed all, and it did not discriminate.

**LXV. Recovery**

"Her pulse is steady and temperature well within the normal range," Victor repeated for the fifth time that evening. It was difficult to tend his patient with only the use of a single arm, but Gold - at first - seemed glad of an opportunity to help. Hours later, Gold seemed not to hear him in his seething and worry, yet demanded a constant stream of unsatisfactory conversation all the same.

"It is possible she's suffering complications from the remnants of Jefferson's serum in her system, but equally likely that trauma has rendered her hysterical. Hysterical coma is not uncommon in ladies, especially when combined with a great emotional upheaval. We cannot know until she awakens, and even with smelling salts she will not wake. Besides that, her constitution undoubtedly requires rest, and I strongly advise against taking any more forceful means to rouse her."

Gold sneered at him, but said nothing, so Whale pressed on: "In any case, I've no idea what Jefferson put in his concoction, ergo there is naught to treat. There's nothing more we can do but wait."

He knew the words lacked conviction, but they'd been said sincerely enough before – despite his broken collar bone and deep bruising; it was only over-tiredness and repetition which rendered them dull.

They both stood now, sans jackets, with a sheen of sweat on their brows and nothing more to do with themselves. It was a bone-deep exhaustion, brought on by over-taxing the nerves, and Gold's emerald-green set of padded chairs called to Victor. His collar bone ached; he needed a sit-down, a drink, and to sleep. They both required rest and respite, yet neither of them would have it so long as his patron remained agitated and worried.

Gold's threats, too, had turned dull with over-use, the only indication that he'd run adrift in his own mire of miserable uncertainty. Whether he lived or died now, Victor had known his life was forfeit the moment Jefferson abandoned him at the docks. Their pair of corpses should have been awake before then, yet the druggist had retreated with his wife across the Channel and left the Doctor with no alternative but to confess his involvement.

The only mercy he would find lie tucked into Gold's bed, clad in dove-grey silk and murmuring incoherently about fire and flame. Belle had not been one to talk in her sleep the last time he'd tended her bedside, and Whale took it as a sign. Of what, though, he couldn't say.

"'S burning," Belle moaned again.

"Why does she keep saying that?" Gold demanded, adjusting her pillows for the seventh time that hour.

The slight tremble in Gold's hands as he busied himself trying to comfort her could not be attributed to alcohol, and that was perhaps one of the greatest wonders of all. Victor had noticed he relied more heavily on his cane of late, and kept too austere a pharmacy to completely drown his pain, yet he had not heard any new reports of bad dreams. It seemed Miss French had taken them all upon herself for the time being. To his physician's eyes, Gold appeared much-changed, though haunted all teh same.
Gold also looked nervous, hunted, and Whale had tended Gold at his most robust and most depraved; the Viscount's jittery nerves were no trifling thing.

"I don't know," Victor answered simply, attempting to spare them both the exertion of hearing his excuses once more at length. They'd discussed it all before, and it seemed they would do so again before Gold would let him go to sleep.

"It could be a dream, or a hallucination of sorts, brought on by the long suspension of activity," Victor continued, though Gold knew all this too. "At best case, she'll wake in the morning well-rested with little or no memory of what transpired. They tell stories of sailors in the far north, or explorers on sledges, who appeared drowned or frozen, only to be warmed up and revived after… well, some claim they awoke after hours."

"But not days," Gold clarified, brushing imagined wrinkles out of Miss French's duvet. So he had been listening when they'd discussed all of this previously. Good. It would make what followed more easy.

"Not days," Whale agreed. "Surviving for days is unheard of, though Miss French certainly was not in such dire straights as freezing or drowning. There are, however, cases of near-death, lasting only moments, which leave the patient addlepated, or invalid. And in other cases, the body recovers but the shock is simply too much for the mind to overcome. I once heard reports of a woman in London who appeared to sleep for days at a time, was even once presumed dead, yet woke to order a bath and then descended into slumber again."

Gold nodded, as if he heard without listening, and Whale braced himself for what he needed to say.

"We ought to discuss your intentions for Miss French if she… if she does not recover sufficiently to lead a meaningful life. There's no shame in speaking in terms of kill-or-cure, Mr. Gold. In some cases, it is far kinder to—"

The clatter of Victor's medical kit as it hit the carpeted floor was his only warning before Gold launched into a tirade against him. With his sleeves about his elbows, hair mussed, and no waistcoat to speak of, Gold resembled a madman.

"She knew me!" the older man snarled, teeth gnashing. "She was awake and she knew me! You cure her! You fucking cure her. There is nae gonnae be any bloody alternative, Victor. If ye lose Belle, ye best write to your damn Royal Society that you went with her, because I havenae spent my whole life working tae stand back and watch when one o' my employees cannae be bothered to do his job, do ye hear me? If you leave me with a corpse, you'll be joining her shortly!"

What little remained of Victor's nerves began to fray as Mr. Gold continued to unravel. He'd have liked to chin the brute, if his arm hadn't been secured to his chest by a sling. He had no illusions that Gold would kill him – or worse – should they fail, but they had to prepare for the worst. If they didn't, it would only

"This isn't my fault!" Victor begged, feeling very much as though a pair of strong hands moved to strangle him. He loosened his tie – damn propriety – and snatched at the top-most buttons of his shirt. He had to breathe.

"I'm not a monster, not a murderer!" Victor carried on as Gold grew more murderous-looking. "We rescued her from that place; I brought her back when you thought she was dead already, so don't accuse me of losing what you've already lost in the first place!

"Jefferson's serum worked in testing, he showed me conclusive proof – scientific evidence, based
on fact – and you've seen the results for yourself! If she's strong, and if we're vigilant, she'll wake up tomorrow well rested and order some soft-boiled eggs and toast, pleasant as you please. But she might not be strong, Gold, and I don't know what else they might have given her at the asylum that has gummed up the works. You know better than most the perils of stopping medications too suddenly. I can't… I can't treat her for an invisible ailment, do you understand?"

"Aye," Gold sighed, rearing back and loosening his hold on the Doctor's good arm. Victor hadn't even realized he'd been clutching at him, yet the moment Gold's fingers released him, he knew there would be bruising.

"I've put in orders at the chemist for the common medications they might have tried, in case she shows a symptom I recognize, but we always run the risk of complicating things with guessing. We might introduce a new compound… it could react badly. Her metabolism was slowed while she remained comatose, but she'll be processing internal stimuli like any other patient from now on. That means she'll need food, water, bathing, and a bed pan most likely… You could hire a nurse from one of the local hospitals, or a chamber-maid."

"I'll send for staff at Sonnachdubh," Gold said, deflating. "She liked the kitchen girl, Ruby, and her cantankerous old Gran who's always fussing at me. They'll be here in a few days. You are to remain here, in residence, and tend Miss French in my absence. Spare no expense."

"You're leaving?" Victor asked, astonished – not for the first time that evening.

"This cannot be allowed to stand. I won't tolerate it. I'm going south, to share a few choice thoughts with Her Grace, and I don't want any complications. Tell Dovey to keep his eyes out for a rider, I'll send an over-night courier by post horse when I find out what they gave her."

"Alright," Victor agreed, unsure if Gold meant to punish the Duchess, kill Dr. Reeve, set fire to the hospital, or some combination of the three.

"Oh and there's a girl called Zimmer who'll be popping 'round tomorrow, looking for work. Tell Dovey to pay her well and keep the money coming, she's been of use to me. Tell him I expect the girl to deliver me a name. Or names."

"Surely you can tell him yourself?" Whale grumbled. He was a physician, not a secretary. "Or wait. Devon and back can't take more than a few days."

"As of this moment," said Gold, "you can consider my absence indefinite."

**LXVI. A Pound of Flesh**

Locomotives were unreliable and full of opportunities for trouble, so Gold issued orders for his grooms to ready the landau. Four wheels, four horses, and he'd pay good coin to every post-house on the way to keep them fresh, but with a limited valise and a slightly-mad coachman, he'd make the journey in haste.

He preferred Mr. Dovey to any of the other footmen in his employ, but all of his drivers were used to stringent demands on their time – long journeys made at break-neck pace without rest – and then nothing for months; he paid them well for the inconvenience, and they knew their trade.

It put him in Plymouth just after sun rise, the day disgustingly and disproportionately bright; it seemed unnatural to see the rest of the world at peace and sunny while a storm raged in his mind. Gold merely drew closed the drapes and ordered them to keep the cattle moving. It took more twists and turns to navigate a single county than it did to travel the turnpikes, but by eleven o'clock
they'd managed the country roads to arrive at the outskirts of the White Hall estate.

"Stop here," Rum ordered as they approached the tall ash trees lining the drive up Lady White Hall's Great Lawn. "I'll walk the rest of the way. Bring the coach around to the stables and permit no servants to leave – but stay out of sight otherwise. I don't want Her Grace to know I've arrived."

The coachman glanced at his leg and cane a bit dubiously, but followed the instructions before him, taking up a cudgel-stick from the side of the drive. The footman produced three braces of pistols and two rifles from the box before climbing up with the driver onto his seat. All his men knew that Gold rewarded loyalty, and so it remained. The landau vanished a little further down the road, turning up the dirt path that circled the White Hall park.

Gold eased himself up the limestone gravel, not caring whether he called at any civilized hour, and glad for the few moments' respite to collect his thoughts. All the world around him had been as a black tunnel, leading to this place, and for all the time he'd spent in stony silence on the journey, there was no plan of which he could speak.

He'd hurt her, and make sure she knew – when she toppled from grace – he'd been the one to do it. All he needed was a weak point. The boy, maybe – Leopold's heir, whom she doted on? Or the stables? Something more gruesome than simple ruin. Children were not sacred to him, only one, and Baelfire had been lost to him the moment he sent him back abroad to school. The boy would never forgive him for securing his good behavior with threats and promises against his friends, though Gold had not been able to admit it before now.

Belle would not forgive him either, because Belle – like Bae – was good, and so he'd have to satisfy himself in vengeance and see to it that the memory of it would be enough. She'd be happier with her liberty, certainly. He'd hoped, once, that revenging himself upon Belle for her father's sins would satisfy him, but he'd been mistaken in that; he was not mistaken in this.

White Hall, with its great columns and reliefs (so very different from old Duke Leopold's sparse, Scottish manse) loomed over Gold like the pearly gates of some classical Heaven, and he wondered if a bit of black tar and fire would improve it, or if the pediments would mock him no matter their state of ruin.

Gold took the stairs as fast as he dared, and brought his cane to bear upon the door – forgoing the knocker. It left a scar upon the wood, and that pleased him a little.

"Open the door!" Gold roared.

He needn't have bothered. The butler appeared from within, escorting an aging, grey-haired man who stank of *parfum* out the door.

"Her Grace is not receiving," the servant informed him. The grey-haired man only glared, then turned and walked away without speaking.

"She will see me," Gold insisted, pressing in. "By God, she will."

"Perhaps if you have a card?"

"I don't need one. You tell that woman her notes are due, immediately, or I'll start taking it out of the furnishings. What does a piece like this go for, I wonder?" Gold asked, shattering an antique porcelain vessel from the Indies with his cane. "In this sort of condition, I doubt it would fetch more than tuppence."

He broke its mate next as the butler gawped at him.
"That's five pence for the pair, then, yes? Best summon up the maids; you'll have an awful mess before I get my pound of flesh."

Gold turned next to shatter the gilt mirror to his left, but a voice from the top of the Great Stair halted his hand.

"Gold! What is the meaning of this?"

"Oh, I think you know, dearie," Gold sneered, lifting his face to look up at the black-clad figure of Her Grace. "I'm here to take what's owed me."

"You have no right—"

"I have EVERY right! You broke your deal with me, Regina. Non-interference and obedience, those were the terms of your loan, I believe."

"I haven't—"

"You told me she died!" he bellowed.

Lady White Hall truly looked her age then, young and frightened, lacking her usual dignity. "I... I don't know who you mean."

Gold shattered the porcelain bust of a stallion decorating the bannister with his cane, and Regina screamed.

"It's not nice to tell lies, your Grace."

"I didn't... I'm not to blame! Why must everyone shunt all the faults of the world onto me?"

"Don't you play the victim with me, dearie," Rum sneered, striking the ground beside her feet and sending the Duchess reeling. He caught her by the neck of her dress, unmolested by the servants standing awe-struck in the foyer, and shook her over the railing. "You took her from me. You lied to me. And now she may be dying, so you're going to tell me exactly three things: why did you lie, what did your doctors do to her, and who the hell told you to take her from me?"

"Graham! Graham, help me!" she cried, and Gold shook her hard enough to bruise her skull and send her hair pins sailing.

"Let's try this again, shall we?" Gold sneered, vaguely aware that the servants below had begun to advance on him. "Why did you lie to me?"

"Because I didn't have a choice!" Regina wept, and Gold released her in time to round on the advancing company. When he glared at them, they stopped dead on their feet.

"Now that is interesting. Her Grace and I are going to go have a nice chat in her study," Gold informed them, forcing the weeping Duchess to her feet. "What do you say, Lady White Hall, shall we have them call the constables and round up a posse, or is that too risky? Never know what the authorities might find if they come around and look too closely."

"Don't call the police," she whispered, some of her color returning to her as she addressed the servants. "Go about your business, you didn't see or hear anything. Do you understand me? Do you understand? Get out of my sight!"

As the servants fled, Gold leveled his gaze back on the Duchess – barely more than a girl when
he'd met her, and still a girl in so many ways. Somewhere in a distant nursery, baby Henry was screaming, and Gold gave a meaningful, menacing look down the hallway. Looking back at the Duchess, at the sick fright in her face, he knew they'd come to an understanding.

"You've got exactly five minutes to enlighten me, dearie, or this is going to get messy."
Chapter 23

LXVII. Les Fleurs du Mal

Regina could feel the wrath of Gold's hands bruising her arms as she struggled not to lose more ground to the deceptively muscular man. He looked like the Devil himself come to call, over-long hair lank with the sweat of the road, jacket crumpled, and traces of dust about his knees; a vulgar meddler and a beast, with no right to treat her roughly. Why couldn't he have simply died and let her be happy?

Gold was shouting at her again, and Regina called for aid despite herself. Mr. Humbert would help her, he must love her at least that much, certainly.

She would not weep. Not for his pleasure or pardon, not for any man. Not again. Then the baby bellowed, and her whole being shattered.

Gold looked to the sound, murder in his eyes, and Regina tasted the bitter sting of vomit in her mouth. A chill of ice stabbed at her heart, and the sudden resolve steeled her.

She'd gouge the eyes from his brow before he ever laid a single, misshapen foot in her nursery; lace him in one of her corsets until he suffocated on his unwarranted dignity.

"Start talking," Gold snarled at her, brogue thick as he slammed the door to her parlor.

He wanted her to tremble, she realized, and chilled her further. Instead, Regina grinned. Henry was still wailing from his nursery, and that – more than anything – gave her purpose. Regina swanned around the room, giving herself space from the frothing Viscount, drew breath, and thought quickly as the pantomime of righting her clothes occupied her hands.

Gold could not know, not for certain, of anything more compromising than the false information she gave him; aside from whomever informed on her – and someone would despair in repentance of that sin – all of her other loose-ends had been knotted.

Lady White Hall's heart clenched, awakening an old ache deep in her chest; delicate and fraying nerves clutched at her stomach, threatening to overwhelm her senses. All of the Duchess' plans and hopes were unraveling, coming loose at the edges, as though the elegant tapestry she'd toiled to weave had been flipped to the reverse and its drives of multi-colored thread traced to their origin to be plucked at like cat-gut strings. It all led back to the wretched French girl. Regina would bury her in the garden, beneath one of the flower beds, if the little fiend weren't already so much dust.

She might do it yet, if the tides turned in her favor once Mr. Humbert came. Dear Graham assured her that a healthy application of wood-ash to the soil yielded the most stunning pink hortensias, without any of the garish blues she hated. For her own part, Regina required purple or white blossoms – the purest, most lovely blooms, which Graham grew especially for her – but a little patch of pinks in the green house (just the shade of a certain French girl's lips) which she could cut and present in a nosegay to Gold when he took it into his head to scold her would have been a deliciously wicked addition to the estate.

Miss French was departed now – truly lost to him; he'd come too late, and that news might be enough to stay him. She would admit nothing beyond that of which he'd already found her culpable, and hope for the best. Regina inhaled again, adjusting her strewn locks with a simple twist, and then stepped toward the jagged, little man.
"There's no need for theatrics, Rumford," Regina began, fixing the distant, cool look of her mother foremost in her mind.

Regina had never understood before how a mother could be so cruel for the sake of a child who'd neither asked for station nor demanded help of her, but it was clearer now. She wanted what was best for her son: property, riches, and title. Gold had threatened all three, in addition to the abuse he'd shown her, and she would make him suffer for it. She'd give him pink hortensias on an autumn day.

"We help so many lost, little lambs in our facility. Your girl was merely a casualty. A casualty of a war you started, if you recall, by interfering with my charities. I'd no notion of keeping her after the issue of my step-daughter was addressed, but you wouldn't hear of it. You thwarted me at every turn, so there she sat."

Gold glared at her, but did not speak, and Regina did her best not to panic. Graham was coming.

"Frankly, I'll never know what gentlemen see in waifish little orphans with no dowry or connections, though I must admit – she certainly was pretty. A certain blush to her cheeks, in some lights, gave quite the florid complexion."

The Judge had thought so too, and his fury at the French girl's loss had been every bit as terrible as the Viscount's now was. If Sonnachdubh caused trouble for her – real trouble, meriting an inquest – it would be on Frontland's doorstep within a fortnight, and that would surely expose her to too much scrutiny.

The little fool ought to have accepted his Honor's offer to marry, rather than kick and scream like a thrashing goblin. If she had married, she might have had her liberty again. A husband's command was not so bothersome a fetter, and she knew very well what a wife might do to rid herself of a spouse whom she despised. Miss French hadn't the head for strategy, none of the French had – it was why they'd come to rely too heavily upon a Corsican – but if she'd listened she might have come to be happy. For that matter, Frontland could not have more than fifteen or twenty years still remaining; if the girl objected to scheming, she need only have waited until the old lump was taken by infirmity.

Ten years were nothing: how selfish, how silly. And had Gold not done the same, seizing her from her home and foisting an engagement onto the girl? That was simply the way of it; the greater half of England remained afloat simply because slim little women – the kind of girl Regina herself had been – lay back and let vile, old men make wives and mistresses of them.

Gold knew nothing of these complications – if he had, she held no illusions that he'd have wrung her neck on the stair – so Regina chose her next words carefully, and focused all her nerves toward the distant hope of a dusty pink bouquet.

What had she said to him, which words precisely, at the point of the original deception? And, now discovered, what might she say to assay him? She'd written, in some detail, of the poor, local Squire whose daughter had been stricken by an oncoming train, and of how his name had – in hushed tones – been mentioned in conjunction to the doings. A suspected suicide, and oughtn't he look to his own exploits before judging hers too harshly?

Regina imagined that she could hear her savior's feet hard upon the pavement, and played for time again.

"I didn't kill the chit, Rum, but there is some rather pressing news of which I ought to inform you before this ill-advised fit of yours carries on. The letter I sent you had a touch of Delphi. I'm glad,
really, that you've had your grief and done with already. The hospital informed us just a few days ago that your girl succumbed to illness and was cremated to stymie contagion."

She gave that a few moments to sink in, but Gold's face remained inscrutable.

"It was not my design, nor by any fault of my own, I assure you; she's of no use to me dead, not even insofar as it may be a torment to you. My staff kept her very comfortable. I'm led to understand she even had her own little parlor, and a wardrobe suitable for entertaining guests, not that the gentlemen were queuing up to call. I dare say it was a right-sight more civilized than any kindness you ever showed the poor, indentured soul."

Gold chuckled, a dry, humorless laugh beset by black, joyless eyes, and Regina felt her skin prickle. "That's not a very good start, Your Grace, and you have only two minutes of my patience remaining. Whom, what, and why? I'm waiting."

"Tosh," she snapped at him, flouncing down onto her settee in a most un-ladylike manner. Where was he? A little bolt of dust shot into the air from where his Honor had last seated himself and Regina fanned it away, thinking frantically.

Frontland wanted Reeve's head, and she'd promised to give him satisfaction. Thank God he had not remained to play witness to this indignation. No, Reeve was the price of his further complicity, and fair; there was more than one weak-willed physician in the country, he was not unique. Dr. Reeve had only one life to give, and he'd as good as forfeit it already.

There had to be somebody disposable, a person whose corruption he would believe – herself withstanding. In a fit of brilliance, a pair of faces popped into her mind.

"If you must know," Regina continued, feeling very much as though Graham must finally be approaching, "I took her because it was easy. Because you sent her south, practically gift-wrapped for me, and because your previous Groundskeeper and his wife told me she'd drawn your fancy. That you ever expected me to do differently is absolute lunacy, and I've no patience for the true madman. I really haven't.

"I have no idea what Dr. Reeve's staff gave her – but whatever it was, it could not have killed her. It's all very mild there, I think they call it a *behavioral supplement*. She died of the plague. Or a plague. The report is not very clear on that regard. Blame the Orientals, if you've got to blame someone, and leave me out of it."

Lady White Hall rose to collect the sheaf of papers, and offered them for Gold to inspect.

"See for yourself, if you don't believe me…" she challenged him.

Gold made no move to take them, and she began to shuffle through them herself. "Really, Rum, I've nothing to profit from her in passing, save your rage. You cannot think me so stupid…"

A glance up to him said otherwise, so she changed tactics as she continued to thumb through the documents.

"You should really look to your own people, when they're disreputable like Hopper, and so willing to betray you. It's bad policy to – ah, here we are. We had an outside opinion, you see? It's signed and certified by my man, Reeve, and a consulting physician called…"

Her entire world sunk to half-a-dozen words scrawled upon the page.

"What's his name, dearie?" Gold asked her, his voice sickly sweet.
"No," she gasped. What had he said before? He'd said something, if only she could think, and she hadn't taken him literally. She _may be_ dying. _May_ be. "No!"

"Oh yes," he cheered, rounding on her and looming.

"Damn you," Regina spat, making for the grate. Where the hell was he? He should have arrived by now, and if Graham was not coming... She'd burn the lot of it before admitting defeat.

Quick as lightning, Gold's cane snapped out in front of her, barring her way.

"Read," he snarled through un-even teeth.

With hands that trembled no matter how she tried to still them, Regina raised the documents to her eyes and read: "Diagnosis concurred by Victor F. Whale, M.D."

"My man," Gold preened.

"Your man," Regina nodded, unsteady on her feet. Henry was still crying. Oh, Henry… "Graham! Graham? What does this mean? She survived? Escaped?"

"Barely, dearie, and it's no sure thing. If she dies, I think you know what the price will be. Does this file contain all of the medications and procedures conducted upon Miss French while she was wrongfully held in your facility?" asked Gold, snatching the papers from her hands.

"Yes," Regina answered, reeling. Not dead? Her pink hortensias and stalwart gardener were fading. For the first time, she began to wish she'd heeded her mother's warnings. Gold was a man deranged, and the heart a happy traitor that hampered reason.

"You betrayed me and nearly destroyed one of the very few things dear in my life," Gold purred, his voice a velvet-wrapped dagger against her rib cage. "You thought you could make me weak, thought you could defeat me. If you'd have waited and obeyed, all would have been seen to discreetly, but that's always been the fault of your family: you've got more ambition than sense. It's time you learned not to trifle with me, dearie."

"It wasn't my fault! I needed your help and you turned your back on me! Leopold's daughter would have cast me out and left me to die alone, in poverty if I hadn't been the first to lash out and take what was rightfully mine. And then…"

Henry wailed again, and Gold's eyes moved toward the nursery. The sound of his hungry little cries cutting her to the quick. Why weren't his nurses tending to him?

"You stay away from Henry," Regina snarled at him. "Everything I did, everything I've done, it was all to protect him from Lady Mary! Would you have done any less for your own son? Could anyone?"

Something snapped within him, but whether it would prove her demise or salvation, Regina could not say.

**LXVIII. Lobelia**

Rumford wanted to strike her for her insolence, but dared not move (he would not relent again). How dare she drag Bae into this fray? How dare she speak as though she knew anything at all of him? Baelfire was a good lad, deserving of every luxury his father's sins could furnish him, and she'd nearly destroyed his dear Miss French; Regina had no right to profane their names with her lies, she scarcely had the right to speak to him, save that he required insight into Belle's treatment.
"Look at yourself," Lady White Hall rallied, capitalizing on the briefest hesitation in his diatribe to renew her cause. "You've the look of a half-mad drunkard, and a cripple to boot. Your clothing is rumpled, dusty, and too old – like you! I'm Duchess-Regent now in spite of you, and I brought about all of this myself. If your girl's alive, consider it a battle won and take what little reprieve is left to you. I've already won the war, Rum, and I won it without you."

"Oh yes, this is a victory – certainly," Rum quipped. "All alone in a manor you've mortgaged to the hilt, not a friend in sight, and a babe crying for its mother – its real mother – in the next room. From the moment you took it into your head to be rid of Lord White Hall – no, don't deny it! I've always known his happy accident was some scheme of yours, though I never cared to test you. From that moment, you've conspired to attach your name to every scandal, every folly in the Kingdom!"

"I was careful—"

"You were brash!" he screamed back, spittle flying from his mouth. "Doubly so when you crossed me, dearie!"

He shattered a mirror on the wall, directly behind her, with a single thrash of his cane. She was cornered now – he'd hardly noticed the predatory nature of their positions before the glass erupted about their feet.

Regina shrieked and crumpled to the ground, uncomprehending. How had all her careful planning come to nothing but a broken mirror and a ruined gown?

"Are... are you going to kill me?"

That was the question of the hour, wasn't it? He'd very much have liked to strap her to the table and let her burn with every, last stick of furniture, but that would take time - time Belle needed, if she was to survive. Rumford looked between the sheaf of papers in his left hand and the cane in his right. He'd already wasted so much time demanding answers from Her Grace, answers he knew must be half-lies – for the Hoppers were cruel, but not clever – and it wasn't enough by half. She ought to be a husk, hollowed out in effigy with the inner machinery scooped away and disposed of, and then Regina wouldn't be of any threat to anybody.

It was a fair punishment, and - much as he hated the weakness in himself - he liked that it would spare the son. Children didn't ask for guardians the likes of them, but they got them all the same, and if any such villain ever targeted Bae... He and the Duchess had that much in common, it seemed. He'd have to kill Regina outright if he harmed the child – he could see that in her face – and respected the tenacity despite everything.

Looking down at her, Gold could see his own face reflected back in the broken glass, and recoiled. It was too much, too similar to another confrontation, another broken deal. Battered as she was, all Gold could see was the violent memory of the day he hurt Miss French, and ruined everything.

He could see himself reflected beside her, and that was worse still. Regina was right, he did look a mess. His trousers, especially, looked as though he'd knelt in the dust – and on the lower extremity, against his calf – stood a single, white hand-print, left when Belle had reached for him from the grave.

It wouldn't do to batter someone when the finer point of a pen might suffice.
Belle would have asked him to stop this, would want no bloodshed on her behalf, and even when the memory of her weak, breathless 

pleases 

failed to move him, the fear that he might waste what little time she had remaining in the act of revenge made him flinch.

"I'm going to let you live."

"Wh... what? Why?"

"Because I'd not have my family see fresh blood on my hands and always wonder if they'll be joining it." The unexpected honestly astounded both of them.

"There will be an inquest, before year-end, and Lord Spencer's little band of Whigs will not be sufficient to keep you safe; Lady Mary and Mr. Nolan will replace you as Regents, and as guardians to the future Lord White Hall in the nursery. I rather expect old George will cut his losses and re-inherit his son before it's all done and said, but if he does not I'll certainly make the gentleman a living in recompense for his services when the babe reaches its majority. You will not fight this regime change; you cannot win. I do hope you enjoy your little two-room cottage in the country, Your Grace; a quiet widow-hood will suit you."

"You cannot expect me to capitulate! I'll fight—"

"You will not. These are the terms, and if you want that boy to inherit a penny, I suggest you accept them. It's easy enough to simply have both of you replaced."

"And if I refuse?"

"Well..." Gold chuckled, turning to leave, "there's always debtor's prison. Unless you've got all you owe me at hand? No, I thought not. Then again, I suppose there is also a room that just opened up in one of the county's finest facilities. I understand it has a little sitting room and wardrobe, not that the gentlemen are queuing up..."

"You can't! I'll tell them... I'll say..." Regina snarled back, defiant to the last.

"Face it, dearie, I wear all my sins on my sleeve. You can't blackmail me, and we both know you can't afford to bribe me. It's been decided; try to muster up some of that regal dignity."

It took all of his resolve, but Gold looked to the papers in his fist, remembered Belle's broken sobs as she lie dreaming, and took his leave.

Passing back through the wake of his destruction left Gold feeling satisfied that Regina understood the severity of her crimes. She'd come to understand it ten-fold by the time all was done on the matter of the White Hall inheritance, but then – she'd been begging for his involvement from the beginning. The soon-to-be-deposed Duchess really ought to have been careful what she wished for.

The sight of his men waiting as instructed at Regina's stables did nothing to lessen the black look on his face, nor comfort the worry in his heart. Belle might be gone already, and he'd no way of knowing it... possibly not for days.

"Saddle Her Grace's best hunter," Gold ordered, and a snappish affirmation told him that one of the White Hall grooms was doing as he was told. If the lad brought him anything but Regina's finest horse-flesh, Gold would know, and he didn't possess the fortitude to suffer another fool.

Turning, he addressed one of his own – a thin, hard bloke hired-on by Dovey – a fair footman, but an excellent seat for thrashing-out and fox hunting.
"Take these," Gold instructed, folding the papers into a compact, leather case produced from his landau. "You are to go directly to my home in London; do not stop, do not dally." There was no need to speak of rewards or punishment – all Gold's employees knew what was expected of them, and the advantages granted those who properly executed their duties.

"This mount is one of the swiftest long-range seats in the country," Rum continued, passing the reins of Her Grace's personal stallion to his courier. "He'll make the ride in one, so don't bother with the post houses, and don't spare the crop. You understand the urgency?"

He did, and took his seat effortlessly.

"Put these into the hands of Dr. Whale or Mr. Dovey, none other; this is everything I could obtain in respect to Miss French's treatment in hospital – do you understand what that means? Good. Tell them I'll send word again after quizzing the doctor, and tell Dovey to find me the Hoppers. Whatever it takes." Gold handed the man his documents, a purse, and two pistols from the coach, and prepared to send him on his way.

"Sir," one of the White Hall grooms interjected with a wavering voice, "you're like to ruin Rocinante if you run him all the way to London… His lungs and legs… Her Grace will beat us, sir; she loves that horse better than most anything."

"Perfect," replied Rumford, a malicious glint of joy in his eye. He'd been merciful, but it would do him a world of good to know that Regina would still be suffering. "If you don't want to be whipped, I suggest you start coming up with a convincing story. Maybe blacken an eye here or there, make it convincing. Horse thieves are notoriously hard to come by these days."

Whatever their objections, the words were lost on the breeze as his man spurred the beast into action and galloped toward London. The tightness in Rum's chest eased slightly

Behind him, a man he hadn't noticed cleared his throat to draw his attention. Gold rounded on the interloper, and paused – it was the old man who'd taken his leave during Rum's abrupt arrival. On a second look, the gentleman appeared ghostly-pale, with a suit going to grey, and a shock of unkempt, white hair. A humble country gentleman, if an unwelcome one.

"What the devil are you still doing here?" Gold asked him.

"Now see here, son," the older man replied, "your coachmen refused to allow anyone off the property without your leave. Lud, but they've driven my horse into the field. It was dashed ungentlemanly!"

"Go and catch the gentleman's horse," Gold demanded, lazily gesturing to one of the sniveling White Hall grooms. "It seems my men do not know Her Grace's servants from visiting gentry. You have my most abject apologies, Mr…?"

The man simply harrumphed him, and Gold conceded the point. He'd made such a horrid breach of protocol already that proper introductions had not seemed necessary.

"Very well," Gold sighed, well and done with decorum for the day but none the less obliged to demonstrate it. "Lord Sonnachdubh, at your service," he continued, making a quick bow.

The man did not respond, only looked at him - almost disbelieving.

"Please forward any expenses for damages to your horse to my clerks," Gold continued, and handed him his card. If the man wanted to come to blows over a bruised pride, he'd have to take it up another day. Time was of the essence.
"I know who you are, lad," the old man grumbled at him, but took the proffered card none the less.

"And may I have the privilege of knowing whom I address?" Gold testily replied.

The grey-haired gentleman's pale, blue eyes crinkled as he scrutinized Rum, but he finally answered with a little grin: "Captain F."

"Eft?" asked Gold, struggling to place the name. The face wasn't foreign, but haggard – tired – and, unless he was very much mistaken, over-thin. Gold knew the look of an addict well, though what this man craved was anyone's guess, but he simply could not recall meeting an Eft. "My apologies, I cannot place you. Perhaps we met in another life."

"Indeed."

"My Lord, pardon me," said one of Regina's stable hands, panting from his run across the paddock. "The horse escaped. Rivers reckons it's headed back the way it knows, down the county road to your stables, your H—"

"Well!" Eft snapped, jostling the groom with a firm slap to his back that set a little cloud of chaff into the air, "I suppose needs must that I impose on your services, son. What do you say to offering an old Redcoat a ride back to his hearth? It's not more than three quarters of an hour west, perhaps a little less with your fine coach-and-four."

Rumford could think of several dozen choice words he might say, but – unlike Her Grace – this man had not wronged him (more importantly, had not wronged Miss French), nor had he any leverage with which to prevent Eft from pressing charges. The less of his time in Devon became fodder for the presses, the better. He was a witness, a witness who recognized him moreover, and to whom he begrudgingly owed a gentleman's debt. Damn society and damn the gentry with it, but he was stuck, his leg ached, and Miss French would abhor that a bystander was hurt on her account.

It was with no shortage of unkind thoughts, exacerbated by the overwhelming citrus of the man's cologne brought in close proximity by the landau, that Rum knocked his cane against the box and bid good riddance to the Duchess.

LXIX. Love Lies Bleeding

Belle knew little of the world beyond the furnace of her head, though she did know – as Dr. Whale's voice drifted in – that she was not burning in the conventional sense. It seemed a simple enough solution, in theory, to wake herself and be done with the mess, but the vice-grip of sleep simply would not end.

She'd woken once (or was it twice now?) when Rum needed her, and she desperately wished that he would come back and hold her again. It seemed she'd been adrift and singed for a very long time, but what passed for hours in semi-lucid misery might be only a moment beyond her own consciousness. It was a truth she'd come to know cruelly, and not all at the tutelage of fever-dreams.

In her room at the hospital, the nights had been never-ending. At times, it felt as though years had passed since she'd seen more than a blurring hand pressing unwanted medicine to her lips, and at other moments she'd wished for no more than a moment more to savor her survival.

How strange, how utterly bewildering, to rationalize one reality, yet experience another.

If she focused, for half a moment, Belle could almost thin the flame to make out the shape of the
hovering Mr. Dovey. He was telling Whale something, and she strained to hear before the flame turned to glass and started cracking. The floor gave out beneath Belle's feet – launching her down into pitch-black nothing, away from whatever conversation the two men were having.

She couldn't breathe.

Something was wrong, dreadfully wrong, and she could tell them if only she could *wake*! It wasn't safe; more enemies than he could possibly know were coming, a storm shattering ships on the sea, and in the black bowels of her own mind, safe at last from the fire, Belle was drowning.
Chapter 24

LXX. Powder

Rum had hoped for a quiet ride to the edge of Eft's properties, where he might be rid of the gentleman and resume his search for the ill-fated Dr. Reeve. He could not risk a rogue witness accusing him of violence against a Duchess, even one so riddled by scandal as Lady White Hall, before his work was complete. All those wretched souls who'd tormented dear, sweet Belle would pay, and then Rum would face the consequences – come what may.

Belle wouldn't like it, not in the slightest. She'd smile and pat his arm, tell him that he'd done enough and promise to try and get well again, now that they'd recovered her medical dossier. Baelfire, at least, would be happy. Bae had shunned his father since last autumn. The boy longed for freedom and Rum had done as much for the lad as any father could; it was settled with his lawyers – should anything happen to him, anything at all, Bae would inherit without interference from the likes of Regina.

It was madness to have thrashed and badgered her in her own home, but the lack of loyalty in her servants and heavy debts she owed him had lent him a small cloak of indemnity. Not so with Eft, who must now be silenced so that Rumford's plans could commence.

He must want something, or he would not have alerted Rumford to his presence. Only a fool would have spoken when he did, if he did not intend to make a play at blackmailing him. If it was only money, Rum would pay him; the gentleman could name his price, and they'd both pretend not to wince at the vulgarity.

"I believe you owe me an explanation for the circumstances surrounding Her Grace, son," said the Captain, pale blue eyes critical, and tuned to Gold like daggers. "I'd not level accusations against a Lord, even a Scotch one, without allowing him the chance to defend his actions in civil discourse. And it helps, of course, that the alleged victim of your temper has been a half-Spanish usurper and a mushroom of the first order."

"I take it you are not over-fond of Lady White Hall, then?" Gold replied.

Eft chuckled.

"The Blanchards have been Lords in this land since Hastings, same as the Squire over yon hillock. All these others you see were manufactured by Queen Anne – or later, if you can conceive of it. Lord Leopold's first Duchess, God save her, was a real Lady of virtue. I knew her when she was just a maid – her and the late Duke, both, though they'd nothing much to do with the likes of us genteel, country folk.

"The best sort of man imaginable. Fair and just, in a time when the courts were not so amenable to the little folk as they are now. Yet it was a fault in His Grace when took that Lady to wife, though it pains me to criticize the departed. But it was a fault, yes, a grievous fault indeed, to remarry as he did. What does he give us for a replacement to one of the finest gentlewomen you'd ever hope to see?"

Gold had several unkind words that might describe Regina to perfection, but he kept them to himself and let the older man continue to speak.

"Some light-skirt, some fresh-minted Baronet's daughter or the ilk," Eft pressed on, answering his
own rhetoric. "With a common, climbing mother and a foreign-inclined lordling for a sire. It's a degradation of the breed, to mount a bitch who's not even properly English – no offence. Whose mother wasn't even in *Burke's*, raised up to one of the Great Houses of the County. That's why I don't mind over-much allowing you the chance to explain yourself, son. It's not done to call unannounced on a Duchess all in a rage, but it ought not be permitted to settle a title on a usurping harlot either, no offense."

"You speak very frankly," Rum observed. His own mother hadn't been within 30 leagues of *Burke's Peerage*, either, but he was used to the sort of contempt these middle-class gentlemen held for his kind. Usurpers, they'd say. It was why he needed power, to buy Bae's immunity from this kind of scrutiny. If Lady White Hall ever heard that the country folk held her in less than eminent esteem, she'd froth at the lips and rage. Regina was never sensible, though; never aware of the world surrounding her, and it was that firm disregard for the scrutiny of her lesser that had put them on such ill terms in the first place.

Eft was both astute and brazen to speak as he did, and that worried Rum too. He might owe the old meddler more than a horse, when all was said and done, but the gentleman still had not made mention of money. He wouldn't, Rum was becoming certain. It would be too vulgar, in a way that mattered to the aged gentry and those too puffed-up to see the way of things in the age of steam. Still, Eft's eyes were sharp; he'd want something.

"Aye, I'll not salute some scab in a fresh jacket if he's beneath me, not bow to them as got their pedigree fresh off the blotter this morning. You can blame that on Her Majesty's Infantry. Though I hardly think I've got to tell you about that, you've got the look of an old rifleman if I ever saw one."

The carriage lurched again, taking a turn onto an ill-kept country road, meandering out toward Eft's property. Gold hoped the weather held – he didn't much trust the wheel-ruts, should the roads turn muddy. He'd had tremendous luck in his travels, always fresh horses and light coaches – the best England could provide – but a good rain storm might put Reeve beyond his reach. He'd not noticed any clouds before, but one could never tell how the winds might switch this close to the sea…

Rum pulled aside the drapes and spared a glance to the horizon. Some clouds, but not mean-looking. The charms of the little farms and manor houses dotting the countryside were lost on him, but he supposed Belle might admire them. After all, she'd grown up among these hills and valleys – and that was enough to endear them to Rumford, ever-so-slightly. If she wanted nothing more to do with him, or if Her Grace somehow bested him in the eleventh hour, he would install her in any property she liked. She only had to live. Just that, nothing more. Survive, grow strong, and perhaps forgive him for his folly.

"No, I'm afraid you're mistaken," Rum replied at last. He schooled his features carefully.

"As you like it," nodded Eft, though there was a half-concealed malice in his eyes that Rum disliked. It hearkened of a man who would not acquiesce easily.

When Rum didn't volunteer any more information, Eft came to the point: "Well, out with it then. What are you about lad? I'll have the truth, by God."

"Her Grace and I were simply settling old debts. It's nothing to concern yourself with, Captain."

The words hung in the air, like so much dust from the road and the chaff of the Colonel's clothing, before the older man unpinned Gold from his severe, blue gaze.

"A debt that involves the Squire's ward?"
Gold couldn't tell if the carriage lurched or if his heart had merely stopped. "Don't gawp at me like that, son. I may be getting on in years, but I've got ears as keen as the next gentleman. Keener, if you agree that half of the young pups waddling about Town these days can't to tell good counsel from a jackass braying, not for love of God or Country! You said Miss French before – and that's Squire Maurice's girl, ennit? He's a friend, and the loss of that child cut him to the bone. We'd heard she fell into the rail tracks a few months back. Terrible way to go, simply dreadful. A tragedy. And before that she'd gone off to work in some Great House, for a Scotsman. Don't try to deny it now; I knew you for a-Devil-in-Lord's-Clothes the moment I laid eyes on you." "Then it seems you have me at a disadvantage, Sir," Gold replied, struggling to keep his tone neutral. "For I've never heard of you before in my life, yet you have known me all this time and feigned ignorance. Do you dare to test me? I assure you, my reputation is well-earned." "It's not your reputation that interests me. Miss French, you said. 'Miss French's treatment,' I believe. Did she… there was never a funeral. No ashes. No lock of hair for her Papa, not even a little wreath to place upon the Lich-gate. Is she… she couldn't have survived, could she?" "Survived a fall into the path of an on-coming train? I suspect not." "She was treated, though, wasn't she? Not dead immediately. Perhaps she even made it to hospital. One of Her Grace's hospitals? It'd mean the world to her family to discover what became of the dear, sweet thing, and you know more than you're saying." Eft leaned forward expectantly as the carriage lurched onto a graveled drive, slowing as they approached their destination, and the dust from the road faded behind them as Rumford glared at the Captain. He'd glared into a pair of blue eyes before, facing worse odds than these, and managed to survive. Belle had softened him on the shade, but it would be all too easy to recall the old rage, to let loose his temper on the old man's age-spotted pate.

The dust inside the carriage did not abate. With every jostle on the drive, small clouds of pale powder shook loose from the old man's clothing, sticking in a sheer, white blanket to his carriage upholstery. Rum breathed deep, steadying himself, and found himself awash in memory.

It was the stink of oranges, and the unnatural pallor of death; it was flesh powdered-over, and a man – hazed by laudanum and time, but a man he recalled by merit of the gentleman's sheer audacity – who'd fidgeted once too often with his hairpiece.

LXXI. Nick'd

"You see somebody coming down the alley, you kick the can. Hard. Make some noise, right? And anybody asks what you're doing loitering, you cough yourself to shambles and grub a penny off 'em. They'll beg off right quick. And whatever you do, don't fall asleep."

Ava Zimmer loved her little brother, but he could be a trifle simple sometimes. Anybody else in the gangs about town wouldn't need to be told how to look out for the pinch, but none of the other dodgers was her family, and they'd sell her out for tuppence – or less, if they was greedy.

Still, if they wanted to eat this winter they needed money, and the only place she knew now to get coin enough for the pair of them was Lord Gold. He'd want to know what the pair of mug-hunters was after and who sent them, more than what she'd said last time, before she showed up at his door looking for a purse. Even if the song she sang was a good one, he still might not pay out, but then they'd be no worse off than they was today. Plus they still had the shilling, and that'd keep them fed two weeks if they was smart.
Any man who'd pay once would pay twice, usually; that was the way of it, so she'd do the job right and maybe they'd even have a new pair of shoes apiece. It was more than her hide was worth to skive off and tell lies. It never did to displease the gentle-folk; one had nearly kicked poor Nicholas' ribs in when he'd tracked soot across their carpets. That was when the pair of them were still spry enough to fit up a chimney. Back then, money came easy.

"I know Ava," Nick sighed, crossing his arms and slumping against the damp, brick wall.

"It's important, Nicholas!" she hissed at him through thin lips. "If anything happens to me, you run to the Sisters like we talked about. You still got most of a shilling to your name, you ent no beggar boy. You make yourself presentable and you take what work's to be got. Sister Astrid'll give you chores and it'll keep you out of the work house, but you'll have to look to your own needs after sundown – they don't let boys sleep in the orphanage, it's just girls after dark."

"I know, Ava," he grumbled again, rolling his eyes. "I kick the can if somebody comes down the alley, I cough and ask for money if somebody's staring, and I go talk to a bunch of sour old nuns as long as I don't look too grubby."

"What's the pass-phrase for the Spenceans? What about Blues of Kent?" she quizzed him, licking her thumb to rub a blot of muck from his face.

"I'll be fine! Just go already," he grumbled back, struggling to evade her meager attempts at a scrub. "We don't do nothing with the gangs anyway, I ent going to run afoul some batsmen in the twenty minutes you're away."

No, thought Ava, probably not. But it was dangerous where she was going, and any one of those mugs could take her poking her nose in the wrong way. She pulled her cap down over her head, tighter, now, with all her hair piled in. Lord Gold made her for a girl too quickly; she'd need to find bigger clothes to hide her shape.

Still, those men were thick, whatever else they might be. She could probably get away with it.

"Be careful," she told her brother, ignoring the ripple of hunger that rumbled through her belly. They'd eat after – meat pies and sweet buns with hot tea. Nick had never had a sweet bun before, at least not one that was fresh-baked, and they'd be able to afford it once Lord Gold paid.

"I will," he insisted, toeing the rusty old can to make his point. She hoped he was right.

With a practiced eye, Ava faded into the darkest shadow and moved on cats-paw toes through the twisting back alleys of the city. Proper folk didn't come down these ways, where it weren't cobbled and no fat slats of timber lay out to keep their fine boots from the muck. It was always muddy, even if it wasn't raining, from the constant piddle of piss-pots and rubbish that fell from the tenements. She'd turned left twice, then right, and though she could still hear the street where her brother stood watch clear as day, she'd already moved worlds away.

Any of the piles of filth here might conceal bodies – warm or decaying – but it wasn't the dead you had to fear. She'd seen dead men, picked clean – even missing slabs of jowl where their fine, golden teeth had been yanked out inexpertly – but a dead man didn't want nothing from the likes of her. A breather would want a toll or worse, but she was quick and small, and that'd always helped to keep her safe.

Ava avoided the piles of rags and filth that looked like they were moving, or like they might be big enough to conceal somebody, and found herself standing ankle-deep in cold run-off that seeped into her shoes. She had one ear pressed to the low, boarded window where the "cock fight" was
meant to take place, and tried to listen for sounds from Nicholas and the street with the other. The men were still in there, sure enough, and if she plugged up the other ear she could just about hear them speak.

"His Honor aint going to like it if we cause a scene out front of his Lordship's carriage house. We was supposed to do it on his way home from the Club, or someplace where not a lot of questions get asked."

There was a sound of flesh hitting flesh, and a grunt from the man who'd been speaking.

"Shut up, Ned," said a second voice. This one lacked the thick, London accent of a common-born thug, and – while it didn't sound refined by any stretch – he did sound different. Not quite foreign. Southern-born, or Welsh maybe, but Ava couldn't be sure. It wasn't a Northern accent, though; she knew that much. "Bludgers like you aren't paid to run at the mouth. I'm in charge, so what I say goes."

"Yes, Mr. Hordor," the others mumbled, and Ava counted three or four distinct voices. There might be any number of men in there, but she guessed it was less than ten.

"We haven't seen the old cripple for going on a full day now. Nobody in or out of the property?"

"No, sir," the low-voiced thugs mumbled. But that was wrong. Of course they'd watched the townhouse – Ava'd watched them watching Gold the better part of the night. She'd have to be mad to take a whole shilling into one of the orphanages for the night, so they'd done the next best thing: the job.

These men might not be clever, but they'd have to be blind to have missed the carriage leaving in the wee, pre-dawn hours of the night. Blind or drunk. Or asleep. Anybody might have been in the carriage, it might not have been Lord Gold, but even so, if these blokes thought he was at home….

"We wouldn't have to do much, just drive up in a milk wagon and hold up a knife to some of the women-folk in the kitchens. It's still just a skeleton staff now, but it won't be if we wait. His Lordship'll send off for more of his Scotch ruffians if he plans to stay any time at all in Town, and then it'll be too late."

"Mr. Hordor," said one of the big, stupid-sounding ones, "What about that big man of his? The one the bare-knucklers call The Dove? He en't like to run weeping like some kitchen maid at the sight of a stolen milk cart and a pig-sticker."

"Look at you lot, scared of an old fisticuff. You've got your pistols, don't you? So give this Dove a belly full of lead and don't let him get close enough to sock those pretty faces, yeah? Easy."

"They'll hear the barkers, though… People'll know… That's how I got nicked affore."

The sound of a man being struck thudded dull and meaty in the room, and Ava was glad – for once – that she couldn't see into their den.

"Nobody's going to call the Blue Bottles for the likes of Sonnachdubh," Hordor bellowed at them. "Even if they did, we'd be long gone. A smash and dash, and who'd know to look for us? No-one. And if they found us, what evidence? We aren't going to rob the man – and any of you puts the rest in danger by taking something is good as dead, mark me – so how could they prove it was us? The job'd be done, and His Honor'd look out for us if it came to that.

"I've been his man these last ten years, and you'd never know a better master, a better judge of character. Sonnachdubh should not have meddled in the affairs of better men – his title's not worth
the paper it's printed on, everybody says. Any of you lot got a better plan? No, you don't. You're all old criminals too stupid to manage on your own, but His Honor gave you a chance to redeem yourselves. There's not a man among you who wouldn't have gone to the gibbet twice over without his interventions."

Ava heard the assembled men murmur their assent, more quietly than they'd agreed to Hordor's other demands.

"So, we work with what we have and we do the plan like I said—"

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" murmured a voice from behind Ava, and she lurched forward in shock, losing her footing for a few seconds.

By the time she'd steadied herself and spun around, the big man had caught her by her threadbare lapels. In his other hand, he held Nick by the ear, silent tears streaming down his cheeks and a telling ring of gravy around his lips.

"Oh Nick…"

"This one nearly ate me out of pocket – three pork pies and two flagons of beer, if you can imagine it – before he let slip that there might be another little boy lurking in the shadows hereabouts. Miss Ginger'll want to see you – some of the fine gentlemen like little boys best."

Ava's instincts told her to fight, to scream and kick, but the big man had Nick, and if Hordor's gang heard the noise… Yes. Ava Zimmer loosed a banshee-scream, the likes of which fat sopranos would envy from Covent Garden to Paris, and waited for the thud of boots to storm into the alley.

LXXII. Penny Dreadful

Belle had struggled to draw breath through the chill and rush of water into her mouth and nose on more occasions than she cared to recall, in ecru rooms populated by severe nurses, and all the while Dr. Reeve had leered down and promised to rub her lurid between the legs if she did not let the spray exhaust and loosen her. The Judge liked her pliant, more flexible than a China doll and so greedy for warmth – any warmth at all – that she'd let him settler her upon his knee and wrap his arms about her until the shivering would subside.

She'd thought, on some of those days, when her screams mingled with the blonde girls' and resistance rinsed away down the drain with the bath water, that it might have been better to drown herself in the few inches of liquid at her feet than to endure for another day. But it was always a choice, in the hospital, and Belle chose to be brave.

It had felt like bravery, certainly, to go on living when she might have faded away into a sort of warped Ophelia. But drowning was not what the romances had made it out to be.

Belle could feel herself sinking into the inky-black sea just as surely as she could feel the mattress, the sheets twined through her legs, but she couldn't see, couldn't speak, couldn't breathe… No one had ever told her that water could burn hotter than fire, but it burnt her lungs to choke down gulp after gulp of salt water, only to go on sinking toward the deeps.

She ought to have died by now, it might have been a mercy, but Rum would be sad – so very sad – and she'd only just found him again. It would all be simpler if her head wasn't swimming.

"There's a good girl," muttered Whale, holding vials of bitter ammonia near her face.

Belle tried to smile, but she choked up vomit onto his trouser-leg instead. He sponged it away with
a bath of vinegar-water, and strong arms were helping her sit up straight.

It was easier to breathe – so much easier – now that the sea was receding.

"Rum?" Belle managed weakly, turning her head on the sweaty pillows to see.

"No, Miss Belle, it's just Dovey. Mr. Gold's gone South to discover what ails you so, but he'll be back 'ere long. You rest now. Dr. Whale's got to change the bedding, and then you're going to take some orangeade and beef tea like a good lass, aye?"

"I think this is the first time you've ever spoken to me," Belle grinned, hearing but not quite comprehending everything he was saying. Rum was gone away, but he'd return, and she'd sworn – she'd sworn to go back and help that girl. So she must get well, musn't she?

"We'll hope it's not the last, Miss," nodded Dovey, lifting her up while the bedclothes were changed. She was supposed to have a chaperon, wasn't she? Men weren't supposed to come into her room while she wore little more than a linen shift and a bleary-eyed smile, but she couldn't quite summon the strength to share her misgivings.

There was something else, too. More important than propriety. Belle's eyes drifted shut as she tried to conjure the memory. It was vital. It smelled of oranges.

Belle sputtered and choked on the orangeade Dr. Whale was dribbling between her parched lips, but she remembered the name.

"Frontland," Belle gasped, reaching for the Dr.'s patient hands. "Rumford doesn't know, but he—"

"Shh," Whale whispered, patting her forehead with his handkerchief and easing her back into the sickbed. "Drink this, it'll make you stronger. You've lost too much fluid, Miss French. You've got to drink."

The urgent fringe of thought faded, but she stayed awake long enough to finish the orangeade and beef tea for him.

"I thought I'd read to you for a while, since you're awake," Whale smiled. "You need to conserve your strength. I'm not much for poetry, and Gold doesn't keep any medical texts about the place, but Mr. Dovey found a few penny-rags in the pantry."

"Why are you being so kind?"

"Hush now. Gold will have my hide if you die on him, Miss, but I… You were always clever. Always sweet. You deserve the best physicians in the City, and I am the best. I was. Before… You rest now, and I'll read. 'The String of Pearls,' doesn't that sound nice? Chapter One: Before Fleet Street had reached its present importance, and when George the Third was young—"

"George… George. We've got to tell Mr. Gold about Frontland…"

"Rest, Miss French. Rest. You can tell him yourself, when you're well. Now, where were we? When George the Third was young, and the two figures who used to strike the chimes at old St. Dunstan's church were all in their glory – being a great impediment to errand-boys on their progress, and a matter of gaping curiosity to country people – there stood close to the sacred edifice a small barber's shop, which was kept by a man of the name of Sweeney Todd…"
Chapter 25

LXXIII. Treason

Rumford's eyes narrowed on the sharp, crooked man sitting opposite him. He'd aged nearly twenty years since Rum last saw him – worried thinned and sunk into himself with fatigue – or perhaps he'd simply begun to look his age. Without the wig, dressed as he was in dated clothing, and humbling himself to a hunch, he'd appeared smaller, less obtrusive. But a fire had lit within the cretin at the mention of Miss French, and now Rum could see the figure of authority masked beneath the man's peculiar trappings.

"Judge Frontland," Gold concluded, all the old malice pooling easily in his gut as he forced himself not to act rashly. "You've made me look quite the fool."

"Now, my Lord, it was never my intent to tease."

"No," agreed Rum, snarling silently with a flash of his un-even teeth. "To tease implies joviality."

The old man gave a dry, rattling sort of chuckle, and leaned back into the upholstery, seemingly unaffected by the Viscount's scowl.

"And I imagine," Rum continued, "that you'll tell me it was all true. It's a hanging-crime to impersonate an officer, but you'd know that, certainly. You were a Captain, once? And when I took your F. for an Eft you were simply too polite to correct me, I suppose?"

"You're a keen man, my Lord," replied the Judge, noncommittally. "I'm sure you'll figure it out."

That was the rub, wasn't it? He'd missed something, something vastly important, and now the teetering old lecher thought he held some manner of leverage over him. They'd soon rectify that.

"And how's that strapping young son of yours, your Honor?" asked Gold, no small bite of cruelty behind the words. "I believe he was engaged to our Miss French before you unceremoniously put an end to it, though I can't say Miss French wept for his sake."

"He excellently decided to join Her Majesty's Royal Navy just as he was becoming most cumbersome to me, but you wouldn't know anything about that, I'm sure. Quite the career upheaval for a gentleman of leisure so late in life, but I'll not mourn the loss of legacy. His mother was a meek, slouch-backed dun, and the boy lacked any real promise. He'd grown tiresome.

"Unworthy, the pair of them, but necessary. Imperative, and then suddenly less so. I'm not yet so old that I cannot get more sons, you know. And on the matter of sons, how is young Master Bae? Still struggling with his Latin grammar at school?"

It took every fiber of Gold's resolve not to flinch, not to let the Judge read his features.

"Then again," Frontland continued, "I suppose you wouldn't know anything about that, either. After all, the lad's not written so much as request for pin money since you shipped him back over the Channel. And who can blame the young chap? I'd have hated a place where they served tongue sandwiches for tea every day too."

What little control Rum had maintained to that point snapped under the Judge's well-aimed blow.

"Stay away from my son!" Rum barked at him, pulling the old man up by his lapels and tearing at
the fabric of his outdated shirt collar and sagging cravat.

The old man merely laughed, then brushed his hands away with a strength that defied his frailty.

"Master Baelfire – unfortunate name, heh – has nothing to fear from me and mine, my Lord. Nothing at all. The lad's of no great consequence to me, though I'd keep a weather-eye on Her Grace if I were you."

"Lady White Hall wouldn't dare—"

"She would at that, sirrah. She would at that. And he's a good boy, by all accounts. Not a hulking, lack-wit dullard like my own great disappointment turned out. No, the son has naught to fear of me. I'm not a beast, like some fellows limping about under the guise of nobility, who condemns other men's sons to death to save his own hide, only to shed it in the next breath like it's nothing – taking up a second life."

"I've no idea what you're implying, Sir."

"Implication? Lud, no. Implication and intrigue is the work of a scoundrel; it's a young man's folly. We old gentlemen, well… I suppose we know what we know, what-what? I speak fact: it's a treacherous snake whose forked tongue sells the secrets of his own kind, ennit my Lord?"

"You're mad," Gold gasped, knocking three times upon the top of his carriage to hurry his men along, "all sound and fury, a dagger of the mind. Your words do not signify."

"Oh, they signify, son. That they do, best of all, as a Judge's words ought to do. They signify as much and more as the bullet that shattered your leg, I think you'll find."

Rumford wanted to strike the old man for that, to say anything at all and silence the wheezing, rattling chuckling of an old man, going on as though he'd made an excellently witty joke, but he froze. For a moment, he was fifteen again and mired knee-deep in muck as the canons deafened him, choked him with gun smoke. He was lost in the hills of Spain.

Rum reached into his breast pocket for his silver flask of absinthe and laudanum, only to find none. He never travelled without it, in case the solitude and strains of the road rendered him poor company, left him too long with old hurts and dark thoughts, but he'd scarcely thought of opium or felt a sore joint since leaving London. He'd had other things – more worthy things – on his mind.

And now – Now! – as his most secret fear unfurled before him, he'd have to manage without even the weakest medicines that the physicians meted out for stout, aged men with gout.

"That… that's a lie," he choked out. "You can't prove—"

"My very word is proof enough: a gentleman's word, the word of an officer, who witnessed the wreckage of your betrayal first-hand. And you've the gall to say I tricked you with my little discretion back there, do you? You've the nerve to impugn my honor?"

"And that you may, for all your popinjay pride gives false securities, though I think you'll find my reputation vastly more secure than your own this time. A dead-man risen, with fancy waistcoats, title and property… you thought you'd scraped the mud of that ditch away, I suppose, but there are boot-tracks upon the carpet leading all the way back to Spain, plainly visible for any who'd care to look!"

"Stop it," Gold begged, the pain of his old wound slicing up his leg. He'd tried to do as Nolan said, but the man was a fool. He had good reason, now more than ever, to be afraid. "Stop it, please. I
never committed the crimes you lay at my feet. I never did."

"And God spared His innocent child, I suppose? It'd be the first time, in my experience, that His mercy did a whit of good. No, sir, I know the desperate stink of the guilty, and you, sir, reek. You say you did not know me today? I scarce knew you the night you set yourself up in my study and snatched her away from me. I might not have recognized you at all, if not for the common theme."

"The theme?" asked Gold, head swimming. He knocked his cane against the roof again. Where the devil were his men?

Frontland's eyes glinted like dark gems set in ebony and his smile turned sharp: "Jones."

LXXIV. Strike

Mr. Hordor's boots beat hard on the pavement as he and his gang leapt to their feet and pushed through the ramshackle door. There were no end of buggerers and vagabonds in Cheap-Side, but that scream sounded as though it'd come wailing through the walls, a breath away from their boarded windows if it was an inch, and some of the bludgers had even looked about as though they'd expected to see the screamer standing alongside them. It chilled a man's spine to hear it.

Hordor was not a superstitious man, and when the simpletons told tales of ghosts and banshees in the London fog, he'd hear tales of murders, rapes, and spies. It was only the spies that concerned him today; too close for comfort, and sure to draw a crowd of on-lookers down on them.

"You lot shut that girl up!" he ordered his mad dogs, turning the sharp corner into the alley where he saw two little whelps kicking at a big, ugly brute in tatty clothes.

One of the lads slugged the chump and took a lunge for the kids, but they weren't cut out for quick, precise work. The mob of street-folk arrived but a moment later, and Hordor lost sight of the children.

"Grab 'em!" he yelled, but it did him no good. They had the grimy man in shambles, coughing up blood, but the little ones had gone. He wasn't sure if it was one or his or not, but the influx of bodies into cramped, fowl quarters turned sour in a rush. The next blow he saw struck landed squarely in the jaw of an old Nan wrapped up in a threadbare shawl.

His Honor wouldn't like it if one of theirs had done it; didn't keep with striking another man's woman, and had hung up fellows for less fierce blows than this.

"Bugger," Hordor cursed, pulling back his dogs – that's all they were, these thugs – and trying to escape the press of bodies pouring in.

It was a singular wonder of London that the main streets were full to bursting of gentlemen and vendors, yet every alley stood dark and lonely until the working poor and human filth sallied forth.

Bare minutes before, he'd have sworn the alley was empty. One scream and a few fisticuffs later, the whole of the city had come to bear. And one of his dogs had struck some old Nan half out of her wits. London had rioted for less.

The people had the scent of blood now, and Hordor wasn't stupid. He'd been a common criminal, before the Judge repurposed him, but not a stupid one – well, not an over-stupid one; after all, he had been pinched.

Somewhere above them, a shrieking woman dumped a bucket of piss onto the rabble and all hell broke loose in the streets. The rapers and murderers among them found lambs for the slaughter; the
pickpockets and vagabonds took all that was within their reach; and the more common sort of criminal – the drunken men who'd forsaken their families – spoiled for a fight simply for the sake of fighting. It engulfed the area like a disease.

Hordor kept calling off his dogs – the ones he could reach, at least – and shouted at the rough men to get back inside again.

He'd kept them cooped and kenneled too long, he realized. He'd been looking for a strategy and a little decorum where all that was wanted was one, swift job, and they'd gone in for the first scrap that presented itself. It presented itself, alright; all along the side of some old Nan's wrinkled-up face.

Hordor had it in him to shoot the lot of these thugs and make-do without them, but a shout from the main street tempered him.

"It's the Peelers! The Peelers is come!" someone shouted, and a bit of street theater transformed into a full blown riot before his eyes.

There were two sure ways, Mr. Hordor was sure, to transform a gathering of people into a mob. One, as it turned out, was to sock somebody's old Nan in the teeth, in full sight of God and Country, and the other was to loose the city police with their mean billy clubs into the fray. All it took, all it ever took, was one common enemy.

Hordor and the handful of men he'd managed to organize retreated back, out a side alley, and hastily blended into the street. Two different coppers charged down that same alley not a minute later, and anybody who hadn't got out by now was surely in for a thrashing this evening.

One of the bludgers – Ned, he thought – looked fit to run back in and take a crack at the Bobbies for old time's sake, but Hordor stopped him.

"Listen here, you lot," he growled, trying to keep his voice low as the foot traffic slowed around them – Cheap Side always paused to see a good, violent sight. "They'll have half the Blue Bottles in the city down here afore five o'clock at this rate, and there ent a one among us who'd like to be round for that. You figure they'll knock a few heads together, and then who knows what songs the rest of those sods we left back there will sing about us? We've got as good a chance as we're going to get to do his Honor right, so I say we take it."

"Now?" asked Ned, cracking his thick knuckles with a slow pleasure reserved by other men for love-making.

"Now," agreed Hordor. Two more police wagons passed them on their way down the street. "It's as good a distraction to the law as we're going to get, and we don't know what might've been overheard. The house hasn't got more than a few maids and the Dove right now, but we can't say who might be coming on the morrow. It's as good a chance as any, what do ye say?"

"If we was to bash in now," one of the particularly stupid ones reasoned, "it might look like a robbery, and none o' that milk trolley nonsense. We might-could fill our pockets then, mightn't we, Mr. Hordor?"

Hordor struck him upon the head. Hard.

"We mean to murder a Viscount," he snarled in hushed tones, tugging the big ogre's ear down to the level of his mouth. "And you talk about pilfering the silver! What do you suppose his Honor might pay for your discretion in the matter of this little Lord, eh? We take nothing." Nothing but a
life, and by all accounts it wasn't much of a life at all.

"Yes Mr. Hordor," the dogs mumbled in unison. Their hackles were raised, and resentment was brewing. He wouldn't make them heel for many more hours if they didn't find a good place for the pack of them to sink their fangs.

"Good," Hordor snarled, fighting the urge to kick the biggest man in the shin for his troubles. Instead, he took his bearings in the streets. "We're almost there. A little further, and we'll bunker down 'til it's dark out."

The men agreed.

"You there," he said to Ned, pointing him out as they neared their destination and the sun set into the grey haze of London smoke. "You see to it that the lamp lighters don't bother with this street."

Ned nodded, and they all found quiet, dark places to wait.

**LXXV. The Dove**

Belle awoke to the sound of glass shattering, or perhaps it was simply the lilting sound of Dr. Whale's voice describing a glass-break. He was growing progressively more perturbed with the vapid, murderous plots of their penny dreadful, but refused to give it up – and Belle supposed that was for her sake.

She ought to find the words to thank him, but her tongue – like her eyelids and arms – lay heavy under the blankets. She'd fallen asleep, drifting from the butcher-barber to another gentleman more sinister in the throes of her fever-dreams.

Dr. Whale could hear her when she had spoken. She'd been entirely sensible, she was certain; he simply didn't understand that gravity of what she needed to say to him. And where was Mr. Gold? He was so clever, he'd know at once – as soon as the name of Frontland passed her lips – what the Judge had done. But he was gone away to find her help; isn't that what Mr. Dovey said?

Illness was entirely impractical, Belle decided, and wondered less at how Rum could have indulged himself in poisonous medicines for so many years, to the exclusion of all else.

She heard the sound of a scuffle again and forced open her eyes. The room was dark – darker than she recalled, with no light from the streetlamps to help the candles in their sticks. Belle struggled to sit up.

"Dr. Whale?" she asked, after under-taking the task of mastering her lips and tongue again. He'd gone; the little magazine with its tawdry, painted pages unattended on the nightstand was proof of that, at least.

Her head swam with the exertion of so much motion and thinking, but despite the weakness in her limbs and the fog in her mind, Belle knew that she wasn't dreaming this.

Another crash shook the house, and then Belle could hear heavy boots on the stair.

"Rum?" she called. The footfalls halted nearby.

"Mr. Gold?" she tried again, remembering herself. Poor and small she might be, and she looked undoubtedly wretched in her sickbed, wholly unfit for company, but some small courtesies might still be maintained. Perhaps he was cross with her, or perhaps he'd changed his mind.
No, Belle decided as the knob to her chamber turned. He loved her, every bit as ardently as she loved him; they'd been lucky to find forgiveness in one another, and shared soft words for a few moments. That, above all, she'd known even in the depths of delirium. But why shouldn't it be Rumford at the door? Her chest ached with the desperate kind of hope that comes from a soul who knows she is tilting at windmills, but can't bear to admit the world may be without Giants and wonders after all.

When the door opened, light poured in from the corridor and a tumult sounded from the floors below. Belle struggled for composure and lucidity, bravery a faint whisper in a heart besieged by storm upon un-ending storm.

"Don't scream," a low voice ordered.

"Sir, I'm afraid I must ask you to go," Belle managed, hoping that if she did not look authoritative, she at least did not appear too weak to stand up or fill her lungs. Both scream and struggle lie firmly beyond her means. "It's hardly proper to intrude on a lady's quarters unannounced, or to call at all so late in the evenings, really."

"Beggin' yer pardon, Marm," the man said in a thick, slow voice that bore a heavy, vulgar accent. "Won't be but a moment. Got to search the 'ouse fer Lord Something-or-Other."

He sounded Southern, and that frightened Belle most of all.

"I assure you," said Belle primly, "that I am quite alone."

She knew immediately that this was the wrong thing to say in such circumstances, and yet the lumbering man seemed to take his time with the information, thinking it through.

"Mr. Hordor'd want me to look anyway," he concluded, taking two wide steps toward her. "Won't be but a minute, Marm."

Belle could scarcely remain upright; she'd no energy remaining to protest. The man went down on his hands and knees, hiking up the bedclothes and looking along the floorboards.

"What's this, then?" he asked, producing a small, leather box that – upon closer inspection – proved to be Dr. Whale's medical kit.

"It's a medicine chest," Belle told him gently. Her voice was not capable of much more than a gentle reprimand anyway, but the man seemed to accept her words unquestioningly.

"I'm quite ill, you see." Then she added, "I'd hate for you to catch it off me."

"Now you say so, Marm, I hope ye don't mind me sayin' ye look a bit wibbly. It ent the Scarlet Fever, is it? Killed me younger bruther, Scarlet Fever did."

"No," panted Belle, groping for words to send the man away with. "It's much, much worse, I'm afraid."

"Worse than Scarlet Fever?" He looked doubtful.

"It's... irregular... smallpox," she lied. The man looked blank, but worried.

"Irregular smallpox," Belle repeated, more sure of herself. The noises outside her room did not bode well for any of them, and she'd hardly the strength... they were running out of time. "My poxes are all inside of me, on the liver and kidneys, and you're like to catch it if you come too close
"I don't feel so good, Marm," the hulking man groaned, and Belle thought she saw a tear on his cheek.

"Now, now, you hardly came into the room at all. You've been a perfect gentleman, haven't you? So I suppose you'll be alright, if you go now. And you won't hurt anyone else in the house, will you?" she added as the man backed out of her room. "They'll all be as unfit as I am in a few more days, and I'd hate for you to catch it off any of them, after all."

"Yes, Marm. I mean no, Marm," the man promised, looking relieved the moment he stepped into the hall. "I won't hurt nobody. I'll be a perfect gentleman an' all."

He turned to go, and Belle wondered – for a few, brief moments – if she'd be strong enough to rise and bar the door. She needn't have bothered.

"The devil is going on here?" another man shouted. This one bore a Southern accent as well, but he was quicker and more refined in his speech.

"Ear-reg-yoo-lar smallpox, Mr. Hordor," the slow man answered, carefully pronouncing each syllable. "Best not to go in there."

"Irregular smallpox? Nonsense," Mr. Hordor cursed at him, and Belle heard his hand upon the door.

"But Mr. Hordor, his Lordship ent in there. It's just that sick gel."

Hordor exploded into a violent fit of profanity and threw open the door. The slam rattled the window panes, revealing one of the Judge's men whose name she'd never known before. She recognized him. He'd held her down for the Judge, before the asylum, and she'd kicked at him; later, he'd been the orderly to throttle her when she screamed for the little, blonde girl. Belle nearly fainted from the shock of it all.

"You!?" the bearded man gasped, he steely voice transforming to a growl. "Well, now... His Honor'll make me a king among men if we bring you back to him, little lamb."

"Stay away from me," Belle demanded, fatigue clawing at her arms. She couldn't raise them up high enough to hinder him from taking hold of her chin and jaw.

"Look here, little lamb," grinned Mr. Hordor, leaning in close. "You've given his Honor no end of trouble, so as I see it, I'd be doing him a favor whatever condition you're in when I return you. He's a good man, doesn't hold with his men beating his woman for him, but I'd sure as sin like to belt some sense into you. You're lucky I'm a gentleman, Miss. I won't hurt you, so long as you heel like a good bitch and come when you're called."

Belle felt in her twisting gut that she had rather be dead than held captive again, and she vowed to fight to her last, free breath.

"Somebody help me!" she shouted – praying for Mr. Dovey to come. Her voice had been nowhere near loud enough to rouse the man if he hadn't already awoken. Dovey must be aware of what was happening, she rationalized even as the back of Hordor's hand struck her across the temple. That he had not tossed the interlopers out must mean that they'd over-powered him, or worse, and now the house was lost.

She was vaguely aware of more shouting, and then a Giant – a real one – cast a dark shadow over
the room. Someone had painted the windmill red, like a poppy, and Belle found a sad, small chuckle caught in her throat. She thought she was crying.

When the house stilled and her senses returned, Belle awoke to a room full of corpses, the largest among them sporting a kitchen knife in his back. She looked, without weeping, at the cold remains of Mr. Theodore Dovey.
LXXVI. Plot

Jones. Jones and Jones and Jones, from here to eternity: swamping his senses and pouring into the hold of a sinking sloop on stormy waters. For decades, Rumford Gold had been a man drowning. No, less than that – he'd been a man drowned, bloated with revenge and animated only by spiteful currents.

To be sure, had felt to him a tremendous success at the time; in the theater of his own mind, he thrived. He'd learned since then that that way of life had been nothing but a slow way of dying. Belle taught him that, and Bae had tried too. Between the two of them, he'd been plucked from the tempest and brought back to life, if only he would take the helm and pilot himself toward the harbor.

"Jones," Frontland said again. "I rather expect you thought yourself very clever for discovering the heir of brash, old Killian after so many years. Did you imagine you were the only one? A pity, then. Hubris. After all, I'd always been here - nearly two-score years ahead of you."

"What do you care for Jones?" asked Rumford, rapping his cane on the door.

"Now, now, my Lord," grinned the crooked old man, easing his hand into the deep pocket of his aged frock-coat. Gold reached for his cane, but Frontland kicked it onto the floor.

The Judge produced a small pistol from his jacket, a flintlock with heavy filigree and gems set into the ebony handle, and then cocked the hammer.

"We've much to discuss, of which - with a certain measure of decorum - your status as a traitor to the crown may prove to be the least. Come in for a drink, we must be civilized – now more than ever – if a gentlemen's agreement is to be reached. But first, dismiss your attendants. I've no inclination to sully myself by dithering with servants."

Gold could smell the black powder mingling with orange blossom, and pain bloomed in his leg. He reflexively reached for his medicine.

"None of that!" Frontland snapped, and Gold's hands fell away from the breast-pocket of his own jacket. It was no matter; he hadn't anything useful to hand anyway. Unless...

Gold settled himself, at his leisure, struggling to breath amid the stench of old memories, and masked his features with what he hoped was a defeated frown. Deep inside of him, a plan and a hope began to sprout.

The carriage shambled to a halt outside Frontland's house.

"You gents jog on!" he ordered as he felt his footmen dismounting the rig. They'd arrived at their destination, and though it was not where he'd envisioned himself going, Frontland's presence confirmed that it was precisely where he ought to be. The old man had over-played his hand, was trying to make him desperate with talk of treason and dead soldiers. It had even worked, in the beginning.
That was the trick with desperation, Gold supposed: if you introduced a man to desperation, he'd toil to please the Fates until well after his hands began to bleed; yet, if you made a man's desperation run soul-deep, he'd sink the ship simply to end the acquaintance. It was a nuance previously lost on himself as well, but one which losing Belle the first time had forced him to face. Destruction trumped desperation, and with the Judge's threats toward his family, Rumford Gold felt very destructive indeed.

Frontland used the barrel of his pistol to shift the carriage curtain aside and glimpse the retreating form of Gold's thuggish coachmen, trained by now to do as they were told without asking questions. Damn Dovey's efficiency. Damn him, too, for never considering this eventuality.

Damning himself all the while, Gold pressed his advantage when it came. While the Judge was distracted, Rumford slid his hands over the thickly embroidered cushion upholstery.

He eased his fingers back over golden fronds stitched into red satin, making a sort of masculine paisley that had not yet faded or grown threadbare with time. It was good; it meant the cushions had not flattened from use, and the crease between the bench and the seat-back concealed a small hide-away. Gold's fingers probed blindly through the few crumbs of dirt lingering in the recess, and then encountered a narrow, cold cylinder which could only be one of dozens of bottles he'd secreted away for emergencies when last he'd been in London.

It seemed a relic from a bygone era, alien to his fingers, and older even than Frontland's clothing; yet he knew, empirically, that the twelve-month or so it had lingered undisturbed, hoarded away, had done nothing to diminish its potency.

When last he'd been in London, Gold realized, he quitted it with all of Sir Maurice's I.O.U.s in hand and gone south - to Frontland's abode - where he'd first met Belle. So much had changed: he'd found Belle, for her own sake, and done his best to forget about Spain; he'd disappointed Bae, but was beginning to realize - with enough time - that he could make it right; and he didn't need the poisonous serum any more, at least not in the usual way.

The Judge turned his piercing, blue eyes back on Gold after the coachmen vanished from sight. His own servants seemed to know that they were not wanted, or perhaps he had none. They were alone.

"You are going to let yourself out, place both hands on the front wheel, and keep them there while I dismount," the old man instructed.

Without his cane, Gold struggled, but he managed to keep hold of the tiny bottle. Frontland joined him on the ground and took his arm to escort him into the house. It was clever, Rumford realized in an almost detached way; it looked as though he were helping a man with a limp up the drive, but they both knew the muzzle of Frontland's weapon was pressed firmly against Gold's rib cage.

Gold took advantage of their slow gait to take stock of the place: slightly overgrown hedgerow, slightly unkempt garden, no indication that anyone – even a scullery maid – had been inside the Frontland property for nearly a sennight.

Without a word, the Judge guided him to a small, out-of-the-way study. The carpets in the hall, approaching the doorway, appeared darker and untouched by sunlight; as though it had been concealed by a curio for some time, then swept aside like the stone before the tomb. Inside, the contents of the room transported Gold to another time. It was stuffed with antique furniture, gilt mirrors, and old portraiture, with no end of charcoal drawings pinned to the wall-hangings.

What remained of the smaller furnishings lay in a tumult, dashed upon the floor, shattered on the shelves. The settee Frontland deposited Gold in released a cloud of orange-scented powder when
he dropped onto it; wig powder, Gold realized, and as it settled over his skin his mind reeled back to the corpse Whale presented in his study: powdery, pale, and perfumed with citrus. His stomach clenched, and Gold choked back bile.

He looked about the room blindly, seeking a focal point; anything to keep him from acting rashly when all he wanted was to run home, curl himself protectively around Belle, and hide from reality.

As it happened, Rumford found his distraction in multitude, and his churning suspicions found an icy form. What he'd originally taken for sagging, torn wall papers transformed, under scrutiny, into ill-made drawings pinned up in hasty arrays. The form of the model had, more often than not, been rendered irrelevant by the artist's haste. In the face, though, he could see the unmistakable lines of careful, charcoal strokes and smudges; it was Belle. She wore the old, French-cut gowns that had been so popular in his mother's day, but the anatomy was entirely wrong. Beyond poor artistry, she seemed to slump and sprawl unnaturally. Because she'd been unconscious, he concluded. Drunk. Drugged. Then shipped away to rot in bedlam, but the "how" of the matter seemed suddenly urgent.

He'd assumed that Regina wanted to hurt him; he'd assumed that she'd done it out of spite, but that wasn't it at all. Lady White Hall had given his dear, sweet girl to this monster, and – for once – it appeared that whatever violent protest Belle had wrought upon the furnishings of this perverse prison cell, the asylum had been the least of it. What indignities must she have suffered because of his thrice-damned pride? If they both survived, nothing he could offer would ever wipe this debt from his ledger.

The final piece of the puzzle sat down before him, depositing a crystal decanter of old Burgundy and two glasses on the low, gilt table.

Gold looked at the old, sinister man and asked the only question that still mattered: "Why?"

LXXVII. El Azote Zozobrador

George chuckled. Gold had made a bargain he did not fully comprehend when he abducted the girl. An elopement would have been preferred, more easily corrected than a contract of indentured servitude; marriages could be annulled, after all, but there was no law under Parliament that could deprive a gentleman of his property. That was the result of weakening the monarchy as they did, no accountability so long as men like Gold paid their taxes and paid lip-service to the crown. A traitor, though… a traitor had no rights at all.

George rather thought that he'd have forgiven his belle dame anything after being exposed to a common lout like Gold. The girl was hardly to blame for the bad blood that caused her sometimes erratic behavior, and a stern husband would soon have brought her back in line without the brusque Scotsman's meddling. But she had the audacity to prefer the Scotsman who stole her: pure madness.

The girl was to marry a Frontland, as was her destiny; he'd made a gentleman's agreement with poor, simple Sir Maurice to improve his fortunes after the union, a wedding present to their lovely girl, and a handshake between gentlemen was worth a thousand brittle words on paper.

That the Squire would not agree to such unless the Frontland in question was George the younger spoke well of Sir Maurice, he'd only done what was required in the eyes of society. And when young George vanished in the eleventh hour, the agreement would naturally have been augmented that the widower and grieving father take the son's obligations onto his own head, some small solace in a lonely manor. Nothing could have been simpler, until a ruddy Scot came into his home like the proverbial bull in the china shop.
Delicacy, George decided. Whatever Gold was or was not, he had been made a Viscount, and must be accorded the proper courtesies.

"You took her from me because you'd reason to suspect that she was the last of Jones' blood-line," said the Judge gently, pouring them each a measure of wine. "You must have hated him for what he'd done, and I understand hate. Hatred is simple. Hatred is predictable. Hate tells a perfectly civilized gentleman to go forth and punish his enemies to the seventh generation. We are men of passion, you and I; and as you hated her in the name of the father, I loved her for her mother's sake."

"That's not love," Gold had the audacity to snarl at him, slamming his hands onto the table and rising like a new-born foal to his half-lame feet. "Ye cannae convince me she ever loved you."

"Of course I can. She is mine," replied George, turning to look fondly at the charcoal drawings Gold had gestured toward. Lovely relics of their first few afternoons in courtship, where all the common accomplishments were displayed, and she did look lovely in some of them, though his hand was admittedly that of an amateur.

Gold's hands shook with impotent rage as he noisily topped up their glasses with wine, and the sound of glass shivering against crystal drew George's attention back to the table again. An immoderate, boorish Scot, Frontland decided; it suited what he knew of Gold's reputation, a knave thinking only of becoming drunk and profiteering in trade. He'd no skills to call upon when confronted by a proper gentleman. Still, there were protocols to maintain, and when Gold drank, George drank with him.

"I am not an unreasonable man, my Lord. I see no reason why the small matter of a quarter century prior must deprive you and your son of the lifestyle to which you've grown accustomed. A life abroad in hiding - or worse, execution - and relinquishment of property and titles is no way for a proper Englishman to live, not even a Scottish one.

"Return my property, in whatever state it may be, and let us be done with it."

"You've naught tae do with Belle," whispered Gold. "Belle is—"

"You will address her, please, as Miss French. It is right, it is proper, and my future wife must be granted the respect due her. Even your Duchess has that right, however common her mother."

Gold responded by taking another long drink, and this time he topped off their glasses with hands that had steadied throughout their discourse.

"Miss French," amended Gold, "has nothing to do with the allegations you've made against me. Whatever you think you saw—"

"I saw it all," grinned George. It was the face he reserved for the men he condemned to hang, a smile full of knives. He took another sip of his wine, "I was there, as I mentioned. My last tour of duty, with a plain, cold bride I couldn't afford not to marry waiting at home with a new baby, and one last run at glory before they decommissioned me. Yet there I was – cloaked in red, trimmed in gold, knee-deep in muck – loathing God, wife, and the Liberal Army. But I loathed Killian Jones more than anything."

"If you were really a witness, then you know that Jones and I were taken prisoner by the Carlists and we escaped. You know how he looked, on the day we… They convicted Jones of his sundry crimes, and found my guilty only by proximity."
"Because those barbaric Spaniards weren't known for taking prisoners," George clarified. "Yes, I know. And you want me to confirm, I suppose, some small detail that could not be known by any who had not – and you'll pardon the phrase – witnessed the proceedings first-hand. Very well, Jones had maimed himself at the wrist. But really, a man who'd saw off his own hand to escape an enemy prison-camp? It's the stuff of fox-hunts and fables, nonsense for the mess tents and stillrooms."

Gold seemed to glare harder after that, then – to George's amazement – he laughed: "Jones maintained he'd chosen a slow death of gangrene all through the proceedings. Said it'd be worth it, if he could just get back to his family, even as an amputee. And like a fool, I believed him. I went on believing him, right up until they clapped me in irons and shot me," concluded the Viscount. They took another drink.

"But it does not signify," Gold continued. "If you mean to let me leave this place with my life, bloody well come to the point."

"Very well, if I must speak plain then I shall. You will tell me where Miss French is, the nature of her injuries, and how you obtained her. In exchange, I will not impugn your honor with any further talk of ancient history.

"Come now, my good fellow, we both know you're harboring her. You gave yourself away at the White Hall estate rather spectacularly." George smiled. He felt lighter, now that the man was cornered and the truth could come out; almost happy.

"I was never a traitor." George winced at the tactlessness of it. One might think the man a common mill worker, judging by his plain and mean speech. The accent certainly did not help matters.

Gold quaffed his wine, and George followed; he poured them both another, not minding that it made the words flow more liberally than he'd intended them to. Let the bastard hear the truth of it; vile though he was, the man was a Viscount, and he'd the right as a gentleman to a full account.

"I know," Frontland grinned and Gold waited. "A frightened lad from the wrong side of the sheets? No, you never would've had the mettle for it. You were merely a casualty of war, green and clinging to Jones like he was Perseus reincarnate. And I suppose, to you, he was a hero of sorts; to those of us who knew him, though, the man was a scoundrel and a cad. He ruined her, but I won out.

"Did you never think that, perhaps, it was a mistake that you were taken prisoner along with him, in a time when captured soldiers were executed into mass graves for want of supplies and space? Or did you simply stew in your own misery and accept the truth that I gave you, thinking that you'd been branded a traitor for crimes that surpassed understanding?"

Gold gulped down more wine, and George joined him. He poured again, the decanter more than two-thirds empty.

"It was always about Jones, wasn't it?" asked Gold, after a long pause. "You betrayed him, and I just got caught in the landslide."

"I betrayed nothing!" roared George. "He took what was mine, the only thing I ever wanted. He took her, and he spoiled her, but I'd have forgiven her for it if only she'd apologized. I'd have forgiven her anything, and she'd have been my good Marie again without Jones in her life. If she'd survived...."

"Thousands of men died," snarled Gold, "all so you could ensure Jones wouldn't make it home
"I'd have married Marie, and given her everything – everything – but she chose him, and he made a harlot of her. The last blossom of a lost era, and he plucked her without even a thought, leaving me a dun, English hedgehog."

"But there was a daughter," concluded Gold. George thought he looked visibly ill, and that suited him. He poured the man another drink, pleased to have the formidable Viscount slowly slipping away and the frightened Left-Tenant re-emerging.

"Do you know," George continued, taking a sip of his drink and relaxing into the cushions, "I used to hate her? I couldn't stand the sight of Miss French as a child; she looked just like her mother. Sir Maurice brought her here without preamble, letting the populace draw the natural conclusion about his time abroad, but I knew. When the Squire brought her back from France, he let on that she was his bastard by some ballet dancer, but I knew better. Those brown curls and blue eyes... a gentleman always knows.

"We spoke about the child at length one night, and about what her future would be as a Squire's get. Sir Maurice never liked to admit the truth to me, but he finally agreed to see reason. He raised her as the daughter of an old friend – well, we knew that she was Killian's, so why not? He didn't like to admit it, but we knew."

Gold's mouth gaped.

"He's too trusting, the Squire; too easy to lead astray, into poverty and poor habits. When he knew he was neglecting her, I asked him to give her to me. I was Killian's friend, his brother at arms, he'd no reason to deny my offer of charity, but Sir Maurice held on to her. For all that it irked me, the Squire's a man of good breeding. And it showed. He was quite correct – I was never intended to be Miss French's father."

"Then... you don't truly know if she is the child of Killian Jones?" asked Gold, missing the point entirely.

"She is Marie's child," George insisted. "For all of the wildness her father gave her, she's got her mother's gentility. Her mother's beauty. It was a second chance for us. But you see now – surely you see – that it is in yours and Miss French's best interests that she is returned to me?"

"When two gentlemen possess something the other wants, a deal can always be struck," replied Gold.

"And what is it that Lord Rumford Gold, Viscount Sonnachdubh wants... besides his continued liberty?" Did the man really have the audacity to bargain for a better price with his entire life and legacy in the balance? Gold's reputation was certainly well-earned.

"I'm a businessman before I'm a Viscount," observed Gold, and George glared at him. "I'll have the truth – the whole truth – and then..."

"Then you'll bring her to me. And ma belle dame, she... she lives?"

"Aye," Gold nodded. "And may continue to do so, if the rider I sent is swift." Gold poured them each another glass of wine, draining the last of the decanter into Frontland's cup. They lifted their cups together in an unspoken toast, and drank deeply. George's head was swimming from the news, and he began his tale slowly.

"If it is the truth that you seek, then the truth it shall be. You have my word as a gentleman."
"However, You must understand: the Carlists had the right of it from the beginning. They only wanted to keep the Enlightenment out of Spain, keep a strong king and a strong country. Well, you've seen what's happened in France.

"These new ways of thinking poison the plebes against their landlords. All the Carlists wanted for their country was to carry on with the monarchy, to deny the usurper-Queen her throne, and preserve the old ways – the best ways – before the intellectuals ruined it all.

"There were hardly any Englishmen at all in the Liberal army, just a coalition of nations siding with the new regime. Someone ought to have stopped them, and I… Killian was my friend, once. Do not think me so blinded by jealousy that I was insensitive to the price of it. I gave the Loyalists a victory, relatively small, with only a few battalions of Liberals – Scotsman and the like, as you well know."

"Andouin."

"Andouin," George nodded.

"And in exchange they gave you Jones. And, by a sad twist of fate, me." They drank again.

"Did he really cut off his hand to escape?" asked Gold, swallowing.

George had to laugh at that, almost giddy. "He did at that. Old Killian and his daft code – didn't prevent him from getting an unmarried woman in the family way, so what good was it? He recognized me, in the shadows, when they brought him in for questioning. If I'm wholly honest, I wanted him to see. I wanted him to know I'd won. It was a… miscalculation of his tenacity.

"I didn't much care how he died, so long as he stayed away from Marie, but the damned Spaniards were determined to get some useful information from the proceedings. They left him unattended a moment too long, and he slipped his chain in the most literal way."

"He saved me," stated Gold, growing still. "Took me with him when he ran."

"He intended to tell what remained of the Liberal army about my activities, most likely, but it wasn't difficult for a well-provisioned gentleman on horseback to out-pace a pair of injured, half-starved deserters across the country. By the time you wandered back to the encampment, Jones had already been found guilty."

"And I'm sure the Carlists would have made you a national hero, had your little revenge at Andouin been enough to propel them on to victory."

"Lud," snorted Frontland, "not hardly. Do you know what those ungrateful mongrels called me? The wrecking scourge, El Azote Zozobrador; they didn't understand why any man would help them defeat his own country, didn't understand that it was never England – but progress and the Liberal army – that stood in their way.

"As far as they were concerned, even the dratted Loyalists had honor; 'they fight for the brighter future of Spain,' the cads would tell me, 'it is only that this is a topic about which we have come to disagree.' Couldn't turn an eloquent phrase in any educated man's language to save their lives, but they accepted my offer in the end. Why wouldn't they? It was easy, and Jones was nothing to them but another foreign enemy."

"I think I've heard enough," said Gold, rising to his feet. He seemed steadier, less stiff in the joints than he'd been when they hobbled up the drive, and when George moved to stand up with him the room started spinning.
"What have you done?" groaned the Judge, his vision blurring.

"I emptied a bottle of chloral into the wine," Gold coolly replied.

"You can't have done!" George gasped, staggering. "I've held my cup almost the whole time…"

"Not the decanter, though. I've given us each half a bottle of chloral and half a bottle of wine, by my reckoning, and we drank it quite quickly. It's hardly my fault if you haven't got the fortitude to tolerate a light libation. Though I will admit, it loosened your tongue nicely."

"We had a deal!" spat Frontland, reaching for the offending decanter and clumsily swinging it like a studded club at the Viscount's head. He missed, and the glass shattered against the fireplace. The world was rippling around him, made worse by his sudden exertion and anxiety. "You swore to return her to me, and now you've poisoned me under my own roof!"

"Did I, now? I'd think long and hard about that if I were you, dearie. I don't recall promising anything. There's no need for the melodrama. Half a bottle probably won't kill you, but there's no need to fret about it the uncertainty, for I shall most certainly finish you."

George reached for his pistol, but Gold's reflexes were quicker than his, more used to the medicine, and the gun found its way into the Viscount's hands. Gold shoved him back down onto the settee. It seemed to take him a few moments to focus his aim – he was not wholly unaffected by the strong medicine, or perhaps the Judge's vision had gone blurry – but George lacked the coordination to pull himself upright again, whatever the case.

"What did you do to her to keep her complacent for all of these?" growled Gold, gesturing widely to his charcoal portraits. This wasn't right. It wasn't supposed to go this way.

An open palm struck him, and George focused on the enraged, brown eyes looming over him; after months of planning, how had it all gone wrong so quickly?

"What did you do to her?"

"Opium, on a rag. She breathed."

"Where?" demanded Gold, but he'd already backed across the room on slightly tipsy legs toward the mantelpiece. He was so tired; all George wanted to do was sleep.

Gold opened a small, ebony box, and George closed his eyes. Something bitter filled his mouth and choked him, but he swallowed it down. You couldn't drown in a parlor, it wasn't dignified.

Men did drown, though; in Spain, they remembered the fiery winds that sunk the Armada off the English coast, and likened him to it. It wasn't supposed to be this way, quietly slipping into darkness without fanfare or legacy. El Zozo, the burning ship, turned back at the English fleet. And Jones, always Jones. A rogue, burning ship on a wind-tossed sea. A long memory. How pitifully ordinary, Marie.

LXXVIII. Memento Mori

The smell of blood and loose bowels nearly overwhelmed Belle, her bed a raft on a sea of decay. The pitcher and basin, white china with a cobalt-blue pattern, lie shattered on the floor. The door looked as though it had been torn from its hinges, and the carpet had gone from the elegant, Oriental knot-pattern to uniform redness. In the places with spatter-spray, it looked like the walls were weeping.
She reached for Dovey, and found his cheek still warm, but his eyes had gone glassy.

"Help!" Belle called, making a vain attempt to hoist the enormous corpse onto the bed, into a more comfortable position. Had she been hale and hearty as an ox, Mr. Dovey still would not have budged; in life, he'd utterly dwarfed her. Mr. Dovey had dwarfed everybody. In death, he seemed not a single whit smaller.

She didn't recognize the other bodies littering the floor, but they'd been battered and bloodied almost unrecognizable. They could have been anybody.

"Someone please help!" Belle called again. Mr. Dovey had lost torrents blood from a knife wound in his side, where his clothes were soaked with it, and the kitchen instrument was still lodged in his shoulder; his knuckles had split open, and his nose was broken.

The sight she could handle; corpses in any state were never as wholly gruesome as their smell, and Belle feared she'd become ill on the floor. Was anyone else alive?

"Is anybody there?" she tried a third time, stumbling toward the door. There were two more dead men in the hall, and one she recognized as the stable boy.

"Miss French?" replied a familiar voice from somewhere below.

"Dr. Whale?"

"Is it safe to come out?" Whale shouted up the stairs.

"Please, I need help up here!"

The Doctor crawled out of the cramped storage space under the stairs, his usually pristine appearance marred by dust. Belle looked between his hands and her own; hers were covered in dark, clotting blood.

"Bugger my eyes, what the fucking hell – pardon my language, Miss French – is that your blood?" The physician had already begun probing at her with his fingers, inspecting her for cuts.

"It's Mr. Dovey's, I think," she whispered, and felt droplets running down her cheeks.

"Shite," croaked Whale, taking stock of the massacre bleeding out over the flooring.

"Please help him," Belle begged, vaguely aware that she was shaking. She struggled to support herself against the door frame while Dr. Whale looked for signs of life among the remains.

"One or two might have a few minutes left, but there's nothing I can do for them," he finally concluded, severe and clinical as ever. Belle saw his fingers itch toward his breast pocket and produce a little flask, from which he took a long drink. She went cold inside.

"We've got to help him," she repeated, uncomprehending.

Whale only blinked.

"Who the devil are they?" he wondered aloud, prodding one of the strange men's heads to turn the face upward. It was Mr. Hordor, with half his teeth scattered on the hardwood floor. "Who the absolute devil are they? Where did they ruddy-well come from?"

"Dr. Whale," Belle tried, but it came out more a sob than any intelligible sound.
"Oh, Miss French, you're quaking!" She hadn't noticed the tremors in her limbs, but it seemed to have grabbed his attention. "And you're ice cold. Come away, come away – we'll clean you up and find another bedroom—"

"Dr. Whale," Belle managed, and she knew she sounded snappish. "You have to help him!

"There's nothing I can do. Come away from here, please. You're not well, and if anything were to happen to you—"

"Plenty has already happened to me, thank you! I decide what's best for me now, and right now I want you stop smothering me and help Mr. Dovey! Please..." her voice broke, and the world began to go dark around the edges. Not again, not now!

Belle tried to force herself back toward consciousness, but she knew it was no use. The landing on the floor below was filling up with people: servants and constables, thronging through the house, while she lacked the strength to steady herself.

"Girl, get up there and help her!" commanded a familiar, firm voice inside the dream.

Ruby took the stairs two at a time, braid trailing behind her, and she threw her arms around Belle for support. She must've grown a whole foot since the last time Belle saw her – quite the little lady now. And warm, so warm, Belle could almost believe it was really happening.

Mrs. Lucas immediately took charge. "Dr. Whale, you tend to Miss Belle and get her settled in fresh quarters. Wrap her up in blankets and get her some orangeade in her, she's had quite the shock, on top of everything, and there's nothing better for it in your fancy medical bag. Ruby, help the gentleman."

They tried to make her leave, but Belle wanted to see what was happening, and the pair stopped obediently at her objection.

"Mr. Hopper," the cook continued, and it took Belle a moment to realize she was talking to Archie. He hadn't quite hit his growth spree, and Ruby would've towered over the poor, besotted boy if they'd been standing side by side. It was almost enough to make Belle smile, but somehow she was still crying.

"Mr. Hopper, you run and fetch the undertaker, the glazer, and a carpenter. Cost is no object, you hear? It's more than your hide's worth to have Gold come home to this sort of sight."

"He'd go spare," breathed young Archibald, a bit green about the gills at the sight of so much carnage. "He'd go absolutely spare."

"Run along!" Mr. Lucas ordered, and then she rounded on the maids, setting them to tasks throughout the house.

This time, Belle barely noticed herself being led away to the master suite. She felt her filthy gown being removed and a masculine flannel taking its place.

"It'll have to do," muttered Whale, tucking her in. "They'll be traipsing through all the other rooms till we get this sorted."

"Do you know why...?" She was finally starting to make sense of it all. Mr. Hordor had been here. That meant something important.
"Miss Lucas just said not ten minutes ago, don't you remember?"

Belle shook her head.

"They met a pair of urchins in the road, a brother and sister. They stopped the carriage, bold as you like, and told Mrs. Lucas what they suspected was going on. Men sent up from the South, common criminals and the like, looking to murder somebody. It all turned sour with Gold gone, and they stayed here scrapping and searching long enough for the servants down from Scotland to summon the law. They killed Mr. Dovey and a few of the errand boys."

"I… I saw," Belle agreed. Mr. Dovey was gone. She'd known that, it was silly to have forgotten.

"I'm going to give you a little laudanum and orangeade to put you to sleep," Whale interrupted. "Rest is the best thing for you now. They might have given you anything at that hospital, but the records Gold sent up list only opiates and antimony, so it's with those that we'll remain."

Medical records? Belle remembered! "The Judge, he—"

"You must rest."

"No, listen to me!" Belle demanded, and the Doctor seemed surprised at her force. "Judge Frontland, Judge George Frontland, is the one who institutionalized me and sent those men. I recognized one of them. You must tell the police, because we're all in terrible danger! Rum is in danger. Please, believe me."

Whale looked at her with critical eyes for a long time before he spoke. "I believe you. I'll tell the constable, though they may wish to speak to you. You'll have to appear sensible, so rest now. Please. And I swear, if this Frontland character means you harm, then your Mr. Gold will see him hanged."

"What if he—"

"There's nothing Gold wouldn't do to keep you safe," Whale assured her, but Belle didn't find it comforting. She was fast running out of energy to keep the Doctor from talking over her, and her head was spinning.

Whale seemed sure there was no price Gold wouldn't pay to free her, but Belle knew that the Judge would never let go. After everything he'd done, he'd never stop trying. And what happened when a juggernaut charged head-long into an unmovable wall? Was there any possible outcome where destruction was not mutually guaranteed? She hadn't the strength to fathom it, and that was precisely why Belle was so afraid.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to Chipped Lionheart for helping me utilize an archaic, Spanish word, with an emphasis on the language as it was spoken in Spain circa the mid 1800s.
LXXIX. Emesis

The ruins of Frontland's perverse, occult room twisted and blurred around the edges of Rumford's vision. At the height of his illness, half a bottle of chloral hydrate with strong wine would have left him quite contentedly sinking into his favorite armchair, blissful in the muzzy embrace of oblivion, reality and mortality a Damoclean demon best ignored. At around that same time a whole bottle, in one of his more foolish fits, had nearly killed him.

Chloral required a steady hand and a sharp eye: in other words, the exact opposite of the faculties typically available to a habitual opium-eater. He'd known and forgotten some three-score wretches in his travels through the world (and its opium dens) who'd taken a dram too much and never awakened while he went about securing his and Bae's fortune. Some perfectly civilized Englishmen even preferred it for suicide, though the notes were just as often destroyed by bereft family members who didn't want to own up to having a criminal in the family.

That made Gold laugh; of all the absurdities he could have conceived in his reduced state, it was the idea that death by poppy would be clean and easy that most amused him. And for Frontland, would they call it a murder or a suicide? An accident of habit? A clever man could piece the truth together, and he lacked the wherewithal at the moment to prevent that from happening. A sloppy mistake, to have come here so openly, but not one that hindsight could rectify.

Gold had grown unused to strong drugs in the scant few months since his reformation, yet craved it with every fiber of his being now that it had passed his lips anew; the poisonous largesse seemed ripe to take him, even as he struggled to maintain his senses. Ought he to have done things differently? A cleverer man would have seen Frontland coming.

No, their confrontation had been many things, none of them clean or easy. Had Frontland found it within himself to mount a defense and struggle against the pure opium Gold clawed from the mantle of the fireplace and dribbled over his face – dexterous enough to get, perhaps, half of the substance into the other man's mouth – they'd have made a pair of ungainly, slothful combatants instead. Wide swings made with feeble limbs, heads hung low in the desire for sleep, and the victory would go to the last one to fall asleep.

The deed was done, though, and no good could come of losing himself in the labyrinth of circular thinking. He'd needed only the slightest advantage, in the end. The slightest edge brought an aging cripple to defeat an even older, able-bodied one, leaving the illusion of honor and glory – pistols and sabers – to the young men.

It would be good to sleep, to curl up in his ditch and die at last – a victim of nothing but his own stupidity, but the memory of gunpowder and screaming horses brought on a wave of vomit to him. Gold evacuated his stomach in a rather stupendous waterfall over Frontland's settee.

The accidental purge lifted the bodkin from his gut, providing a moment of clarity, and it was enough to mobilize him.

The Judge began to choke next, and with no small effort Gold rolled him off of the settee and onto the floor; it sounded like a carcass slipping onto the wet floor of an abattoir, bringing up another wave of nausea onto the floor, and Gold nudged the old man over, onto the flat of his back. He hadn't stepped in it, must not step in it; that was important.
Frontland's body began its own purge in earnest, and it was only a matter of time before the half-bottle of wine, bile, and poison finished their work.

Rumford looked down at his chest, and saw a few red dribbles upon his coat. He wiped them away with his hand, and then wiped his hand on his trouser leg. No trails, no footprints: just a crooked old man, dying alone in a cesspit of the vilest substances known to the civilized world.

"Ye cannae hurt her now," Rumford whispered.

He took a slow, unsteady step toward the door, but his bad leg and drug-addled coordination conspired against him. In a fit of petulance, he bloodied his knuckles against the top of a gilded, marble table.

"I dinnae want to die here." He wasn't sure if he was speaking for his own sake, the Judge's, or simply to the shadowy shapes closing in. "I dinnae want to die."

Gold focused on the pain, noting the thin sheen of wig powder clinging to his jacket cuffs and the heaviness of the air around him. He looked between the vibrant, crimson blood blooming on his fist and the purplish, deathly vomit on the floor. For a brief moment, the higher mysteries of creation made sense in his head; he was home with his wife, Bae, and their new child. Then he lost consciousness and crumpled into a heap three steps from the door.

There were strong hands, he thought, and a ship – or perhaps a chariot – pallbearing him away, toward the underworld. You'll help her. Too young, not her fault. Not her fault at all. You'll come back. Golden-haired and full of hope, but that was wrong, wasn't it? Belle and Bae were both dark of hair. No, you'll help her and her son. It's all there, all the paperwork. Gold thought it was odd that they'd papered his coffin in Frontland's charcoal drawings and assorted legal documents, but smiled anyway because they still bore the vague features of his Belle. Then it all went away, into a black leather valise and someone shut the door.

He wasn't aware, so much, of the road churning beneath him or his stomach roiling within, but rather of the pure tones of twilight (though he couldn't have said if the sunlight was coming or going away again). By the time the carriage stopped, he was shivering and sweating; the need for another dose nearly consumed him.

"What the hell happened?" demanded a familiar voice. Rumford made himself focus on the speaker, the shape, the voice.

"Bad day, Victor. Bad day. Belle…?"

"Miss French will be well. Your rider arrived a good five or six hour ahead of you and we're combating the opium and antimony withdrawal as best we can. Whatever after-effect of Jefferson's serum was lingering seems to have passed."

Withdrawal. After-effect. Yes.

"Chloral," Gold managed, wrapping his arms tighter around a small parcel he hadn't realized he possessed. "A little now, then a little less."

"If you've already had too much medicine, I can't recommend—"

"Now, Victor!" Rum snarled, and he'd have struck the man if he'd had his cane to hand. "Until it passes again."

"He needs to rest, Doc," interjected a vaguely feminine, fully authoritative voice. "Find a bed for
him. Girl, go fetch me two strong men. If he's back in his cups, he'll need to be carried. Mr. Dovey used to….

In the resultant silence Gold wanted to argue, but as he struggled to tell his cook off for over-stepping her position, his legs gave out again and he had no choice but to acquiesce.

LXXX. Nemesis

Ginny didn't like it. Not one damn bit of good ever came from that man getting liquored up and fixating on poor Miss French, and now that wretched Doctor had allowed the pair of them to be placed within the same chamber. It made her chest ache and her head spin; she rather suspected that it was causing her angina to flare up again.

But the damage, so far as it mattered to the rest of the world, had already been done, so what more could she say? He'd ruined that girl, whether or not he was sensible of it, and not even a lace veil on a spring day would fix the damages done now. A life sweating on a dirty mattress with legs spread-eagled seemed kinder than what the Doc insinuated about the practices inside these so-called mental hospitals: a willing sort of ruin, the likes of her daughter… it was better, in its way.

You simply didn't talk about it again, and life carried on. But people ought to talk about these asylums, Ginny decided as she took a heavy blade to her carrots. People ought to know what it was all about, before they shipped off their errant, strong-willed girls and locked them up with a bunch of white-coated mad men.

And Miss French was no fool; she signed-on for her share of trouble, sure enough, but never for the likes of this. For the first time, Ginny felt old – too old – and out of her depth in this new, mechanized world where people and cogs commanded equal respect from those with the power and wherewithal to make the cranks turn.

A mad woman was unsuitable for matrimony – to anybody, never mind a reluctant Viscount with a reputation for infamy; Gold might've bullied society into letting him marry his valet, and they might even have accepted the girl after the scandal died, but from the moment that girl set foot in Sonnachdubh, Mr. Gold had been the inescapable agent of Miss French's downfall.

If there was any justice in the world at all, the old bastard would have long-since choked to death on his sick and left them in peace for a while.

"Ruby," Ginny snapped, slamming her knife into the butcher's block, "where are you?"

"I'm here, Gran," replied the child, raising her neatly-braided head from the behind the stock-pot on the stove. Ginny's chest ached all over again, looking at her granddaughter; she wouldn't be a child for much longer, the first few inches of womanhood had already found her limbs and bosom.

"You stay close, you hear? I don't want you caught up in another of Mr. Gold's episodes."

"But Belle—"

"Miss French is a grown woman who's been through hell. If Gold's bound and determined to make himself into her own, personal devil, she at least knows where the pointy-end of the pitch fork goes."

"He wouldn't really hurt her, though."

"Wouldn't he, Ruby? Do you remember what happened last time?"
Ruby shuddered. It wouldn't happen again, Ginny vowed. She wasn't some hostage to daft old cow of a housekeeper and her wretched husband in the Servants' Hall; at the first sign of trouble, Gold'd have hell to pay for hurting Belle.

"I'll tell you what, girl," she continued, "if a man ever tries to tie your wrists down and force your laces open, you bite, kick, and claw. If you put up half so-good a fight as Miss French did, any sensible man'll run to the sheriff and report himself before the neighbors start to talk. They aint sensible when they're in their cups, Ruby; it's madness in a bottle, pure and simple. You stay close like I say, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," her granddaughter mumbled. She'd put the fear into her again. Well, good; fear'd serve a precocious girl like Ruby well, and it was still kinder than the truth of what happened when foolish little girls like her mother delved too quickly into the adult world.

Little girls ought to be afraid, if they couldn't be sensible. The small army of rough northmen she'd hired on to protect them against another incident like the one that killed poor Mr. Dovey was proof enough of that. Ginny saw the way men like that damn Dr. Whale and vile Mr. Hopper had started to notice Ruby, the way those thugs had begun to notice Miss French, and the urge to shake something made her joints sore from clenching.

What business did grown men have in noticing a girl? But they always noticed the pretty ones. Hell, the younger Hopper was half in love with her, and he was still gangly as a grasshopper. Maybe Ruby was still too young for the gentlemen to bother her, but when the lecherous physician finished up whichever of the two red-headed maids he favored these days, he'd come sniffing around. Of that, Ginny was absolutely sure.

Ginny took another vicious chop at her carrots, and fancied for a few seconds that it was a stiff cock. When the whole stack resembled a little pile of wood chips, she scraped them into the hammock of her apron and headed toward the stove.

The pot of chicken carcasses steaming up the kitchen from inside a wide, copper kettle gurgled merrily as she dumped handfuls of chopped root vegetables into the broth. Perhaps more carrot than one tended to want, but no invalid yet had ever turned up their nose at a Lucas woman's broth.

She braced her old bones for a minute, then bent down and managed to maneuver another log into the grate. Twenty years ago, she'd have chased the boy off the log pile and worked out all the frustrations of the world with an axe and some kindling; now all she had left were a few more years of carrots and the occasional fish to clean.

The huge, cast-iron oven mocked her with its efficient modernity. All the meat came cleaned and portioned from the butcher; all the vegetables came scrubbed clean on karts from the country; and the days of cauldrons suspended over hot coals while fish smoked in the chimney had gone, and left her behind. The new ways were easier, certainly, but no less demanding physically. She felt like an antique in her own lifetime, worn out and a day or two beyond mending.

"Mrs. Lucas?" asked Dr. Whale from the kitchen doorway.

"What do you want?" she grumped at him. Ginny stoked the fire rather than turning to look at him.

"I need a little wine to mix in with Mr. Gold's medicine, but the decanters in the study must have been smashed during the break-in, and the cellar's locked. Be a dear and fetch the key?" Her back went ramrod straight at that.

"It'll stay locked."
"Pardon?"

"I said it'll stay locked!" Ginny snapped at him, rounding on the swot. "You give him one of the little, silver spoons of that gut-rot of his in tea, with a big bowl of porridge, and that's all. He can have half a spoon tomorrow at breakfast, and again at tea-time; then half a spoon the day after at midday. No wine."

"Madame, you are not a medical professional. Do not presume to tell me—"

"I may not be a doctor, sonny, but I know a thing or two about what that old beast gets up to when you and Mr. Jefferson give him strong medicine and alcohol. You want to give him his way like it's God's own word because he's got a title and property? Well, fine. I can't stop you cooping him up with poor Miss French, not any more than I could turn the bastard out of his own house. But I say who's allowed in the cellar, and I say when the meals are served, what's served, and when. And by God, this time you're going to do as I say!"

Ginny hadn't realized she was brandishing a heavy fire-poker at the man until she prodded him back a few inches with the charred tip of it. Thankfully, it wasn't hot. Still, her point was made and Dr. Whale seemed at a loss for words.

"I—"

"Tea will be ready in twenty minutes. Not before. I'll ring when it's ready."

She turned her back on the flabbergasted gentleman and busied herself with the kettle, bristling with something like pride at the awe-struck look in her granddaughter's eyes.

LXXXI. Certainty

Belle felt the mattress dip beside her, and smelled something musky and sour. Had Ruby and Archie Hopper had brought Warg to town with them? Neither of them was quite so heavy as her visitor, nor quite so tall as the dog was long. Well, Warg was welcome, she supposed, but she hadn't the strength to roll over and pat the beast behind the ears to tell it so.

"Sweetheart?"

"Hm?" Belle mumbled, snuggling back into Warg's warmth. It felt ever-so-good to be warm and safe once more.

"Sweetheart, please?"

Dr. Whale's medicine – Rum's old medicine, she supposed – made the simple act of opening her eyes nearly impossible. She might have wondered how he'd ever accomplished anything at all, if she'd been prepossessed of enough spirit to think much at all. As it happened, she found fortitude enough to realize that Warg – for all his merits – could not talk.

"I… I'll go…"

"Rum?" Belle murmured, managing an uncoordinated shuffle from her side to her back, head sinking further into the feather pillow.

He looked horrible, sweaty, sans jacket, and wearing a shirt rolled up at the cuffs and unbuttoned at the collar, soiled with purplish speckles. The shaggy lankness of his greying hair was a bit like Warg's she supposed. Belle wanted to smile, to tell him about her silly dog dream, but the world felt like a cloud and she was just so tired.
"I'm sorry," he was saying. So, so sorry, and pressing his lips to her hand. This was important, so Belle tried to sit up and hear him.

"—and I didn't want to wake you, but I needed you."

Somewhere between them, there were unwritten tomes spanning from their ill-fated encounter over her new corset and Judge Frontland, whose attentions she had never once wanted, but Belle could not have denied him for the entire world. He was home now. Her Rum was safe, and the Judge's assassins had not found him on the road.

Belle wanted to comfort him, mussed though he was, but the best she could manage was to open her arms and offer a sleepy, uncoordinated embrace.

Rumford collapsed against her chest, wrapped himself around her, and quaked and sobbed. Belle thought she was crying too, or perhaps he was only damp from an English rain, but it didn't matter now that they were both safe again.

"Where's Bae?" she asked him, lacing her fingers through his hair. She'd have liked to cosset him, but her limbs wouldn't cooperate, and holding him seemed the next best thing. "The Judge sent men here; he could have sent them anywhere. He is… not safe."

Gold shook harder at that, and she could feel the scruff of his unshaved face against her neck. He felt sharp and rough, more grounded in reality than the subtle urge to sleep.

"I'll send Dovey to fetch him," Rum moaned. "I didn't know Belle. I didn't know. I'm so, so sorry."

"Rum… Mr. Dovey is dead." Belle wished she could have softened the blow, but her words had only just returned to her.

"I'll send Tavish, then."

"No, Rum, you need to listen. Rum, Mr. Dovey is dead. There's a man, a Judge, named Frontland, and he's—"

"I know."

"Wh-what?" Belle gasped. She'd nearly gathered her wits again, and Gold had just shattered them.

"He won't ever hurt you again," Rumford told her, and his honey-brown eyes opened – an inch or two from her blue ones – and she could see his absolute surety and security in them. "He won't ever hurt you again, so please – please, can I just stay here with you? I need to know you're safe. And Baelfire too. I'll send for him. He always wants to come home, but I'd never let him, so he wouldn't see… I didn't want either of you to see me like this."

Gold seemed as ill-prepared to take command of his extremities as she herself, but he managed to ring the service bell on the nightstand, shuffle off his clothes, and pull a fresh nightshirt over his head without ever leaving the bed.

Dr. Whale arrived with a tray just as he'd eased himself back under the blankets, and she pulled herself tight against his warmth again.

Rum panted from the exertion of it, but he welcomed her into his arms with a kiss that was more passionate than precise. They'd kissed before, but never like this.

The Doctor cleared his throat.
"Mr. Gold, I have your medicine. Mixed with Darjeeling, I'm afraid. You ought to see to your cook, she's quite—"

"Mrs. Lucas generally knows what's best," Belle murmured, not sure if the words actually escaped her lips. When Gold nodded and Whale did not broach the subject again, she assumed that they had.

"She's a meddlesome old hen," Gold griped, but he took his steaming tea and gulped it down as though it were only tepid. "But she'll have command of the house, or die trying. I brought her here to manage things. Listen to her, Victor."

"The police will be back tomorrow to ask about the break-in again," Whale sighed. "Am I to present them to the cook, then? She's hired on triple the staff we once had – thick, Scottish lads from the docks, and gives them room and board in the carriage houses! There are carpenters and glazers all about the place, turning up dust and mending things that I am not quite certain—"

"I can spare the coin and then some," Gold groaned, flopping back down on the mattress and wrapping his arms around Belle again. "Tell Tavish he's to take my carriage, a third of the new... stable hands, and a fresh team for the Channel Ferry at once. Bring Bae home."

"Tavish is exhausted, he only just brought you back—"

"Go yourself, then, but I will have my son!" Gold snapped, and Belle yelped at the sudden violence of it. Rum's breath came in heavy pants, and she did her best to soothe him. His quaking had stopped, and his skin felt cooler – less damp to the touch; whatever the Doctor gave him, it was a swift, potent drug.

Whale backed out of the room without further comment, and Belle wriggled free of Rum's arms.

"Are you... ill... again?" she asked quietly. It was her worst memory reawakened, with Rumford sweating and insensible, holding her too tight and taking liberties while she was powerless to leave the bed. She hadn't the faculties to be fearful before he truly roused her, but reality was fast closing in.

"Not ill," he whispered after a long pause. "Just... over-medicated. I stopped, eventually, after I tried to send you home. It's not... habitual. Not anymore. I'm sorry, sweetheart; I didn't want you to see me like this again, but I..."

"You needed me." He needed her, because somehow he knew about the Judge and knowing darkness like that would put anyone in need of love. She'd needed him too, in the dark of her cell and in the sweat-drenched sheets of her sickbed; she needed him now.

"Aye," he breathed against her neck. "Whale'll wean me off it in a few days, to lessen the severity of stopping, and then never again. And maybe Bae will recognize his father when he comes home."

"We'll do it together," Belle promised him, and she relaxed into his arms. She'd felt the bitter knife-blades of a body accustomed to certain drugs too suddenly deprived of them, and knew the suffering it caused.

Odd, she decided, that a flower could cease to be a flower and transform into a creation of unbridled potential. The poppy cured the sick; Hua's people had used it for centuries to treat illness and chronic pain, but in the end it brought war to their doorstep. Rum, with a small measure of laudanum, could manage his old injury so elegantly that his cane went almost unnoticed; with too
much, he ceased to be the man she loved and a hundred-thousand pitch-black seeds of wickedness and impulse clogged his veins. And with even a small dram of opium and an evil intent, Judge Frontland and Lady White Hall had kept her imprisoned and pliant. Too much of the little flower meant death; too little as well, for those already exposed to its poison.

As Belle faded back to sleep, she couldn't help but worry. There was still a little, blonde girl in a dark room somewhere, waiting to hear another sane soul still fighting for liberty; there were fields of red flowers swaying in the breeze, waiting for civilization to transform them for good or ill; and there was still Rumford, and whatever price he'd paid to free them from Frontland's tyranny.

He'd seemed so certain that they would be safe here, or he wouldn't have sent for Bae, she told herself over and over again. They'd be a family. Married, maybe. But if there was one thing that hard experience had taught Belle to caution herself against more than opium, it was the certainty of a happy ending.
LXXXII. Domesticated

"It's a simple enough process, Your Grace. Cock the hammer, take aim, and squeeze the trigger. Here, I'll show you." The American wielded her signature weapon with absolute certainty, an admirable quality.

Her form remained loose and inelegant, not at all the kind of careful marksmanship demonstrated by wealthy wives who insisted on joining their husbands' hunting parties. Then again, the landowners and country gentry employed gillies and grooms to aim their rifles for them; they had the luxury of stocked forests, and time to align their sights. Mrs. Mallory's posture bespoke a more urgent function, of the necessarily quick and unflinchingly precise variety.

"It's so petite, Mal; will it really kill a man?" asked Her Grace.

"Most of them would rather not find out," the American panned. "But yes, it will. If you shoot him through the chest, up close, it will kill him quickly. The design may be somewhat antiquated, but the ivory stock and slender design make it suitable for a lady to conceal in her garters or bodice without much discomfort. Never leave home without a good pistol."

"And why's that, Mal?" Her Grace took aim at a frothy, purple hydrangea and took a shot. The little pistol recoiled in her hand, startling her, and the shot rattled the windows of the house, but she didn't miss. A little rain of shredded petals showered their gowns and tea set.

"Liberty," replied the American simply. "It's designed to kill, and a gun doesn't give two good shits what it's killing. You be careful with it, you hear?"

"It wasn't so long ago that you advised me to be satisfied with my lot, Mal," observed the Duchess-Regent as she grasped the weapon daintily between her thumb and forefinger. She passed it over to him for reloading. "And now you've come to visit with an armory. What changed?"

"Everything. Regina, I know you don't want to hear this—"

"Then resist the urge to say it."

"— but Gold will make good on his threats if you push him. Spencer's Parliament accomplished nothing, aside from meddling with Jews in the Indies or some such rot, and Derby's on his way out; your plans will not bear fruit. There is no middle-path left now, and if you're sensible, you'll take that pistol, pack your things, and get the hell out."

"I am not going to sell off my estate and vanish into the night like some common criminal!"

"I think I'm qualified to say, on behalf of the common criminals, that a life – any life – is preferable to the sudden absence of one. Take Henry and run. Surely your mother—"

"That woman is dead to me."

"She is the only person you know abroad, and family besides! Take Henry, take Graham, pack up the silver and make for the Plymouth ferry."

The pistol clattered onto the silver tray, reminding them of their silent company.
"Be careful with that!" Her Grace snapped at him, and Graham begged her pardon. He resumed the process of reloading the dainty firearm with trembling hands, biting at his inner cheek to steady his breathing.

She couldn't take him with her; she couldn't force him to flee the country, to remain locked inside foreign townhouses and secreted in the bowels of ocean liners for the rest of his days. He'd simply refuse to board the ferry, if it came to that.

Refusal, for all Mr. Humbert's natural stubbornness, did not come easily in the face of Her Grace's persistence. In the past, she'd have threatened to run all the tenant-farmers and peasants off the grounds if he displeased her, and – in the past – that fear would have been enough to ensure his complicity. They'd never borne him any particularly good will, nor he them, yet he would not sentence his worst enemy to a life in exile from the country, toiling in the factories and suffering the Pea Soupers, with nary a breath of fresh air to breathe.

Duke Leopold never made any fuss over the Enclosure Acts, but it was certainly Her Grace's right as Regent to do as she liked with the White Hall estates (and with all the people reliant upon them). Graham never wanted to displease her, first from fear and later from a crippling sense of loyalty – young Master Henry might have been his own ill-begotten son, as often as she summoned him for those particular duties, and he owed the lad protection from his would-be-mother's wrath. He couldn't help but care for the boy, none who saw the happy babe could.

And where else would he have gone? Who else would have employed him? He'd have been forced to return to poaching, and then been hanged or worse. That is, if Her Grace hadn't seen fit to have his head lobbed off first. They'd all blame him for ever touching her, polluting her with his base, treacherous cock. And, worst of all, it wouldn't even be a lie (at least not entirely); it was known among the staff and her acquaintances that she favored him best, but the law wouldn't see it that way; the law, especially under men like Frontland, would bear down on him with its full, vengeful weight.

No, Graham would not be going with her. He was not her pet, to be crated and transported at her convenience half way around the world. Soon, very soon, she would not have the power to harm anyone ever again.

He straightened his simple, tweed waistcoat, flicked the dust from the sleeves of his shooting jacket, and offered the silver tray back to Lady White Hall. She snatched up the pistol gleefully and took another shot at the flower bed. This time, the petals that rained down were red.

Perhaps this mixture of tentative hope and crippling anxiety was what the golden-haired young lady who'd given birth to little Master Henry meant when she talked about bravery. She was a strange girl, Miss Swan: trouble (by anyone's definition), gravid before her wedding, and – if Her Grace was to be believed – not even properly married.

They spoke, sometimes, when Her Grace visited the Hospital, if she left them alone for a few moments to speak to Dr. Reeve.

"You could forget to lock up," she'd suggested, tugging at the sleeve of her dress. "I bet I'd get out of the garden this time, before they caught me."

The girl wasn't even an adult yet, outgrowing the clothes Her Grace supplied every few months, but when she matured, she'd be tall, kind, and lovely – if the confinement didn't destroy her inner light.

"Her Grace wants you to stay here, where it's safe," he'd told Miss Swan, by way of an apology.
"Do you always do what the Duchess says?" she'd asked him, as though it were the most repulsive idea to have ever entered her golden head. Graham hadn't been able to answer, and she hadn't waited for him to speak. "Well, what if you didn't this time?"

What if he didn't? Indeed.

Her Grace passed the pistol back to him, and he loaded it again.

"Begging your pardon, Your Grace," mumbled a liveried maid as she dipped into a curtsy and presented a card for the Duchess' inspection. The poor thing looked half paralyzed with fear, and Graham didn't know if it was the pistol or Her Grace's general ambiance that was upsetting the girl.

"We are not receiving today," Her Grace replied evenly.

"It's an inspector up from Plymouth, Your Grace. They say it's very urgent."

"Has someone died?" drawled Mrs. Mallory.

"Judge Frontland, ma'am," squeaked the maid. "They say the Squire discovered him only yesterday."

"Mr. Humbert, speak to the Inspector," she ordered, still fidgeting with the pistol.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Mal asked her, and Graham's heart was racing. "If you've been implicated by Gold…"

"Frontland is an old fool," snapped the Duchess. "He was in here not an hour before Gold, raving like a lunatic and vowing to ruin me if I didn't produce the corpse of his girl… Yes. Yes, I think I will speak to the Inspector," she decided, sliding the slender gun into her riding boot without blushing in the slightest.

"Don't rush on account of me," grinned Mrs. Mallory, pouring herself another generous measure of wine.

Graham felt as though he would vomit, and – after an appropriate interval – he made his way toward Her Grace's sitting room.

"Well, my Lady—"

"I am not your Lady, I'm Your Grace," snapped the raven-eyed woman peevishly.

"Well, my Grace," amended the gruff-sounding Inspector, "the problem, see, is that when we spoke to the maids they said you was unconsolable due to bad news from a gentleman caller. They said his Honor was up here, and you quarreled, and then he and another gentleman left together. And now you're telling me that two gentlemen arrived that day, picked a row within half an hour of each other, and that the Judge was murdered by a Viscount? It don't add up, begging your pardon. If you was in your parlor, in hysterics, you couldn't have seen—"

"Mr. Humbert," snarled the Duchess in a voice that brokered no argument. "I seem to recall that you were very, very far from my parlor that day. Why don't you tell the good Inspector here whether or not the Judge left our grounds safely. Certainly you must have seen, or you'd have been close enough to hear me calling for you."

"Certainly," Graham agreed. She wanted him to lie, he realized, and to implicate Gold in the Judge's death. And that, to Graham's way of thinking, was the most important detail: she thought accusing Gold of murder would be a lie.
Graham already knew he wouldn't do it, but he'd have to expunge another lie to outmaneuver her. He'd heard her screaming – oh, he had heard – and he'd nearly obeyed. And then he'd thought: but what if I didn't this time? And nothing had ever been simpler. "Although, I fear you're somewhat mistaken, Your Grace. I was in the stables that day."

"Enlighten us," she ordered, voice laced with poison.

"Lord Sonnachdubh offered Judge Frontland a ride in his carriage, because a band of brigands and horse thieves had ransacked the stables earlier that day, and the Judge's mount was missing."

"Horse thieves?" asked the Inspector, full of incredulity. "You're telling me there were two quarrels and a pack of horse thieves, all unrelated?"

"Yes, Inspector. Most irregular, but if you ask the grooms I'm sure they'll agree." They would, too; Gold had put the Fear in them.

"But, you see, the thieves didn't manage to steal His Honor's mount as we'd feared. I found her wandering in the garden, so I saddled her up and rode off after their carriage to return his property. She was an old thing, not quite up to speed, so I'm afraid I arrived quite a bit later than the gentlemen in the carriage. At any rate, I returned the Judge's horse to him, he thanked me, and I watched as the Viscount's carriage took its leave. His Honor was very much alive when I left him. How did he die, if I may inquire?"

"Took too much opium," grunted the policeman, chewing on the corner of his mouth, as though he were missing a large cigar usually attached there. "Only his son's not been seen in months, and he wasn't never known for an opium-eater."

"I suppose we all have our little oddities. Had ye any other reason to suspect murder?" Graham asked, his Irish accent coming out more than he'd have liked.

"No," sighed the portly man. He looked very disappointed. "Well, that'll be that, then. Thank you for your time, my Grace – so sorry to have bothered you. J ust finishing the paperwork, you know; good man like Frontland passes in disgrace, it raises a lot of questions in the law community. I can see myself out, thanks."

Graham and the Duchess sat in strained silence until the Inspector's footsteps faded in the hallway.

"Graham," she said softly. Her voice made Graham wish he could scrub his skin clean with a paring knife. "You told him you were at the stables. But you told me you were far away. You're lying. Did you hear me when I called for you that day?"

"Yes."

"And you abandoned me."

"Yes," he agreed.

The Duchess seemed to shrink, collapsing in upon herself, transforming into a wilting pile of sobbing skirts pillowed on the floor. He took half a step toward her, torn between comforting her and running, and her sobs turned to howling.

She couldn't hurt him now. Soon she wouldn't be able to hurt anyone, and Graham steeled himself. They would all be safe from her rages, once Gold returned. He'd seen to it that the drugged old fool was placed securely inside his own carriage, along with any evidence leading to him or Miss French. He'd stuffed pages of drawings and letters into a valise, along with the extra wine glass and
the empty chloral bottle made out in Gold's name. When Gold recovered himself, Emma would never have to be afraid again.

So why did she look so pitiful now? Graham hated his sympathy for the woman whose bed he'd shared. He awkwardly placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Regina, I—"

She turned on him like a viper, screaming, and he was knocked back several feet. Graham looked from the pistol in her hand to the red stain blossoming on his chest.

In the end, Graham dropped to his knees, the fragile hope of Gold's Sonnachdubh – rolling lands without boundary – and fidgety, golden-haired Miss Swan bringing a smile to his face. What if he didn't obey her this time? He'd always known the answer; it wasn't even surprising.

LXXXIII. Insanity

Days and nights spent tangled in sweaty bedclothes, punctuated by nurses, Dr. Whale, and glaring Mrs. Lucas, had been Belle's entire world since awaking in Rum's arms. They'd taken what little comfort they could in their delirium, the closeness bringing neither regret nor shame, and they'd managed it. Somehow, they'd managed to overcome the nausea and misery of opium dependency.

She'd learned to cope without the increasingly smaller doses of poison Dr. Whale prescribed to help with the tremors; she'd learned to cope with the disappointed grumbles of Mrs. Lucas; but she hadn't learned to cope without the warm weight of Rumford a few inches away from her.

Belle hadn't anticipated the strong reaction she had to being led away to a private bathing chamber, having the door shut, and being asked to disrobe by the maid. It reminded her of Reeve, and of Frontland, and she'd wept and shivered the whole way through her hot bath, knowing that she had to be brave.

It hadn't worked. The nurses had to call Rum in, settle him in a chair behind a changing screen, and she'd held his hand like a frightened child.

She was dressing now, on the right side of a terrifying bath, and Ruby had her hair pinned back in a damp twist at the base of her neck. She wished she could simply fall back into bed and forget again, but she didn't know how to go about it. It would be embarrassing, now, to see Rum again. He'd know about her crying in the tub, and Belle didn't think she could bear it if he wanted to send her back to the hospital again.

"There's something wrong with me, Ruby," Belle breathed, wringing her hands together. "I feel as though someone is screwing down a press over my chest, printing 'mad woman, mad woman, mad woman' over and over again. What if he sends me away?"

"He won't, Belle," promised Ruby, and Belle could see that she was growing into her Grandmother's surety and sagacity. She'd be a ferocious woman in a few more years, and a beauty. Before she remembered that those were meant to be happy traits, Belle almost felt sorry for the girl.

"I don't think I know how to be with him anymore," she confessed. Everything came so easily in their drug- addled haze, where it was simply enough to be near one another and share chaste kisses without overthinking. It wasn't fair to unburden herself on a girl ten years her junior with no equivalent experiences, but there was no one else she could talk to, and Ruby was her friend. "I don't… I don't remember how it was, before…. All I remember is being so, so happy, and then he
hurt me and it just never stopped hurting after that."

"Do you still love him?"

"Of course," Belle breathed, smiling through the silent tears on her cheeks. "I was going to come back, you know. Before I… before the Judge…"

"And he loves you, I know he does. Isn't that what matters? That's what you always used to say."

Belle wasn't sure about that any more, but she hoped that it was enough. Finally, dressed in clothes that – while not elaborate or confining – would certainly pass muster for a quiet supper at the house, she gave Ruby a long, solemn hug, and made her way to the dining room.

The table had been set simply, with an assortment of dishes on the sideboard and golden candle sticks on the mantle.

"Hey," Gold said, rising awkwardly to his feet.

"Hey," Belle replied. He approached her swiftly, and she was certain he meant to kiss her, but then he stilled himself, fingers flexing at nothing, and ushered her into her seat.

"Dr. Whale thought we should keep our repast light and bland, to aid in recovery, but I had Mrs. Lucas put on some of that oxtail stew you liked. If you'll have some?"

"Yes, please," Belle smiled, and a footman served them – the formality completely at odds with their simple meal. Gold dismissed them a few moments later, but it didn't matter; she'd lick the pot clean, if they'd let her. Belle had consumed quite enough tasteless, pallid food in the hospital to last her several lifetimes.

She waited patiently for Rum to take the first bite, but he only twiddled with his spoon. Then, in a sudden fit, he seemed to realize that she was waiting for his cue and began to slurp in great mouthfuls. Belle took one bite to his three, and he'd finished half the bowl in the space of a minute.

Their eyes met across the table, each of them blushing wildly, and then drifted back to the table settings.

"The stew is lovely," Belle supplied.

Rum tried to reply, but his mouth was still full, and he swallowed loudly.

"I… I'm sorry for my behavior earlier," Belle continued. "I panicked, and I—"

"Dinnae apologize, darling. It wasn't your fault. None of what happened was your fault."

"So you don't think I'm… mad?"

"Nae. Never. You and Bae, you're the best people I know. If you're unwell, it's because of what a true pair of madmen did to you. It will get better, my love. I know it will." His eyes had gone dark, made glossy with unshed tears, and Belle – for all her insecurities – believed him. She relaxed a little.

"Where is Baelfire?" she asked then, disappointed that she could have forgotten the boy.

"He ought to be making landfall tomorrow, with the tide. I got a letter this evening, sent the day Tavish arrived in Belgium, and they planned to leave at sunrise. It'll be slower than the post-carriage for them, with all of Bae's things, but they'll make good time on the roads. He's alive. He's
"I'm so glad, Rum," Belle told him, for once not concerned about whether or not she ought to go back to calling him Mr. Gold. "I know you were worried. And I'm so, so sorry about the Judge. I—"

"It's done now," Rum interjected with a note of finality. A mind less fuzzy with fever and strong medicine might have put the pieces together before then, but Belle could only stare at him with a slack jaw.

"You killed him?" she asked, voice barely a whisper. "Oh, Rum..."

"I suppose you'll tell me I shouldn't have done it. Frontland was a monster, Belle, and not one I'd care to face again, certainly not in a courtroom."

"What he did to me wasn't illegal?" she surmised, stomach twisting into knots.

"It's... a gray area. But I promise you, Belle, when I'm through with Spencer's Whigs, it will be. But sending people to invade my home was illegal; plotting with Lady White Hall to murder me was illegal; threatening my son was illegal... and, for all that, his acquaintances among the High Courts and District Justices may well have granted him clemency. I'm not a gentle man, Belle. The Judge deserved to die for his crimes; I couldn't have him walking about with impunity, a constant threat to our family. I had an opportunity, so I took it. He had to die."

"But not by your hand," she pleaded. "And you don't know that he wouldn't have hung for his crimes, you're only saying that to appease me, but I'm not a fool. You can't know the future; you can't know what would have happened by doing things properly. And Rum, anything could have happened to you when you confronted him! He's dangerous. What if he'd—"

"But I survived," he concluded, and Belle could see that he was running out of energy for this debate just as quickly as she was. He'd never regret killing the Judge, and — in her heart — she'd never blame him for it. If there was room for hate alongside all the hurt in her heart, it would wear Judge Frontland's face.

Maybe the girl who'd gone north in an antique dress and chapped her hands scrubbing pans would have hated Rum for it; maybe she'd never be able to love a murderer. But Gold... he'd never pretended to be other than he was, and he was a man with a reputation for violence. How many people had he killed in the war? How many had suffered under his heel as he made his fortunes? Death begot death, in an endless cycle, and Rumford – who despised warfare more than anyone she'd ever met – knew it well. He'd changed so much since she met him, but she couldn't begrudge him this. He'd never do it again, because there would never be another enemy like Frontland to come between them; she'd make sure of it, she'd protect him.

Belle wanted to tell him how knotted she felt, how frightening to think that there were men and monsters walking about – identical, in every relevant respect – except insofar as what they would kill for, what they would chance to die for, and what would give them the nerve to fight at all. Instead, she said: "I'm glad."

Rumford seemed to take that as his cue to continue.

"White Hall and Reeve will be next," he said. "Spencer too, though that's more difficult – he's got some strong allies at the moment, but they're losing support every day, and he's already too far in debt. Then the Hoppers, and Jefferson—"
"What? No!" Belle demanded, spoon clattering against the rim of her bowl.

"They nearly killed you, Belle! They took you from me, and nobody wrongs me, Belle. I will not let this stand!" he roared, rising to his feet.

"No one else has to die," she pleaded, coming to stand next to him. "Look, I understand your anger. I do. And I can't bring myself to mourn the Judge, I'm only sorry that you had to be the one to do it; it must have been so horrible for you, Rum, and the risk if anyone discovers… But, whatever wrongs were done, they were done to me. They hurt me. I understand that we need protection from people like the Duchess now, but we don't need to provoke her to violence just to satisfy your pride. We can be strong, together, without causing more bloodshed. So promise me – no, look at me, and promise me – that you're not going to hurt anyone."

"You'd have me do nothing?"

"No, not nothing! I'd rip that hospital apart and put nothing but fountains and rosebushes all over the place, until it wasn't even recognizable; I'd help all the other people they've got locked up in there, and get them to a real doctor if they need one; and I'd do it with you, together, because I… I love you, and I trust that you're a better man that they are. And Bae… it would grieve him to see you that way. Don't you see? That child adores you, Rum, but he won't forever if you can't really show him you've changed.

"If you're looking for justice, give it to the people who deserve it. There's a little blonde girl in there, and patients whose rooms are never opened… Rum, please. If you want to do something for me, help them. But please don't kill anybody."

Belle could feel her legs wobbling beneath her after her sudden outburst, and Rum scooped her into his arms, drawing her close to his chest to support her weight. They were both a bit clumsy on their feet these days, but between the two of them, they could stand steadily.

"Together?" he asked after a long time.

"Only if you still want to," Belle whispered, flushing red. "Please promise me that we can still be together?"

"Oh, sweetheart… yes, of course. I promise," he vowed, lowering them both to sit in his chair – her upon his lap, with his face pressed into her hair.

"And you… you won't kill anyone?"

"… No. No, I want to be a good father. And… a good husband, too?"

"Yes," Belle laughed, smiling back tears as her doubts began to fade and some of their old easiness returned. "You will be. I know."

LXXXIV. Think of England

When they parted ways and Belle, exhausted, was tucked into her own bed – Mrs. Lucas ought to count her blessings that he hadn't dismissed her over that little upheaval to their previous arrangement – Gold adjourned to his study to think.

Perhaps Belle was right, and he did need to let go of his hunger for revenge. What good had it ever done him? He'd sought to ruin Killian’s child, and had discovered a vast emptiness inside from the moment he found her. He hadn't even been sensible of what he was feeling, so wrapped up in his own misery, that he'd nearly killed himself on chloral to numb the disappointment. That was all
When he discovered that he loved Belle, it was the same: frighteningly large, unexplored territory. Doubt had tormented him, and he'd driven her directly into the jaws of his enemies. Her enemies. Their enemies. Could he truly doubt her wisdom now, when the grace she offered him had brought him back to the best version of himself? Frontland had not ruined her in any way that mattered to him, her goodness and intelligence remained, and he ought to have fallen at her feet and begged for forgiveness… except that she gave it to him, freely, without his ever asking.

Belle would be so disappointed with him if he failed her in this, the one demand she'd ever made of him, and he'd die before he let that happen again. Very well, then: no more bloodshed, no more poison in their lives. But it was so very, very tempting… Gold needed a distraction.

He turned his attentions to the correspondence which had accumulated while he remained incapacitated. There was an invitation from Mr. Dovey's son for him to come and walk behind the hearse at the funeral… which was yesterday. Damn. He'd do something for all Dovey's children, the man had been extraordinary to have fought them off bare-handed, with a kitchen knife in his back. He'd never had a better, more reliable man, and it was going to be a challenge to find a replacement. Mrs. Lucas' band of rough Scotchmen possessed many useful talents, but discipline and discretion were not among them.

The next letter came from Sonnachdubh, penned in a familiar hand. David Nolan wrote that he and his wife had received word from the White Hall lawyers that Regina had been arrested by an Inspector who found her holding a smoking pistol over her Gardener's body. No one could guess at what had driven her to it, and Gold scoffed – if anyone knew, Mrs. Mallory would – but they had cause to believe that her Regency would be over-turned with her conviction, and had plans to quit the North and Sonnachdubh very soon. On the whole, it was the best resignation letter Gold had ever received.

And finally, he turned to the large sheaf of papers poking out of his briefcase. Rumford did not remember placing them there, but the case had been with him when he left Frontland's manor, and he'd been in no condition to address it.

There were portraits of Belle, wilted with opium, and a heap of broken glass – both clear and brown – in the bottom, all of which made his head spin and yearn for a drink.

"Not yet, not yet..." Gold muttered.

He found more papers, some of them yellowed with age – letters, he realized. Love letters, made out from the early 1800s and spanning the years… but almost all of them had been addressed to Belle, and the possibility of El Zozo haunting them both from the grave had him stoking the fire violently.

Rumford stopped himself. He'd tampered with Belle's letters once, when she'd written to her father about the wedding, and as a result the old Squire hadn't even known she was missing until it was too late. He couldn't lie to her again, not about this; not about Frontland. He'd killed the man, and these letters might be the only closure – the only resolution – she ever got to claim.

He resolved to tell her in the morning, but the sound of soft feet padding on the carpet interrupted him before the offending documents could be entirely packed away.

"What's all this?" Belle asked him, dressing gown wrapped around her slender torso.

"Belle, what are you doing here?"
"I couldn't sleep…" she said.

Alone, she didn't say. She couldn't sleep alone, and – if he had his way – she would never have to. Mrs. Lucas would fuss, and Rumford was so glad he didn't give a damn. What if she'd awoke in the darkness and was frightened? No amount of censure would merit putting her through that again.

Gold offered her his arms, and she came over to sit on his lap, in front of the fire.

"I suppose business matters don't rest for the ill," she giggled, pressing a small kiss to his temple.

"Oh, I imagine my enterprises can wait a few days more. I… don't want to upset you, sweetheart, but these are not business documents. They're Frontland's. I must have taken them when I… well, enough about that. Some of them are addressed to you."

Belle tensed in his arms, and began to shake.

"You don't have to read them if you don't want to," he told her.

"He can't hurt me anymore," Belle declared, as much for his sake as her own.

"No," Rum agreed.

They sat in silence for a long time while Belle ran her fingers over the pages, shuffling them mindlessly, looking without seeing.

"Burn them."

"Are you sure?" he asked, loosening the arms around her waist.

"I'm sure. I don't care what he has to say. I know… enough about why he did what he did. He'd tell me, sometimes, that I looked just like her, and I hated him for it. Sir Maurice is my father, Rum – the only father that matters, not this… woman that he claimed to love. Nobody who really loved someone could ever hurt another person that way. Burn them. Please."

They crumpled up the pages together, tossing them to the flames.

"You know, I… I thought, once, that Sir Maurice wasn't really your father. It's why I…"

"But you never hurt me. Oh, Rum, no – you never hurt me, not like he did. And you've changed. It won't happen again," she told him, and she was so certain that he could almost believe her.

"I think he was your father, though. The Squire, I mean. Frontland told me that when you were very young, Sir Maurice claimed he fathered you with a dancing girl who got sick. He said Sir Maurice only agreed to say you were the daughter of one of their school chums after—"

"It doesn't matter," Belle said again. "He's the only father I ever knew or wanted. I loved him – I do love him. I came with you to spare him, didn't I? That's what matters; that's what makes us a family."

It was impossible not to kiss her after that, and the rest of Frontland's pages turned to ash as their lips swelled and danced. Suddenly their kisses turned to caresses, and Gold felt a stirring in his loins that he'd almost forgotten.

"Come to bed," he panted against her neck.
Belle blushed red, but nodded. They hobbled slowly, supporting one another and giggling, attempting not to draw the attention of the staff. Well, let them look, Gold decided. As much as he hated the idea of any of his employees seeing Belle's private moments with him, he liked the idea of staking his claim better. Whale forgot himself, grew too familiar; the cook needed to remember her place; and for all he cared the Devil could take the maids.

There were several flights of stairs in the town house, and any number of oil lamps in the corridors casting splintered shadows across the floor, but when they entered his quarters the whole atmosphere went dark. Belle lie down across the bed, quiet and still, and he felt his way along her sides to loose her sash and stays.

Rum nibbled at the corner of her mouth, up her jaw to her ear, and down her throat to the tops of her delicious breasts. His breath came in quick, ragged bursts, and Belle swallowed a whimper. He flung off his tie and waistcoat, tore the topmost buttons from his shirt, and slid the rich fabric off, onto the floor. Belle made no complaint when he moved to undress her as well, and her dressing gown and shift joined his things on the floor.

"You're so beautiful," he told her, knowing it was true despite not being able to see her, and he started kissing every inch of skin he could reach. His hands trembled at her breasts, but she let him cup them, and he felt braver. Rum pressed his length against her, letting her feel the hardness and desire she inspired, and trailed one hand down Belle's stomach, between her legs. He slipped one hand under her drawers and tensed.

"Belle?" Rum asked, suddenly uncertain. He traced his fingers over her sex, which felt deliciously warm, but he found only dry flesh.

"It's alright," she said. "I want you to, and I… I'm not a madwoman. I'm not. So I'll lie still and let you, like I'm supposed to. You don't have to worry about me struggling. I'm not mad."

"Oh, Belle," Rum sobbed, collapsing against her neck. What had they done to her? What had those bastards done? "No, sweetheart. No. Not tonight."

Her hand brushed against his cock and he stifled a moan into the pillows.

"I can tell you want to, though," Belle whispered, and he thought he heard tears in her voice.

"I know what that means," she said, squeezing him through his trousers. "And I want to. I know I want to, I – I love you. And I can do this for you. And I know you'd never… never take what you wanted and leave. I trust you."

"Maybe you want to up here," he whispered as he pressed a kiss to her hairline, sure his voice would crack and betray the depth of his feeling. Then he took her hand and guided it away from his cock, down to the apex of her own legs. "But you don't want to down there. When you're ready… you'll feel it. And then, I promise, if you still want to… with me… we will."

"What if I never... feel it?" she sniffled.

"Darling, I would marry you tomorrow if you'd have me. We will wait until you're ready. Married or not, we'll wait. Is that what's bothering you?" he asked, pulling her into his arms at last.

"No, I… well, I heard Vera and Margie talking. It would hurt Bae, wouldn't it? If you married a person like me, people would talk. So I thought, maybe… maybe if I really were your mistress, we wouldn't have to... I don't know, Rum. I'm just so confused, and you wanted to, and I wanted you to, but I just disappointed you."
He was going to bury those red-haired bitches under two tons of chimney soot tomorrow; they could bloody well learn to keep their mouths shut cleaning fireplaces and coughing themselves to death instead of gossiping. He had half a mind to drag them from their beds and get them started immediately, but fortunately for them, he had more urgent demands on his time.

"Shh," he cooed. "You could never disappoint me."

"Promise?"

"Aye."
LXXXV. Sanity

Sleep did not tempt Belle, and— with Rum's arm draped over her, his torso pressed flush against her back-side and so very, very close— she wondered if Delphi had dreamed a thirteenth Labor just for her. Rest should have come naturally, her anxieties ought to have abated in the face of his honest, unassuming love. His trust. It was all she'd ever wanted for her own sake. Perhaps it was foolish to think that all love led to happiness; the Judge's most certainly had not. Or perhaps she had slept too long with tincture of poppy to slip unassisted into the realm of dreams, or perhaps her mind could not— would not— consent to slumber without the dreaded flower.

Without Rumford's steady breathing to anchor her, she could almost have seen her way to taking a few drops of the bitter stuff. Morphine repose seemed the easier solution to her troubles, and the simple truth of this matter was all the worse for how woefully wrong she'd been in thinking that asking Rum to abandon the substance was a small thing.

How could Gold bear it, this stunning sobriety, where sleep would not come and ease the pain? To his thinking, when he was even younger than she, the world had become and remained a terror to him. He'd seen the worst of humanity in the mud and gunpowder (and knew quite a lot before then, if the rumors of his childhood were to be believed) and if his actions had been the actions of a coward, they were— at least— an attempt at self-preservation in the face of cruelty and uncertainty.

Belle knew that beast. In the austere sheets and padded cuffs of the asylum, she'd seen what human beings were capable of enduring, she'd seen what happened when the point of endurance was breached, and she knew two things: firstly, that cowardice and caution were quite often the same thing, and second that even the appearance of bravery in the face of utter defeat was worth any amount of suffering. The two-fold truths, a Gordian knot in their own right, waged war in her thoughts all night— and she could not discern where one rope ended and the other began.

It was giving her a headache.

Belle sighed audibly, and again fought the urge to calm her nerves with medicine. It was poison; she knew it was poison, but a more soothing, slow death would never be devised. And what could be the alternative, to simply think upon the nature and depths of misery all night? Her inability to… to perform the duties of the bedchamber for her love only solidified that something had gone irrevocably wrong inside of her. How could she accept his marriage proposal, knowing it may be a marriage in name only, and that Bae— dear, lovely Bae— would suffer for the sake of a name?

"You're troubled," Rum whispered against her curls, drawing her closer still. His palm splayed across the soft curve of her stomach, and the simple gesture felt more intimate— more protective— than any number of kisses they'd shared.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she whispered back.

"You didn't, love. I was awake."

"Have you been awake all this time, feeling me fidget in the bedclothes?"

"You havenae fidgeted much, darling. No, I— I couldn't sleep, if you must know. Insomnia is a problem when you're accustomed to opium. But I'd not have left you alone for anything in the
"You like… this sort of embrace? Even though it's chaste?"

"Aye, I do. I love embracing you, any way you'll have me, though I wouldn't call this wholly chaste – barely a stitch of clothes between us, and us still unmarried." She could feel him smiling against the naked skin of her shoulder blade.

"And… since I'm being honest," Rum continued, "You steady me. I'm very selfish, Belle, but I'd not have ye believe it's a chore for me to hold you close, knowing your safe."

They remained still, entwined, for a long time before Rumford spoke again.

"Belle, do you… could you ever…"

"Could I what?" she asked him, lacing her fingers through his where his hand rested on her abdomen. If he asked her to try again, she'd do it. She wanted to – she knew she did – and if she insisted that she was ready, who was he to contradict her?

"Do you think you could ever bear to tell me what happened? Did Frontland… did he…"

She swallowed a cry in her throat as it tore loose from her heart. He seemed to think better of that line of questioning, and then immediately growled in his deepest burr: "It was not your fault, Belle. Please – please, for me – please try to believe that."

If Belle had been standing, she rather thought that voice would have set her weak in the knees.

"I… as a matter of fact, I know that," Belle replied shifting herself so that her neck craned back and she lie on her back, looking up at Rumford, still propped on his side. "I never courted the Judge's attentions. I know he'd quite decided before I was even of an age to speak and think for myself who I was and… and what I might become."

He'd been honest with her before, and that was no small thing for him, she knew. It's only fitting that she endeavor to return the favor, and it was less complicated now – alone in the dark – to speak of things that she'd rather not contemplate in the light. She had to be brave.

"Half of me feels as though I'm just being silly, because it could have been so very much worse than it was. I'm here now, and we're safe, after a fashion. But that was yesterday, and now it's past midnight, and I've nothing to think on, save the morrow. The future is just... awfully big, and full of uncertainty. How do we carry on after everything?"

"Belle, I love you. There's nae a drop of uncertainty in me, I-" She cut him off before he could say it again.

"That's not what I mean. It's not that I doubt your feelings, or mine. It's just... honesty. In all my life, I've never been so frightened of honesty. I've no idea how to go about telling anybody, let along Bae – your son, how could I ever expose him to something so disgusting? But how could I look at him every day and pretend… and lie to him? He's your son, he's part of you, but he'd hear of it in the whispers of busybodies and malicious gossips eventually.

"The other half of me wants to be practical. Bleak, but practical, and never admit it to anybody, no matter that they'd all know I was lying. Even you knowing about it bothers me, when I'm thinking in a certain light. I know what's happened has ruined, forever, any little scrap of good reputation I might once have had, but admitting it is... a difficulty."
"So what's the obvious solution, in the end? We mustn't marry. After everything we've endured, I knew that we mustn't, but that didn't mean we couldn't be known to one another. And then when we couldn't copulate," they both winced at the word, "I began to wonder if I hadn't been irrevocably ruined for everything."

"You don't want to marry me?"

The desperation in his voice echoed every wretched feeling that Belle found herself unable to articulate. She tried anyway.

"I… I don't want you and Baelfire to suffer for a marriage of name only. If you've got some misguided notion that matrimony will save me, I… I thought I ought to disabuse you of it."

She could feel him scowling, thinking, for several minutes after that, and Belle feared that she'd destroyed the small trust between them with too much honesty.

"Belle… I…" Rum's voice broke, and Belle couldn't bear it. Her heart ached for him, so she wrapped her arms around Rum's chest, drawing him close. In the darkness of their chamber, she could feel the proof of tears upon his cheeks.

"I need you to believe," he choked out, holding her tight, "that nothing that bastard did to you would ever diminish your worth to me. You could never disappoint me. Never. But please, I want… please tell me… did he force you to—"

"No!" Belle gasped, and then they were both weeping. "No, he never… forced me. Oh, Rum, no. You must think I'm the most selfish, miserable creature in the world, carrying on as I've been, and he never… I'm not insensible. I know what happens to girls in those places. Oh, Rum, of course you'd think… No. No, there was only… only touching, and… and sometimes he'd kiss me."

Belle found, now that she'd begun speaking, that she could not cease.

"I think… I think he meant to, in the early days. He had men in to hold me still when I resisted his advances, and sometimes they drugged me, but some shred of pride always stopped him. He used to say that I had to be willing, but I always found the strength to let him know that I found his advances disgusting. I think he believed me quite mad by the end, the way I'd howl and claw him. And when they moved me to the hospital, he wouldn't allow Dr. Reeve to cure my hysteria in the usual ways. He wanted it to be his hand that… he wanted to train me to – to enjoy it when he—"

Belle had to pause and collect herself, and Rum began to press small, calming kisses into her hairline.

"But they never got far enough to… to really hurt me. Not that way. I understand the mechanics of it, though. I saw… Oh, Rum, the things they must have done to poor Mr. Jefferson's wife! The doctors used to do awful things to get the girls to lay still while they… they masturbated them. And any other treatment they devised, it was just an expansion on the same. It seemed to hurt them so badly, but I know – in my heart, I know – that you would never hurt me. Can you ever forgive me for letting you think…"

She hadn't meant to mislead him! She hadn't meant to add to his myriad worries, and it was the sudden onslaught of guilt held so long at bay that truly caused her to weep.

"Not your fault," he murmured over and over again, petting her hair. "Not your fault. I'm such a coward, Belle. Such a coward. I should have asked you straight away. I let myself believe, because I'm not brave like you. Not brave enough for optimism."
"Sometimes," Belle cooed, running her fingers through his own locks to console him, "It can be very brave to allow yourself to hope. And you did that… for me, you never lost hope. Even when you thought… that, you still loved me. You're not a coward, Rum. You're the best man I know."

"Come away with me," Rum whispered, kissing her so tenderly and deeply that she scarcely had breath left to answer. "You've been so brave, we could do with a bit of cowardice if you ask me. Come away with me and Bae, if he's willing, and we'll travel the Continent away from all this scrutiny and bad memories. We'll wed if we please, love if we please, and if you grow tired of me, I'll install you in a villa with a library to shame even the Royal Society's. You'll want for nothing – with or without me, you will want for nothing. It would be your choice. But we could go to Italy, Constantinople, the ruins of your old Greece, and Egypt or even Gibraltar if you like. It could be an adventure, like your stories."

She could do it, she knew with in the space of three rapidly-increasing heartbeats. The universe owed her a little comfort, even if Rum would call it cowardice. It would cost her nothing, but the price would be paid. The price was always paid, and she didn't want anyone else to pay hers for her.

"Your business is here. Everything you've built for Bae is here, Rum, and that was your whole life. I wouldn't ask you to do forfeit that for me."

"I spent my entire life building a future for that boy, and when I wasn't doing that I was hiding in a bottle because I couldn't stand the sight myself. How was Bae supposed to tolerate me, if I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror? I couldn't even be with my boy, I had to send him away. I wasn't fit to be seen by him.

"If I died tomorrow, he'd inherit nothing but gold and enemies. When I lost you… when I thought you were gone, no invoice from the bank could make the ache go away; no number of deals or fortunes made could fill that void. I had your chipped cup and an ache in my chest where my heart should have been, and it was misery. Ledgers and schemes aren't what makes me happy, love, it's you. Just you, and my son."

"Bae should have his say," Belle decided. "If we're to go away, and he's to come with us, he should have his say. He may want to go back to school, or Sonnachdubh, or—"

"Hang Sonnachdubh!" groaned Rum, pulling her flush against himself again. "The place can turn to rubble and ash with the first light of dawn, that'd suit me just fine."

"But it's Baelfire's home," Belle pleaded. "The only home he's known."

How had that daft, darling, stubborn man of hers still not realized that his son loved the home he loathed? Nothing would have made the young man happier than to be allowed to stay in the highlands with Ruby and Archie and – for whatever years were left to the beast – Warg.

He probably didn't want a life on the road, new tutors every few years until his father packed him off to University; and he almost certainly didn't want a step-mother, or whatever she'd be as Rum's paramour, should they decide against marrying. If she spread her legs for his father, how could he see it as anything but a ploy to deprive him of his inheritance? The boy scarcely knew her, and what he did know of her was that she'd been his father's maid. The terms fortune-hunter and mushroom came to mind.

"We'll discuss it," Rum promised her. "And we'll talk with one another. You told me that, once; that I had to be brave enough to trust you. I... I almost am. Can you do the same, can you trust me?"
She kissed him for that. They kissed and kissed until their kisses grew drowsy.

Belle could hear the sounds of the city coming awake in the streets, servants preparing for their masters and milk-karts and grocers making deliveries, and her eyes grew heavy. They still had a few hours before anyone would rouse them, and Belle thought – with this new lightness of spirit inside her – that she might even manage to sleep.

LXXXVII. Fathers and Sons

Gold awoke to the slight shift of fabric against his pelvis, the bedclothes slipping against him as small hands tugged them, gently. When Belle pulled back the sheet to expose him, the chill air of the room danced around his loin, and Rum had to stifle a gasp at the sudden coolness.

Whatever she was about, he didn't want to startle her, but the first soft brush of her fingers against his prick set him gasping.

"Hey," he smiled, catching her blue-eyed gaze.

"I'm sorry," she replied, drawing her hand away. "It's just that I've never seen... I thought, in good light, that it might not be so frightening. I should not have done it without asking."

Gold chuckled. "It's just a shriveled old thing. But if you touch it, it won't stay that way."

"It's not bad if I...?"

Gold shook his head mutely, and Belle's inspection commenced. Her fingers trailed over his bollocks and the small patch of hair above before patrolling his slightly engorged length. He could feel the warmth of her breath against the tip as she tested the soft skin around his small opening.

"I could have cupped it in one hand before it got stiff," Belle observed.

"And now look at it," Gold teased, rather proud of the stiff cock jutting up between them.

"Is it nice if I touch it? It doesn't hurt?" Belle asked.

"It doesn't hurt if both parties are ready," he replied in awe of her explorations. She seemed intent on discovering every inch of skin without giving him much friction, a terrible tease without meaning to be. He would endure, and groaned out his praise.

"Why does it get so large?"

"It's what happens to a man when he's ready," Rum answered, forcing his hips not to buck as she tested the temperature with her lips. "The blood-flow intensifies and the muscle contracts. You'll have to ask Victor, beyond that."

"I'd rather not," Belle giggled. Clearly she'd overcome her trepidation of the subject. Unable to resist, Rum reached down and gave himself two firm tugs.

"Is that how you..." But Belle was happy to answer her own question, wrapping her hand around him and emulating the motion.

"If you keep that up, I'll... I'll..." But what he'd do was apparent enough when three long spurts of his mettle shot off onto their combined flesh.

Gold relaxed into the pillows, and drew Belle up to his arms. If she would lie her head upon his chest, just give him a moment, he could make sense of it all and apologize for the suddenness of it,
but first he just needed to melt into his wife.

Wife. That thought put a smile on his face, and he knew he'd keep asking her until she agreed.

"Is.. is that all?" Belle asked, resisting his embrace.

"Aye," he replied, trying to wipe the stupid smile from his face.

"And how do you know when the lady's ready? How do you know when she won't be hurt by... touching?" Something in her posture seemed restless, and Gold hoped he'd read the situation correctly.

Without breaking his eyes from hers, he took Belle's hand and guided it between her legs.

"Don't!" she gasped, pulling away.

"I'm sorry," he rushed. Idiot. Complete idiot. Of course she wasn't ready. "It's too soon, I'm sorry. I'll try to explain without touching. I-"

"No, I... I want you to. It's just... down there... right now, it's dirty."

"Dirty?" Gold gulped. He could feel his hands trembling.

"It's sticky," she clarified, and Rumford couldn't have stifled his moan of appreciation for anything.

"When a lady is ready, she grows... moist," he managed, quite sure that he had the world's most pathetic, needful look on his face. "Can I show you, darling?"

To his absurd and utter amazement, she let him. She let him touch her the way those miserable doctors touched their patients, and he'd drive the memories from her with his dying breath if she let him see her composure shatter just once. He slid his fingers over her ivory skin, through the small thatch of hair, and slipped his fingers between the folds of her privates.

"Was it exciting for you, touching me?" he growled into her ear, pressing kisses up and down her neck as she gasped and writhed against his fingers. "Is that why you're wet?"

"I- I think, oh yes," she hissed as he rubbed his thumb around the top of her slit, circling the little treasure there. Belle's body responded to him, insensible as she was of the cause, and he dared to run a finger over her opening, where the thin membrane of her hymen was. He had to be careful, there could not be blood. Belle deserved nothing but pleasure, and no smear of blood to worry her.

Gold redoubled his efforts on her little nub, working his whole palm over her outer lips. For himself, he laved at her breasts with the broadest part of his tongue, teasing them to distraction, the work of his hand below almost forgotten. Then Belle broke. He'd never felt a woman fall apart so completely, hot and wet and utterly loose in his arms, a look of pure marvel on his eyes.

Baelfire's mother had done her duty without complaint, and Regina's mother had put on a good boudoir performance, but Belle - his lovely Belle - looked utterly sated. Women like Belle, he surmised, had been the reason for the Renaissance in Italy.

"Not frightening?" he whispered, leaning back into an exhausted embrace.

"Not frightening," Belle agreed. "But only because it's you here, with me."

They lazed away their morning, cossetting and whispering, and Gold had half a mind to sack the unfortunate maid who disturbed them on principle.
"It's only," said the girl - one of the creatures he'd have set to sweeping chimneys, and still might, "that Master Baelfire has arrived."

He hated to leave Belle, but she needed to rest, to recover, and he needed to speak to his son before they decided anything. Rumford quickly changed into some semblance of proper clothing, kissed Belle goodbye, and dismissed the maid to send up the Lucas girl.

When he entered his study, leaning heavily on his cane, he found his son standing by the fireplace.

"Tavish said you were ill," said Bae without turning to face him. "Then he started talking about dangers, sounding deranged. But you were ill, so that's why I came. Papa, if you were just drinking too much again and gone out of your head, and if I'm to be sent back to school post haste, then I think you should know that... this will be the last time. I'll not come again. I'll not be where I'm unwanted, at the beck-and-call of a madman."

"Bae," cried Gold. "Bae, I'm sorry."

His son did turn to look at him then, and the boy looked nearly-grown in a close-cut, hunter-green waistcoat, neck tie, and frock coat. He'd always known the lad wouldn't be his little Baelfire forever, but he'd never wanted to admit how near to the crushing burdens of adulthood his little chap was. How many good years had the bloody laudanum cost them?

"You look... better," Bae concluded lamely. He looked sober, Gold knew, and that would be an improvement on the last time they'd spoken together. He had not been kind, had used the boy's little friends against them - they were meant to get an education, but after Belle had gone he hadn't even delivered that, had he?

"I feel better, son," Rum told him. "I've stopped taking laudanum. And I'm getting married, if the lady in question will have me."

"You haven't asked her?"

"It's complicated," Rum confessed. "I'd hoped to talk to you about that, actually."

"And this is the devastating, all-consuming danger?" Bae demanded, crossing his arms in front of his chest. The lad was pouting, begrudging, but Rum conceded that he had the right to be. "A wedding?"

"I have many enemies, and there was danger. I nearly died, and so did Miss French. But it's been dealt with; I just needed to know that you were safe," Gold said.

"Miss French?" His son's interest piqued. "Isn't that your poor valet? She was kind to me, I'm glad she's alive. Where is she?"

"Resting," he rushed. "Or, more likely, bathing and dressing and very likely preparing to join us within the hour. She's quite the tenacious lady."

Bae considered that for a moment. "Am I to understand," asked his son in a level voice, "that you've brought me here to caution me on your eminent marriage to your maid?"

"If she'll have me." He couldn't afford to forget that; it had to be her choice.

"Oh, that is rich. Of course, knowing Miss French, she's very likely to refuse you if she's displeased. When we met, I admired - as you say - her tenacity. So is this the part where you bribe me and threaten my friends to make me call her Mummy?"
"Bae!" Gold snapped, closer than he'd ever yet come to striking the boy. "Belle is a brave and loyal lady. She gave up everything to save her family, and when I was my absolute worst she saw the best in me. She made me better, she saved me, when there was nothing at all worth saving. She's a bloody hero, surviving all the horrors she's faced, not the least of which are of my making. And she loves me - really loves me."

"The marry her," challenged Bae. "And leave me be."

"I'd hoped you'd be pleased. I'd hoped you might want to be a family. We'd spoken of traveling, but Miss French is concerned that your interests would not be adequately protected if I took her abroad. She suggested that you might disagree with my choice, if you came to know the particulars of her circumstances, and I... I assured her that you could never be so selfish. Have you truly grown so bitter in the last year, Bae?"

"I'm not your little boy anymore. I'm fifteen, and I've not seen you for more than ten days together since I was eight. Marry her if you want to, Papa; I don't want anything from you, least of all money."

"Don't say that," Gold begged. "I thought... I thought we could have builders into Sonnachdubh, to renovate it for you, and we could tour the continent with tutors until you're ready to attend University. Cambridge or Oxford, either way. They should be done with the larger works by then, and the house would be yours after matriculation. I mean to renounce my title to you as soon as you're of age, I thought you'd be pleased."

"You thought of having our home renovated?" asked the boy defiantly. It was a fair question - he'd have let the Hoppers piss the place away quite happily if he had his own way.

"Miss French might have had some thoughts on that subject as well," Gold conceded. "Come with us, Bae. Please. Or, if you won't for me, at least talk to her. Get to know her, and hear her story if she cares to tell it. There are... circumstances that we need to discuss, as a family. And Belle won't have you hurt for her own happiness, Bae."

"Then she's kinder than you deserve," said the boy, but his features softened slightly.

"Aye," Gold sighed. "On that point, we can both agree."

LXXXVI. Mothers and Daughters

When they escorted her outside, the sunlight nearly blinded her. Emma winced at the winter chill, but would have spent the whole day out-of-doors, shivering, just for the privilege of doing so in the daylight. They'd never allowed her to go outside before, not since the Duchess brought her to the hospital. Not since the last time she'd tried to escape, to find Henry.

It was a poor name for a baby, but the one that the Duchess had given her little chap all the same. He'd have to grow into it, though Emma could scarcely fathom what a toddler named Henry would look like. She'd never see him again - that had been assured - and if it was a choice between her son or the sunlight, Emma wasn't sure she could choose. She'd never even held him, the midwife had simply passed him over to the Duchess.

There must have been some sort of emergency, Emma decided, because all of the patients were being escorted out to carriages and ambulances by nurses and doctors she didn't recognize. They all seemed awfully calm, considering "out of the hospital" was the primary goal of every inmate stuck in the place; she didn't see the brown-haired woman who used to scream and thrash at Dr. Reeve, though. Hadn't heard her in an age, but hadn't wanted to admit that she had most likely died. People
didn't leave the hospital, except stitched up in a body bag.

A fine lady with dark hair, wearing a dress embroidered with snowdrops, approached Emma on the lawn.

"Are you Miss Swan?"

She looked nice, Emma decided, but she wouldn't risk it. "I'm Mrs. Cassidy," Emma replied.

The Duchess always said the reason they had to lock her up was to stop her being a trollop. She always replied that she'd been married by an infantry chaplain, and that being a widow wasn't a crime. It was rubbish of course - at thirteen, the thought of marriage hadn't been at the forefront of their minds.

Maybe she was a stupid trollop, but the Duchess was wicked, and that was worse. She didn't deserve Henry. Though, at fifteen, Emma wasn't sure she had been worthy of a son either, and she definitely hadn't been at thirteen.

At any rate, if the pale woman was trying to trick her into admitting something, Emma wasn't going to give them the satisfaction.

To her utter amazement, the woman threw her arms around her and gave her a hug.

"Emma, we are so glad you're safe," she cooed, and Emma stiffened in her embrace.

"Who the hell are you, lady?" Well, there was no sense in a madwoman being polite.

"I'm Lady Nolan, the new Duchess Regent of White Hall. Regina was my step-mother, but she's been deposed. My husband and I have Henry - he's such a beautiful little boy, Emma, you'll be so proud."

"Does that mean Henry's not a Duke anymore?" asked Emma, serious and practical as always. Someone had to be; if you left these noble ladies alone too long, they inflicted no end of misery.

"He's still the Blanchard heir," Lady Nolan confirmed. "But you can come and stay in White Hall and be his mother now. We'll protect you both, you'll want for nothing."

"Well maybe... maybe I don't want Henry to be a Duke," Emma balked, wriggling out of the woman's embrace. "Maybe I don't trust you not to hurt him when you have your own son."

If sadness were a song, this woman's face would play a symphony.

"Emma, I know you don't trust us. The White Halls, I mean. But Neal was my father's cousin, and Henry will inherit the title when he's old enough. Whether you raise him as a prince or a pauper, he's a Duke by blood. My children... if I have children, they will inherit their father's title, the Earldom. You don't have to be afraid. The hospital's being dissolved, and you'll be allowed to do as you please. We can give you a home, you and Henry. Won't you come with me?" She gestured to an ornate carriage among all the others.

"Alright," agreed Emma. "But only if I get to see Henry. I'm not promising anything."

"He's here," Lady Nolan smiled, the sadness gone from her face. "He's waiting in the carriage, with my husband. You can hold him, he's-"

Emma dug in her heels. Things were happening quickly, too quickly, and the last time she'd
accepted aid from a White Hall it had ended in her imprisonment. She'd been alone, so very alone, and - while the Duchess kept her in quarters separate from the patients and visited from time to time - there had been no opportunity to prepare for the likes of motherhood. She hadn't really thought she'd ever be allowed to leave, and the Duchess... she was evil, as horrid as they came, but she'd promised a better life for Henry.

That was the real truth: Emma would have given up her baby, to give him his best chance with a real family, before the Duchess showed her stripes. It was just that Her Grace was cruel, and didn't trust Emma not to come around later, complicating things. She didn't know if she wanted to be a mother, shocked by the suddenness of this new possibility.

"What if he doesn't like me?" asked Emma, twisting her fingers into her skirts and fretting.

"Oh, Emma," the woman cried. "Emma, he'll love you."

"What if I'm not a good mother? I don't know anything about kids, except how to make one."

"We'll go at your own pace. You can stay on as his older sister, if that's easier. Or as an aunt, at the holidays. We'll think of something, I promise."

"We'll think of what's best for Henry," Emma agreed, and she allowed herself to be ushered into the carriage. The sight of a little boy dressed all in velvet took her breath away.
Epilogue

LXXXVIII. Venice, 1859

The gondoliers and small bands of musicians made their way up and down the canals of Venice, shuttling the gentry from place to place as the festivities of the Carnival commenced. From his small flat, Jefferson could observe them like toy boats floating in the sea, packed tight in places and bobbing solo at others - the most perfect, disorganized kind of madness unfolding. It was the madness of life.

A young man was shouting from the pavement, waving down at a gondola with two people on it. The gentleman wore a black mask, the nose vicious and crow-like, and the lady made a beautiful silhouette in gold.

So Gold had come to Venice, finally. That was interesting, his informants had put him in Sicily just the other week, but he'd recognize the cut and severity of Rumford's posture anywhere, and there would never be so grand a frock as to disguise the lithe figure of Miss French. Mrs. Gold, Lady Sonnachdubh, by now, Jefferson presumed. And that could only mean the young gentleman was the Right Honorable Baelfire Gold.

"Congratulations, lovey," Jefferson grinned, turning to gaze at his wife. "We can come out of hiding. I think the old Beast found something more distracting than vengeance on the likes of me."

Alice was not well, would and could not be well again in this life, but she'd survived. Whatever came, they were together, and he'd care for her tenderly until the end of their days. He didn't mind; after what happened to little Grace, he'd learned that there was nothing a man couldn't do for his family.

"I'd like that," smiled Alice. Jefferson doubted that she'd comprehended his full meaning, but she'd recovered enough to be genuinely pleased. She rose to her feet and pressed a small kiss to his cheek.

Jefferson grinned. "Happy un-Birthday to me."

LXXXIX. White Hall, 1863

"They didn't have Christmas trees in Belgium," Baelfire blushed. "And they hadn't quite come into fashion growing up. This is the first one I've seen, so of course I couldn't know how to trim it properly."

"I'm only teasing," grinned Miss Swan. "No need to be so serious."

She was pretty - far, far too pretty for a girl of nineteen. Women Belle's age were pretty, girls their age were supposed to be 'delicate blossoms' or some such rot. Pretty was too familiar a word for a girl who'd only just come out.

"I'll be at Oxford in the spring," Bae bristled. "Aren't University blokes supposed to be serious?"

"If you say so," she chirped.

Her younger brother, the White Hall heir, tore through the room at full-speed, skidding to a halt to hug his sister, and then resuming his loud romp to places unknown.
"Careful, Henry!" Miss Swan called after him.

"Well, uh, children will be children," Bae remarked, lowering his voice a little. "You're lucky your little brother is at an age where he's sociable. My step-sister's just got to the age where she thinks everything is a present for her."

"Knowing your father, everything really might be."

"Well, uh... your father-"

"Lord Nolan's not my father," corrected Miss Swan.

"Well, Lord Nolan's quite the reputable chap as well. He put together the plans we used to update Sonnachdubh after less than a year on the property."

"He's clever," she agreed, "and kind. But that's not the same as spoiling me and Henry."

"I would," blushed Bae, completely out of his depth. "Spoil you, I mean."

**XC. Sonnachdubh, 1869**

"Happy New Year, Mr. Gold," grinned Belle, nibbling her lover's lower lip.

"Happy New Year, Mrs. Gold," he rumbled back, running his hands over the back of her bodice.

They raised a toast to the new Viscount Sonnachdubh, freshly-made at the stroke of midnight.

"Papa, really," groaned Baelfire, hiding his face in his hands.

Belle couldn't help but chuckle at the boy; he was an excellent man, doted on his little sister (though Rose had been put to bed), and spoke six languages now. She and Rum did their best not to embarrass him with their lapses in propriety, but he always got so serious around little Emma Swan. Well, she wasn't so little, Belle supposed; the Nolans - Lord and Lady Spencer, and Regents of White Hall for a bit longer yet - had seen to it that she grew into an accomplished, if somewhat unconventional adult.

Henry, at least, seemed oblivious to the flirtations of his sister. It was his first New Year (well, the first time he'd been permitted to stay awake for the champagne) and he looked about ready to fall asleep on the settee.

Good for Emma. Well done. They shared their secret look across the room, a defiant, happy look that ran bone deep, and then buried the memories of screams in the night. It would never do to dwell, and time and distance had helped.

Miss Swan would make a good match for Bae, Belle decided, leaning into her husband's embrace. He was, after all, his father's son. He'd understand, when Emma told him what happened, and Belle very much doubted that the truth would do anything to slake his enthusiasm.

"He's smitten," Rum whispered against the shell of her ear. "I only worry that Miss Swan will prove too adventurous for him."

"Is an adventurous wife such a burden, Sir?" Belle asked him.

He made his answer in kisses, a supplication and seduction that set Baelfire's already flushed face aflame.
Fin.

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