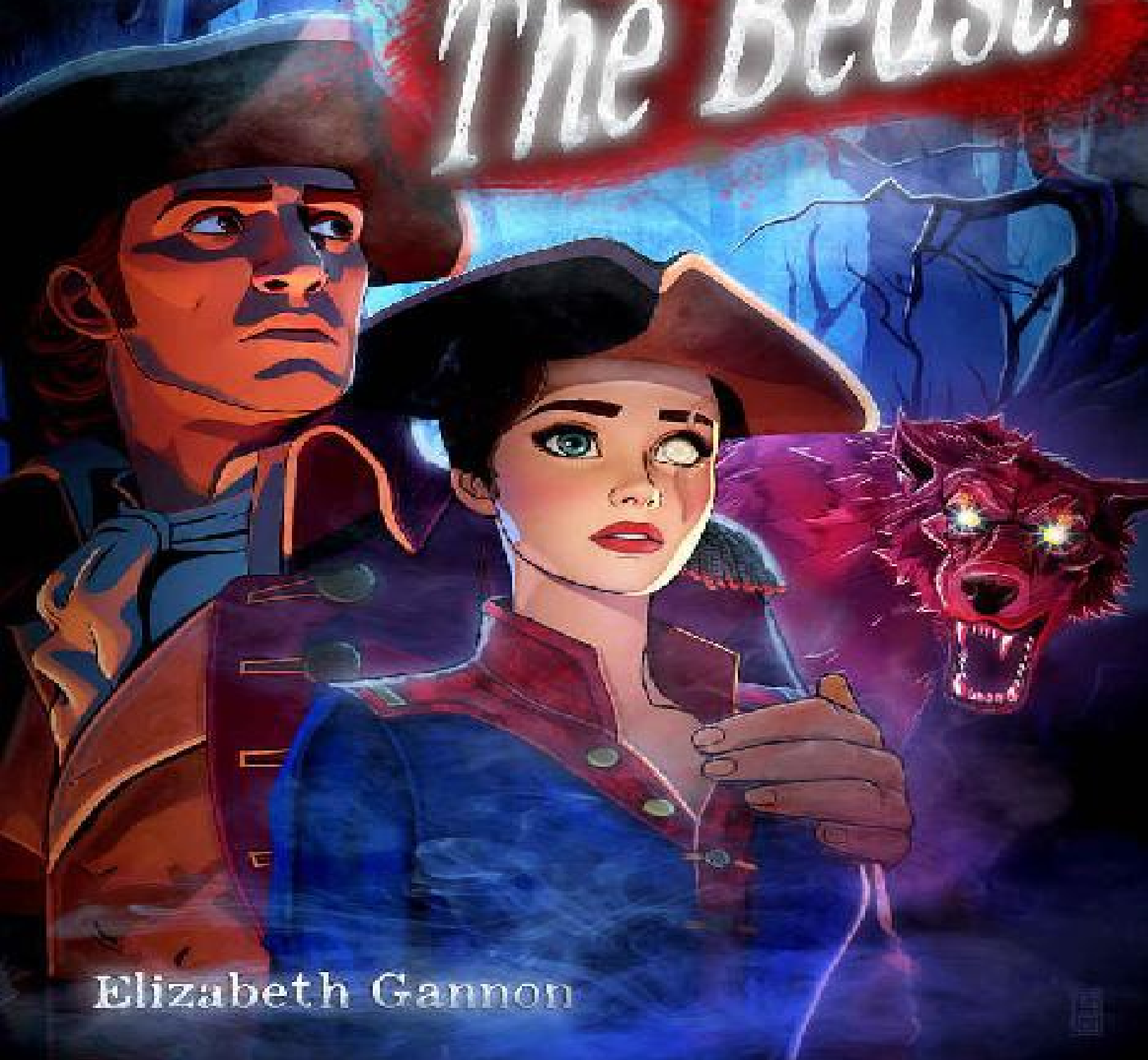


FRIGHTFUL LOVES

Love vs The Beast!



Elizabeth Gannon



-- Frightful Loves--

Love Vs
The Beast!

Elizabeth Gannon



An
Elizabeth Gannon
Book

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It knows why.

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Author's Note

This book is deliberately historically inaccurate about many things (for instance, in my universe unless stated otherwise, all standards of hygiene are the modern standard of hygiene, because otherwise it's gross.) While I have tried to keep the story as authentic as practicable to the period as the plot and my own personal morality allows, ultimately, this is a romance novel set in a horror kind of world inspired by 1990s horror paperbacks. Few readers buy a book like that hoping for an entirely realistic portrayal of actual historical interactions between men and women of the time, a multifaceted portrait of the complex (and horrifying) social and racial forces at play in the American Colonies in the 18th century, or for a calm and serious take on the American Revolution itself. I believe that you buy a book like that because you want something set in the time period that's fun, with sex and romance and blood and monsters.

Generally in my writing, when the fun conflicts with historical accuracy, I side with fun. My apologies if such anachronisms upset anyone.

- E.G.

“Love will find its way through paths where wolves would fear to prey.”

Lord Byron, *The Giaour* (1813)

Prologue

“I will send wild beasts against you to rob you of your children, destroy your livestock, and reduce your numbers, until your roads lie desolate.”

- *Leviticus 26:22*

Tarasque Creek, Nevermore County

1779

“Isaac, you are a beast!” She scolded playfully. “I told you I can’t right now!”

“No one is around,” Isaac assured her, his boyish eyes twinkling at the thought of the mischief he was planning, “no one will know.”

Hannah Vanbutchell rolled her eyes and continued arranging the flowers on her dresser. “*I shall know, Isaac!*” She whispered sharply, trying to drive home her certainty on this issue. “My parents have forbidden it, you know this!” She glanced around, half expecting them to suddenly pop out from under the bed. “If we get caught...”

“We won’t get caught.” Isaac Mardén made a face at the absurdity of the very idea. “Besides, they were young once, they will understand.” He insisted, leaning further through her window. “It is not like we would be going a great distance, just to your fields.”

Hannah made a humoring sound, making a show of looking busy, trying to drive him away with the boredom of her chores. Isaac avoided real work whenever possible, and she’d long ago found that having a pile of housework in front of her chased him away faster than a cat did mice. “You said that *last week* and my father has now forbidden me from leaving the house for a *fortnight* as a result.”

“Ten minutes.” Isaac insisted, holding up his hands to indicate the number. “Ten minutes and then I shall not trouble you again. I swear it.”

He bobbed his head, causing his mop of golden-brown hair to fall down over his forehead. He quickly reached up to secure the rebellious strands under his hat again.

Hannah did not believe that. Isaac had been “bothering her” since they were both nine, and he showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. In fact, as he matured, his methods had only become *more* complicated and devious.

And shamefully exciting for her, obviously.

“Five.” She countered, skin warming at the thought of being alone with him, even for such a short period of time. There were so very few opportunities. “I shall give you five minutes, but then I *must* return back here.” She pointed at the door to her room. “If they were to discover that I have gone, even for the shortest of breaths, I will be forbidden from attending the All Hallow’s Eve Harvest Festival, and I simply *must* attend!”

To Hannah, that was a matter of life and death. It was the absolute highlight of the entire county’s social scene and people from all over Nevermore County were supposed to attend. If she missed it, her life would be *over*.

He immediately nodded, making a small cross on his chest with his index finger. “Cross my heart.” He assured her, looking overjoyed at winning the argument.

Hannah knew better than this, obviously. But... but there was something about Isaac. He made her feel so alive and mature! And sometimes, Hannah enjoyed breaking her parents’ rules. Not all the time, naturally, but every now and then.

She grabbed her shawl and bonnet, checked the door to her bedroom one last time, then went to him. He ushered her out of her room with a sweep of a hand, and they were soon both scaling down the tree which grew too close to her window. When they finally hit the ground, Isaac took her hand again and led her across the yard, keeping clear of any of the windows which faced that direction. Her house was situated in such a way that she could reach the east field without any of her family’s neighbors seeing it, because their house backed up onto the forest, about a half mile away.

Which meant... there would soon be a good distance between Hannah and Isaac, and anyone who could possibly stop them from doing whatever they wanted to do.

The idea was exciting and dangerous. If they were caught, Hannah's reputation would be *ruined*. Hannah's father would be *furious*. Of course, if worse came to worse, he would simply demand that Isaac marry her immediately. Which wouldn't be the worst thing in the world for her, when she thought about it. After all, she had been planning her wedding to the boy since the day after they first met.

Hannah was a simple girl, and that was her one wish in life.

They made it to the edge of the fields, the grain tall and almost ready to be harvested. Most of the rest of the colony had harvested already, but Tarasque Creek had always had a long season and shorter, intense winters. At the moment, the crop reached just under her chin, and as far as she could see was a rolling landscape of it, gleaming in the midday sun.

She looked back over her shoulder one last time, then allowed herself to be pulled into the grain. The spot he'd picked out was quiet and snug, nestled amongst the stalks. She sat down on the cool ground, looking up at the sky and admiring the clouds. The rich golden color of the grain around her framed the brightest blue sky she'd ever seen, and brilliant white clouds.

It was a magical day, and it would be one she would remember for the rest of her life, she could feel it.

Her heart began to beat faster in her chest, imagining what plans Isaac had for this meeting. And more importantly... whether she'd permit him to carry them out.

She bit her lip nervously, enjoying the sense of danger, the fear of the looming unknown, and the possibility of forbidden romance.

Her hands were trembling at the thrill.

Isaac sank down beside her, kissing the back of her hand. "Are you comfortable?" He asked, adjusting her shawl for her, which was wrapped around her shoulders.

"Yes, quite, thank you." She nodded her head, trying to keep her

voice steady despite the fact he was touching her.

He reached into his pocket and removed a small bottle of Nevermore County's best apricot brandy, and took a sip. He offered the bottle to her.

"No, thank you." She shook her head. Then she thought better of it, and quickly took a small sip. The liquid was terribly strong and tasted like sweet fire. She made a face, gasping. Then quickly took another sip, silently praying that her parents didn't smell it on her breath. When she was done, she handed him back the bottle. "Well... I suppose it is a *little* warm." She announced, guessing what he wanted. She shrugged off the shawl, revealing more of her neckline.

He nodded, looking relieved. But also now slightly nervous. He must have been having the same kinds of thoughts she was. "I... I thought so, yes." He agreed, eyes straying down to her exposed collarbone. "I think only of your comfort, Hannah, always." He assured her, looking up to meet her eyes again. "You are... my *only* concern, in all things."

Hannah felt faint now, letting out a soft breath, trying to stop the pounding in her chest. "Isaac, I..." She began.

Isaac stood up, looking even more nervous now. He ran a hand through his hair, trying to tame several more rebellious locks which had somehow come free. "Long have I considered this matter, Hannah." He announced, pacing back and forth several steps. He cleared his throat, standing straighter. He met her eyes, a serious look on his gorgeous face, for once. "I... I would like to ask your father for your hand *this* winter, not next, as we..."

Isaac didn't finish the sentence. Instead, it was like something smashed into him. A shadow as large as a horse, moving so quickly from the forest that Hannah barely saw it.

One moment Isaac was there, the next... he was gone.

"Isaac?" She blinked at the spot where he'd been, feeling like he had to still be there and that she simply wasn't seeing him for some reason. "Isaac?" She called again in confusion, standing up to look for him in the grain. "Isaac, are you there?" His disappearance brought the stirring of fear in her breast... "This... *this isn't funny, Isaac!*"

A moment later, she heard a muffled, gurgling scream.

Then a growl.

Then a crunching sound, which could only be bone.

Then silence.

Twenty paces to her right, she watched the grain move, like a struggle was taking place there.

The stalks in that area were now stained the brightest red Hannah had ever seen...

Absolute terror took over her mind, and she immediately turned to start running back towards her house.

She simply ran.

She pushed the tall grain out of the way, trying to look back over her shoulder towards the forest without falling. Unfortunately the height of the crops made it impossible to see whatever had taken Isaac, it was concealed by the ocean of stalks. But she could see the grain moving behind her as whatever it was displaced it, swaying like ripples in the water, indicating the movement of her unseen pursuer. And its large size.

It was chasing her now.

She let out a scream, trying to keep her clothes from snagging and her shoes from sinking into the soft earth beneath her. Every step felt like her boots were filled with lead, and her muscles started to ache.

She could see her house now, it wasn't that far. Her heart leapt from her chest, recognizing that she would be safe there. How many long years she'd dreamed of being away from it and on her own... but now, all she wanted was to run through the door and hide. Call for her father to protect her, and *never* go outside again as long as she lived.

Hannah reached the edge of her yard, sprinting from the fields and towards her house. "*FATHER!!!*" She screamed, her throat feeling raw. She charged up to the back door, her hand closing on the knob. "*FATHER, IT'S A BEAS...*"

She never got to finish her warning.

Something sharp and powerful snapped shut on the back of her head, making her vision go cloudy and her muscles unresponsive. She desperately tried to hold onto the knob and prevent herself from being pulled away... but she couldn't get her fingers to close tightly enough, for some reason. It was like the pain in her head caused them to stop working. Her grasping fingers simply played off the surface of the knob, like raw dough.

A second later, she was being roughly dragged back across her yard, further and further away from her childhood home and the safety it provided.

She tried one final time to scream... but all she managed was a small, choking gasp...

And then she was pulled into the field again, her boots trailing behind her and leaving indentations in the soil. Then her vision faded to black, surrounded by the golden grain, which was dripping with a reddish liquid now, for some reason...

Only her ears seemed to still be working correctly, and all she could hear was the deafening sound of a very large creature breathing directly into her tear-stained face...

She made a soft, whimpering cry...

The animal lunged...

Then her face-- and Hannah herself-- were gone entirely...

Chapter One

One Year Later

Tarasque Creek, Nevermore County

1780

Gideon imagined that men would react in different ways upon being told that the military force they served would be switching sides in the war, that they were to be relieved of their command, and that they were to be sent to the middle of nowhere, to hunt down and kill a man-eating demon.

Some might object to the order. Some might feel terror at the thought of the monster. Some might pray.

But for Captain Gideon Wlkwo, this mission, like so many others in his life, immediately made him think of weaponry.

He was to fight a bloodthirsty monster which had already eaten over a hundred souls. Those were his orders.

Which probably meant... teeth. Claws. Firing from a distance, and then close quarters combat. Engagement in trees or on uneven ground. Against a powerful foe.

Thus, in addition to his musket and pistols, he unslung his back-up weapon from its place on his saddle. Most officers on both sides of this war carried a sword, but Gideon had always preferred the traditional Témhosrew club of his people. It was more versatile. Halfway between a short spear and a mace, the weapon consisted of a strong wooden pole with an iron cap and spike on the end, and running down one side was an embedded blade.

In bygone eras, it had been developed in his homeland to bash and eliminate men in full armor plate, and the point could stop a cavalry charge in its track. Hopefully on this more modern battlefield, the club could aid in the slaying of monsters.

He held it in one hand, like a walking stick. The engraved

medallions running down the wooden shaft were a testament to the many battles and wars he'd been a part of.

Gideon only carried it when he expected there to be a fight to the death, hand-to-hand. It was a weapon of brutal last resort.

Sergeant Dákkru saw the club make its appearance, and knew what it meant, but said nothing. The other man simply continued checking his supplies, ensuring that his musket was in working order and that his knife was on his belt.

"I take no chances, Dákkru." Gideon reminded him simply, tucking one of his pistols back into its holster at the small of his back. The other pistol soon followed, once it too was determined to be clean and ready to fire.

The sergeant nodded. "Didn't say anything. Never in my life have I regretted being *too* armed for a fight, no matter who it was against." He didn't bother to straighten his uniform. Ordinarily, Gideon would immediately correct any soldier who allowed himself to look so unkempt, but he'd long ago learned to give the man some slack on issues such as these. He'd earned it. "A word of warning though: I doubt the men in this town will like you, sir." He broke the news to Gideon as if he somehow could have missed that point.

"You ever meet any who did?" Gideon slung his musket over his shoulder, ready to go to war. Again.

"No, sir." Dákkru grinned. "But some of us make do, regardless."

It was meant as a good-natured jest.

But Gideon was not good-natured.

He had no sense of humor. About anything, least of all himself. Frivolity was a waste of time and sense.

He simply stared at his underling with cold judgmental authority.

The man recognized that he'd overstepped and remembered who he was speaking to. He straightened. "Sir."

Private Brophy appeared a moment later, looking characteristically nervous. He'd only just met the lad a moment ago, as Brophy was part of the Colonial Army itself and not Gideon's auxiliary regiment, but he could

already tell the boy spent much of the day panicked. Gideon had ordered him to be fully outfitted, just to test the man on how quickly he could be ready for battle, but it seemed his definition of fully kitted for war was sadly lacking. The boy didn't even have his pack.

Unacceptable.

Had Gideon been given more than half a dozen soldiers for his mission here, he surely would have had this one brutally flogged as a lesson for the others.

Beside him, his regiment's dog was chasing a squirrel and had decided that the easiest way to catch the animal now that it had escaped into a tree, was to simply fell the tree by gnawing through the trunk. The huge animal set about doing just that, its massive teeth scraping the bark away in sheets. It watched as Brophy approached, wagging its tail, obviously hopeful that Brophy was there to add his own teeth to the endeavor and quicken the effort.

"Dog that big, someone in this town is liable to take a shot at him, sir." Brophy warned. "They'll think it's The Beast."

"Wouldn't be the first time someone has shot at it." Gideon was still preoccupied with the man's shoddy soldiering to pay much attention to anything else. "We all have a job to do, man and dog alike, and it shall get done, regardless of dangers." He absently gestured to the animal. "That's a *Segheyki Hound*. He's a war dog. His ancestors fought the Romans. And the Mongols. They are not the brightest animals, but they follow orders and they can humble *anything*. Short of a direct hit from a mortar bomb, I place my faith in the dog."

"Well, the Beast has killed all the other dogs in town." Brophy relayed, looking up and down the street, planning to start his tour. "Best be careful."

"I assure you, the animal will be fine. Things in life, Brophy, they do not always appear to be what they are." He motioned with his hand, directing the dog back into the garrison's office to wait for them. "Some qualities are hidden, for good or ill. That animal is such a case."

It reluctantly left its tree, pausing to pick up a large stone which was

its favorite toy, and then ambled off back into the building to plot its everlasting revenge against the hateful flora and fauna of this county.

“What’s his name?” Brophy asked.

Gideon made a dismissive hand gesture. “It’s the *regiment’s* dog, who even knows?” He rolled his eyes. “Focus on *your* duties and let the dog focus on his, yes?”

“Right, I... I guess we’ll start with the east side of town, sir?” Brophy decided, rubbing his hands together to warm them in the chilly fall weather. “The whole village is surrounded by the woods beyond the fields, so it makes little difference, but that’s where the attacks first started. Down the road to the east.”

“I could not possibly care less where you begin, Private.” He told the young man truthfully. “I simply need to know everything I can about this village, if I am to defend it against the demonic hoards reportedly rising from your otherwise tranquil woodlands.” Gideon tried to refrain from rolling his eyes again. “I can...”

His words were cut off by the screeching of a hardanger fiddle playing *Fanitullen*. The sympathetic strings mounted under the main ones on the instrument made each note last an abnormally long time and added a wailing discordance to the irritating tune.

Gideon winced, as the tune got louder and was now accompanied by a woman singing.

Brophy let out a sigh, hurrying down the street towards the sound. A short distance away, a young woman wearing a black dress was playing the nightmarish instrument, performing for an audience of exactly no one.

She didn’t appear to notice that she’d driven the world away with her pointless noise.

At first Gideon had assumed that she was an elderly woman, since her hair was pure white, but as he got closer he could see that she looked barely out of her teens.

“Miss, how many times have I told you that you can’t be out here alone?” Brophy called to the girl, his voice sounding nervous for some

reason.

Dákkru looked at the young woman for a beat, then snorted at Brophy. “You have *no chance*, Private.” He judged, believing the girl’s beauty put her beyond the other man’s romantic grasp. “Might as well reach for the moon.”

Brophy ignored that. “You need to hurry along now, sweetheart, before the monster eats you up.”

The girl looked up at them as they approached, her mint-colored eyes wide as the sky and twice as vacant. “Oh! Good evening, Sergeant!” She called in a sing-song way, her words still hitting the note her tune had left off on.

It wasn’t even afternoon yet.

Nor was Brophy a sergeant.

The girl then spotted Gideon and visibly flinched, taking a step back in fright. She let out a soft, “Oh!” sound of shock.

His reputation had preceded him, it seemed.

Good.

Never had Gideon been happier to be one of the true beasts of this world.

“This... this is the new Captain.” Brophy quickly explained. “He’s here to help, don’t worry.”

“I... I just wanted to play.” The young woman all but whispered, weakly holding up her fiddle, as if in a plea for Gideon not to immediately execute her. While he had not yet arrived at a determination on that course of action one way or the other, her whining appeal would not influence his decision. “No one can hear me inside.”

“What an absolute tragedy that would be.” Gideon deadpanned.

Dákkru snorted. “Christ, sir, it’s like watching you kick a puppy.” He said softly, still eyeing the angelic girl.

“Just go back inside, everything will be okay.” Brophy assured her, motioning with his hand towards one of the houses. Apparently it was a

genuine question as to whether or not the girl would be able to recognize her own dwelling.

Fucking Colonials.

Gideon had no use for rustics and fools. A pox on them all.

The girl nodded and backed away from Gideon, still looking terrified of him. She got several steps away, then ran for her front door. Then right *into* her front door when the door latch failed to open, smashing her face into the wood hard enough to produce a reverberating “thud” sound.

Dákkru and Brophy winced in unison, no doubt anticipating the girl’s perfect features becoming marred by her own stupidity.

Gideon didn’t even blink. Her wounds were none of his concern and were justly earned by her own foolishness.

The white-haired girl staggered backwards from the force of the collision, in genuine danger of toppling unconscious down onto the cobblestones. She somehow regained her balance, then tried the door again, yet it remained resolutely secured.

Finally, she resorted to knocking. “Mrs. Gansevoort?” She shouted in a child’s petulant whine, knocking more frantically. “*It happened again!*”

They silently watched the white-haired woman’s doomed pitiful struggles to open the door for a moment. Then Brophy cleared his throat and started walking away again, returning to the tour. “She is the single handsomest girl you shall see in all of Nevermore County, I do say, and I expect no argument on the matter.” He told Gideon, obviously smitten with the foolish girl. “She is an absolute *angel*.”

Dákkru nodded, having no objection to that assessment.

This type of conversation was lost on Gideon. Sometimes, it seemed, the sight of an attractive woman made a man’s mind run away faster than he could chase it. Personally, Gideon had already forgotten what the girl even looked like. “I have no use for angels.” He scoffed. “I shoot men for a living and cannot stand moralizing about it. Give me a demoness spat from hell itself, at least *she* would have some utility.”

The sound of the girl’s small fists desperately hitting the front door

could still be heard as they rounded the next corner. Brophy cleared his throat again. “She’s just... always a bit addlebrained...”

Gideon nodded in agreement, disinterestedly observing his surroundings. “She does seem like an idiot, yes.” He glanced towards Brophy. “Is the *entirety* of Tarasque Creek’s population that simple and pointless?”

In every shadow of this forgotten hamlet lurked a hellish conspiracy of blandness.

It was sickening.

Brophy started walking faster, apparently in an effort to prove himself a go-getter. His boots were messy and unkempt though, indicating a severe lack of discipline. They were unacceptable and would be noted on Gideon’s report. “They... they pronounce it ‘crick,’ sir.” Brophy corrected softly, obviously justifiably concerned about Gideon’s anger erupting.

Gideon looked up at the heavens, hating this place more than ever. He was beginning to understand The Beast’s desire to gruesomely maul everyone here. Gideon had been in this village less than an afternoon and the wholesale slaughter of its citizenry was quickly becoming his one true dream as well. “*Why the Devil* would they pronounce ‘creek’ that way? That is not even close to how it is spelled!”

“I have no idea, sir.” Brophy admitted.

“Because they are peasants.” An older man announced, appearing from a doorway to their right. “Ungodly peasants who are being punished by the Lord.”

“Reverend Patterson.” Brophy nodded his head in greeting. “This is the new Captain, here to help us.”

“They’ve sent us one of their Krewhian captains?” The Reverend looked Gideon up and down, his face awash in disgust. “How *remarkable*. I can think of no other way they could have so succinctly expressed our worth to them.”

The man’s tone managed to convey a complete disregard of Gideon as a soldier and a human being. It somehow delivered the message that to

Reverend Patterson, Gideon was a stupid mindless savage from some far-off, uncivilized land across the sea, and that he had no business being here.

Gideon was from Segheyk, the State of Kréwh-Hner to be exact. A fairly unimportant region of the map, and the men who inhabited the eastern reaches of the country-- his homeland-- had a reputation for being savages, living in caves and slaughtering each other over nothing.

This wasn't true. Those were lies, told by their enemies.

Traditionally, his people actually lived in *huts*. They only used the caves to store victims and spare weapons.

In any case, there were few employment opportunities available to the men of the Kréwh-Hner region. What they did have though, was a fighting spirit unmatched and a courage which some said bordered on madness. This made them a great professional fighting force, and one without natural foes of their own. His countrymen's soldiers were thus often bargained for by other nations, employing them as an auxiliary army. Gideon had joined up in his youth, having nothing whatsoever else to do and no other prospects of which to speak.

Gideon excelled in his profession, serving honorably in a number of conflicts he didn't pretend to understand. He wasn't paid to. He served in his army, which worked for a *different* army, which fought for reasons that didn't matter to him.

And now, he was here. The latest in a long series of wars, an ocean away from his previous, a lifetime away from his first, and a musket ball away from his last.

In his travels around the world, Gideon ran into lots of men like Patterson, however. The man's attitude was not a surprise. Or a problem. Just an annoyance.

In Gideon's opinion, if you were going to be aggressive with someone, be *overtly* aggressive. Passive-aggression was for cowards, and cowards were pointless.

"You believe the Lord sent a man-eating wolf to this town to punish them for not pronouncing the letter 'e.'" Gideon summarized in his usual haughty deadpan, meeting the man's glare dead-on. "My superiors were

apparently right in their assessment of your worth.” He drew himself up to his full height, towering over the other man. “I am *just* what you deserve.”

“It’s not a wolf.” Brophy corrected, missing the underlying conflict at the heart of this discussion. “No wolf could do this.”

“It is a demon!” Patterson agreed, his voice filled with religious certainty.

“So I’ve heard.” Gideon rolled his eyes. “Repeatedly.”

“Reverend Patterson also runs our newspaper, which has been following this nightmare from the beginning.” Brophy bragged. “There’s no one in town who knows more about the demon.”

“It is sent to punish us for our wickedness.” Patterson insisted, ignoring Gideon.

“What ‘wickedness’ have you committed which would justify the brutal killings of one hundred and thirty-five men, women, and children, Reverend?” Gideon wondered aloud. “Perhaps if you shared this dark secret, it would relieve us of this curse.”

The Reverend’s face grew red with anger. “I know who you are, ‘Captain.’” He sneered out. “You may have this fool in your thrall,” he gestured at Brophy, “but I see through you. You and the rest of your packet rat trash!”

Gideon glanced over at Dákkru, ignoring the *bizarre* insistence that Gideon’s people were in any way dedicated to the Navy or shipping. It was an irritating and seemingly random stereotype which had no basis in reality, and existed entirely in overwrought theatrical productions shat out by a man who bathed in laudanum like Poseidon in his seas. “I possess a ‘thrall’ now.” Gideon informed his underling with no small amount of feigned pride. “This is news to be celebrated, as I previously judged myself as possessing mere ‘sway’ or perhaps ‘sinister command.’”

Patterson ignored that, his eyes still burning into Gideon’s. “I’ve heard of you. Even out here, I hear whispers of the most bloodthirsty officer in that mercenary band of paid savages.”

“‘*Auxiliary* band of paid savages.’” Gideon corrected calmly.

“They say you’re a *monster*.” The Reverend nodded, sure of himself. “They say that you never took a prisoner on the battlefield.” He shook his head in contempt. “They call you ‘The Grave Digger.’”

“That’s a misnomer.” Gideon took a step towards the man. “I *don’t* dig graves. I leave my foes as they lie, to rot.”

“At St. Sylvester, you unleashed your *murderers* on over one hundred men who were trying to surrender. Cut them down in cold blood, after they threw aside their weapons.” Patterson spat out. “Good Christian men, fighting for freedom.”

“If they were surrendering, they employed a rather peculiar methodology.” Gideon took on a thoughtful tone. “You’d think that with the number of times men from this county seem to surrender, they’d be better at it by now.”

Dákkru snorted in amusement.

“Soldiers on both sides refer to it as ‘Wlkwos’ Quarter’ when prisoners of war are deliberately executed like dogs.” Patterson continued.

Gideon took on a serious tone. “To ease your troubled mind, Reverend, I can assure you, on my word of honor as an officer... I have *never* shot a dog.”

The Reverend’s eyes narrowed in fury and he opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, another man arrived on the scene.

“What’s going on here? Why is there yelling?” The portly fellow demanded. He looked Gideon up and down. “Are we to be beset by the damnable *Krewhians* now? As if we didn’t have more troubles than we know what to do with, without bringing in *those* mercenary pirate butchers.”

“‘*Auxiliary*.’” Gideon grumbled to himself in an irritated mutter. “‘*Auxiliary* pirate butchers.’”

On average, the American colonists had no idea where Segheyk even was, and since most of the soldiers in that auxiliary force were from the State of Kréwh-Hner, they’d simply taken to calling them all “Krewhian.”

Brophy gestured to him. “This is the new Captain, Magistrate Duhamel.”

Gideon inclined his head to the man in formal greeting. “Captain Gideon Wlkwos, Her Majesty’s 1st Grenadier Guard of Segheyk, here under service to the American Colonies in your rebellion.” He informed the Magistrate. “I have been told you have a problem with an animal. So perhaps you should be happy that my commanders have sent in a ‘*butcher*,’ yes?”

The man laughed good-naturedly, his whole round body shaking. “Yes, indeed!” He clapped his hand into Gideon’s, in the style of the Colonists. It showed an audacious cheek and unreciprocated familiarity which annoyed Gideon, but he rose above the impertinence. “Indeed, sir! If anyone was ever in need of your kind’s brand of gruesome work, it is *us*, as sure as the Lord made little green apples. Glad to have you on dry land, lad, for once. I understand that it’s against your pagan ways to be more than a night’s journey from the sea.”

Gideon *hated* that fucking play.

Years previous, Sebastian Sinclair, 5th Earl of Kestlefordshire, had written a play and sheet music for something called “*Oath of the Tattered Flag or A Sailor’s Courage O’er the Storm*.” The very popular story featured a theatrical and *highly* fictionalized interpretation of Gideon’s homeland.

The play, in Gideon’s esteemed opinion, was unquestionably the single worst thing mankind had ever vomited forth into God’s perfect world. Sinclair and all those treacherous souls who gave him aid and comfort, deserved only a slow and agonizing death.

The man paid no attention to Gideon’s scowl at the mention of the play, and bowed in formal greeting. “François Duhamel, I’m the Magistrate of Tarasque Creek.”

Sure enough, the man pronounced it “Crick.”

It was a small annoyance, tossed onto the already imposing pile of things which Gideon disliked about this town and colony. But it grew more and more irritating each time he heard it. Soon, the dike would burst and Gideon would let loose his fury on these people and their heaping multitude of staggering idiocy.

But today was not that day.

...Probably.

“What can you tell me about your community, Magistrate?” Gideon returned to his tour, walking alongside his newfound guides. “If I am to find and slay this ‘beast,’ I need to understand the village it seems intent upon destroying.”

“There is not much to tell, Captain.” The Magistrate shrugged, his thick neck and drooping chin momentarily forming a straight line with his narrow shoulders. “We’re a quiet hamlet, keep to ourselves. A haven for people from all places: English, French, Germanic, African, Dutch,” he surreptitiously looked Gideon up and down, his tone taking on a critical edge of reserved distaste, “...the savage races.” He cleared his throat. “Nothing much has happened here before.”

“I can see that.” Gideon stepped over a puddle in the street, ensuring that its foulness didn’t get on his otherwise spotlessly shined boots. He had a silent debate whether this puddle of urine in the road was the product of the cattle or the damned stupid residents. “Have you had animal problems before?”

“No, sir.” Duhamel shook his head. “Well, we are a bit out in the wilds here, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. So there are the occasional sightings or attack, but nothing like this. This is a very peaceful place.” He paused, looking down at the ground for a moment. “Or *was*, anyway.” He cleared his throat. “Have you spoken with Burgermeister Portefaix yet, Captain?”

Gideon shook his head. “We have only just arrived and are still surveying our field of battle, as it were.”

“Well, I know he’ll want to speak with you as soon as you are finished.” The Magistrate bobbed his head, obviously excited over the prospect of a resolution to these attacks and of getting Gideon out of town as swiftly as possible. “He’ll want to make certain that you and he are able to work together, without any difficulties arising. He will...”

Gideon simply stalked across the street, cutting him off. He didn’t care what the Magistrate of this town felt the *Burgermeister* of this town might theoretically want from Gideon. In Gideon’s experience, if a man wasn’t willing to appear before you and make an ask in person, then you

probably wouldn't agree to his demand anyway.

Instead, he simply followed the increasingly loud sounds of a crowd. Since he'd arrived in this vile place, he'd yet to find any villagers who weren't cowering in fear inside their homes or playing outlandishly horrid instruments. But now, he was hearing a few dozen people off to his right, shouting about something.

He rounded the corner and arrived in what must have been the market square of Tarasque Creek, which was positively *infested* with grotesquely carved gourds, lit from within by candles, apparently as decorations for a harvest festival.

Such a strange and pointless village this was.

Rough open-air booths were arranged around a central courtyard, which was fitted with a pillory for prisoners, as well as a small platform for livestock auctions. Behind the platform were assorted pens and stables for animals, and shops and tables for associated businesses to hawk their wares.

It was generic and filthy, which made it entirely in keeping with the manner and appearance of the rest of this village, colony, and prospective country.

On the platform was a man dressed in shabby but respectable brown and green clothes, standing next to a tall, almost gangly woman. She was wearing a wide leather collar around her neck, which was attached to a rope clutched in the man's hand. The collar was one you would normally use for cows or other livestock, and it looked out of place and disgusting attached to a human being.

Gideon's eyes narrowed and he angrily gestured to the proceedings. "What is this about?" He demanded of his guide as Brophy hurried to catch up with him. "*Out with it.*"

"Auction, sir." The Private panted, having had to run to keep up with him. "Only an auction."

Gideon rounded on him, eyes narrowing. "You mean to tell me that during this crisis, with over a *hundred* dead already, the villagers are holding a *slave auction*?"

He was going to pack up and leave. Now. These people *deserved* to be eaten. Rather than helping slavers, he'd be more likely to help *The Beast* destroy them.

“Ain't no slavery in Nevermore County, Captain.” Brophy shook his head. “Never has been. Not even indentured servants. Folks here won't stand for it.” Brophy leaned against one of the hitching posts. “No, that's a *wife* auction.”

Gideon frowned at him, like he was speaking another language. “A what?”

“That gentleman there.” Brophy pointed at the man in brown and green. “He's puttin' his wife up on the block and leavin' town, on account of The Beast.” He paused for a beat. “And her being a cruel and inconsiderate harpy.” He pursed his lips in thought. “They say she communes with the Dark One and is seen dancing naked in the forest at night.” He shook his head, obviously having given considerable thought to the woman's nude cavorting. “I see no wings, but they say she flies about at midnight. That's why she's so crazed during the day, talking all...”

“So, a man can simply *sell* his wife here?” Gideon pressed before Brophy could finish, more amazed by this news than by the woman's supposed magic powers. “*That* is the kind of civilization you've developed? That's more of the 'freedom' which I am now supposedly fighting to defend?”

Fucking Colonials.

“He doesn't want to be responsible for her and if he leaves now still married to her, he'd still have to pay any debts she incurred.” Brophy explained, sounding confused as to why Gideon would object to something he seemed to view as entirely commonplace and easy to understand. “He don't want to be with her no more on account of his leaving Nevermore County, and her being a witch...”

“A *what*?” Gideon held out his arms helplessly, hoping this was some kind of joke. “*Witches* now? I recognize that you people are into harvest festivals and carving ghoulies into vegetables for some damned reason, but do you insist upon imagining *every* fairytale creature in your

midst to celebrate All Hollows Eve?”

“This... this is *Nevermore County*, sir.” Brophy reminded him in an almost confused way, like it was so obvious and answered the question so completely that Gideon was a fool for even asking it. Then the Private continued on with his original thought. “He can’t abandon her as it would be illegal, can’t remarry, and can’t kill her either. Church won’t help settle things none, but that legal connection still needs to be severed somehow.” Brophy shrugged. “So, an auction.”

“You seriously mean to tell me that this man is auctioning off his wife from the block?” Gideon asked again, still not believing this. He pointed at the collar. “Like cattle? Just... whoever bids the highest, wins her body and soul?”

“Aye, sir. That’s the custom.” Brophy nodded again. “Carried it over from the old world, they did. The Church don’t like it none, but it’s the only way to do these kinds of things way out here. Only option.” He paused. “Or at least it is according to the citizens of *Nevermore County*, anyway. But folks here are,” he paused, searching for the right word, “... peculiar.”

Gideon turned to pin Magistrate Duhamel with a glare. “And you *allow* this?” He demanded, his anger on the verge of snapping. “This... this *horror*?”

“A man’s wife is his property like any other.” The Magistrate defended, sitting down on a bench and dabbing at the sweat on his forehead, despite the October cold in the air. “If he can sell his cow or his farm, shouldn’t he be able to relieve himself of the burden of owning a wife in the same way?” He returned his damp handkerchief to his pocket, the fabric over it immediately darkening with spreading moisture. He looked entirely dismissive of Gideon’s objection to the auction. “No harm done, after all.”

“It’s the Devil’s mischief.” Reverend Patterson announced, walking up to stand with them. “The lower order of people believes it is their right. *They are depraved.*” He shook his head in contempt. “It is no wonder that the Devil’s fiend now besets us.” He watched the assembly for a moment, face growing more and more disgusted. “And that one?” He gestured to the woman on stage. “Worst of our flock. A feral girl, raised in the wild like a

mongrel dog. Her English and her French are *both* terrible, and her behavior is an affront to everything civilized and decent. Look at her! She's nothing but a grunting, slobbering *beast*." He spat the word. "The Private is right, the girl *is* a witch. And my grandfather had the right idea a century ago, when he helped organize Nevermore County's only successful *witch-burning*."

"I daresay that everyone in this colony is a witch or in league with some Devil or other according to you, Patterson." Gideon returned to watching the auction. "It's a wonder you have anyone to do business with on the Sabbath."

"Have you never been to Nevermore County before, Captain?" Brophy asked, voice almost pitying, like Gideon simply didn't understand where he was now.

"That's the longhunter's girl." Duhamel thought aloud as he looked up at the woman on the platform, still sounding out of breath from his walk of half a block. "I forget her name." He squinted in thought. "Don't remember his name either, come to think of it. He was a *Frenchman*, I remember that..." He obviously did not approve of that supposed ancestry, then finally shrugged, abandoning the effort to remember the name. "Kept to himself and only came into town for supplies when he was back from a hunt, which often lasted months at a time. He's been dead for..." He let out a long breath, silently counting the years and then giving up on the task. "Strange man. Called him 'The Mad Trapper of Nevermore County,' after the *Guerre de la Conquête*. Took an entire regiment to hunt him down and stop him, the damned maniac. Led them on a merry chase for six months through the wilds, but they never even got close. An avalanche finally did the poor sod in, as he was trying to march up the side of a thirteen thousand foot peak, as if going for a stroll in a fine gentleman's garden. He almost made it too. In the end, only his young girl made it over the summit and down the other side. She couldn't have been more than eight or ten at the time." He shook his head regretfully. "He really should have simply paid the damn tax, avoided the whole mess. But theirs was a difficult family. And race. The French are the only creatures worse than the Irish, except maybe the damnable Krew..." He trailed off, remembering he was speaking to Gideon and that launching into a tirade against Gideon's race probably wouldn't win him acclaim.

Gideon simply stared at him. At this point, he expected that the only help this man could provide him on his mission would be that The Beast would be so distracted eating Duhamel that it would leave itself open to Gideon's musket fire.

Duhamel cleared his throat, moving on. He pointed at the platform. "That was many years ago, obviously, but they say the girl spent too many months alone in the woods after his death, and is now incurably mad as well. Pity. Damnably affliction, that."

Dákkru squinted at the podium. "What the devil did she do to her hair?"

"Shaved it, apparently." Duhamel confirmed, eyeing the woman's close-cut head. "Shorn like a sheep."

"Why?" Dákkru sounded baffled.

"I told you, she's *mad*." Duhamel wiped at his forehead again, looking red-faced from the exertion of the sweating itself. "Looking for logic in her behavior is senseless."

"One time, she marched through the center of town leading a moose calf behind her, claiming they were in love." Brophy related, sounding enthusiastic about witnessing such a sight. "Damnedest thing I have ever seen."

"We generally endeavor to avoid the girl whenever possible," Duhamel continued, "unless she has fur or meat on offer. Otherwise, her presence invites only confusion and fear."

Brophy made an astonished sound. "Honestly... I'd be surprised if any of the men here will even bid on her. She makes an absolutely terrible wife. She's..." He obviously tried to think of a tactful way to describe the woman, "...a *handful*, Lord bless her."

Gideon returned his attention to this insane spectacle taking place in the village square. The woman in question simply stared at the ground, her head hung low, not even looking at the crowd.

Gideon had seen a lot of women in a lot of different places. He'd seen them in all variety of colors, sizes, and temperaments. The full scope of

womanhood over the years, their faces vague in his memory, parading through lands he barely recalled now.

But this one? This one, like the colony she called home, was... very, very strange. She was as tall as a man, but frailer. She wore a man's blue infantry jacket over a simple dress which appeared to be sewn together from scraps of *other* dresses, and had animal claws hanging from a necklace around her neck. Her hair was indeed shorn close to the scalp, for some reason, leaving behind only the barest hint of what must have been brown locks as they grew back in. A tricorne hat covered up more of her head, a bird skull and feathers affixed to the side in a rugged but jaunty style.

The girl's face was most distinctive, as it was marked by what appeared to be a large scar from an animal attack. A clawed line, stretching from her scalp, down her face, through her left eye-- leaving it milky white-- and then finally across her cheek to her jaw. The wound must have been a severe one and the damage it left was ghastly.

Gideon had never really been attracted to anyone on first sight. He'd never looked at a woman for the first time and instantly found himself hard. That simply wasn't how he was built, it seemed. He had only ever had what one might call a *secondary* sexual attraction. He could recognize beauty, but was not immediately excited by observable physical characteristics. He simply wasn't.

The appearance of things had little value to him, and physically, he needed to know a woman for a bit, before he became interested in companionship. Which made any kind of relationship difficult, as he was always on the move and spent very little time in any one place or in any one war.

This proclivity had been the subject of much gossip and whispers. But Gideon didn't care what anyone said about that. He would not debase himself to make others comfortable with his constitution.

So, standing in front of her... Gideon was not excited by the instantly available information about this woman. She was pretty, in an unconventional kind of way, he supposed. And she was distinctive, at least. If nothing else, he would *remember* this woman.

The people in the assembly continued crowding around and shouting, making all kinds of noise. He'd been told that there weren't many men left in town, which was one of the reasons why Gideon had been sent here, but there were certainly plenty of men in this square at the moment.

Cowards.

That was unacceptable. The lack of discipline it exhibited was nauseating, and would be noted in his report.

He started off across the square, preparing to put an end to this grotesquery. It wasn't from a desire to rescue this strange woman from the indignity of this ritual, obviously, as Gideon was not someone who cared about such things.

No, this was a matter of *civil decorum*.

As the newfound protector of Tarasque Creek, it was Gideon's responsibility to save it from itself. Discipline was the watchword, as always. The town must have *discipline* or it would surely come to ruin, despite his best efforts to stop it.

...*Auctioned like fucking cattle.*

His grip tightened on his club, furious now.

He shoved the audience aside, using the weapon to clear a path and hold back the crowd. The villagers were... not excited to find a Krewhian soldier in their midst, no matter what flag he currently wore. Given the reputation his people had among the Colonials—a reputation which he'd taken no small part in earning—that was understandable.

Still, aside from the usual mutterings, most stepped aside for him.

At the far end of the square, several musicians struck up the same irritating tune he'd heard all over these colonies. He wasn't sure why, but they seemed to play it whenever they saw him.

Gideon ignored it.

One man spit on him, and Gideon looked at the saliva dripping down his uniform for a moment... then smacked the man in the side of the head with the blunt end of the club. The force of the blow caused the man to flip over in the air, his shattered teeth pinwheeling out in a spiral around him. He

hit the ground in a bloody pile, and Gideon reached down to rip a piece of the man's tunic off. He wiped up the mess the man had made of his uniform, then disgustedly tossed the scrap of fabric down onto the man and calmly stepped over his writhing body, without a second thought.

"That's The Grave Digger," one of the men whispered to his companion, "*he's a bloody butcher!*"

"Mercenary scum!" Someone else shouted from the edge of the group, counting on the anonymity of the crowd to protect him. "My brother was at Strasilo! *We don't want your kind here!*"

"Go home, you Krewhian bastard!"

Still, Gideon's casual display of near murderous violence had quieted down most of the other more vocal objectors to his presence in the square. Despite their dislike of his race, vocation, and his country's frequently shifting allegiances, they could apparently tell that he was *not* a man they should pick a fight with.

On the platform, the man was still looking for additional bidders. "Come on! She's worth more than *that!* She's got a strong back and could give any of you many sons!" He gestured to her, yanking slightly on the rope in his hand, which was still connected to the collar around her slender neck. The woman was caught off-guard by the sudden jerk of the rope, and nearly fell over. "Turn around, show them the back." The husband tugged on the rope again, urging his wife to turn around and let the men see her from another angle. His words were slurred from the false teeth in his mouth slipping slightly, producing a wet sort of lisp. "Show them the back!"

The woman simply stared at him.

Gideon had never been married... yet he still recognized that look. In his experience, all men were born with an instinctive understanding of what that look sought to convey when a woman flashed it at them. And it meant nothing good for this man and his continued survival.

For some reason, her expression almost made Gideon smile.

He appreciated hostility towards those who deserved it. And this man *definitely* deserved the woman's—indeed, the *world's*—violent festering contempt.

An idea formed in the back of Gideon's mind... an entirely unproductive strategy, which involved pulling a pistol and shooting the man dead without even bothering to say a word to him...

The man seemed to understand that his wife was uninterested in displaying her... *stern* to an audience of drunken layabouts, and returned to searching the crowd for someone who would offer an additional bid. "Well, take my word for it: the back is *more* than worth the price. The front?" He held his hands up to his chest, referring to the woman's breasts, which were very small. "Not much meat there, obviously, but the back is very nice."

"*That one's a mad woman!*" One of the men shouted. "No one wants her! Her pa-pa chopped my cousin in the face with a Cree tomahawk!"

Half the crowd immediately looked at the woman's belt, where a weapon fitting that very description seemed to be dangling.

The evidence was circumstantial yet compelling.

"I don't want bald daughters, even if you hadn't already had her run goods!" A man shouted. "No bid! Bring out another!"

"Let's see the witch's cunny!" Someone called from the shadows, the slur of liquor in their voice. "A half-crown to see the cunny of the Mad Trapper's Daughter!"

A cheer of approval went up for that plan.

"She shave that too?" Another man shouted, laughing at the thought.

"She is *not* worn in at all, she is still fresh as a virgin on Sunday." The man on the platform looked out over the crowd, still trying to find a buyer and sell his wife. "Do I hear three guineas and a crown? Come on boys, you *know* she's worth that! None of you can find her better in this town, even if you took the time to look! Half the women here have already been consumed by The Beast! The other half are off the market or are her *clear* inferior in terms of endowments!" He gestured to his wife. "Mine has a damaged face, obviously, but what's left of it is quite fetching. And the rest of her is in *perfect* condition. In the dark, who could even tell about her face!?! If a small scar bothers you, tell her to turn around..."

Gideon arrived at the front of the crowd and he spun around to face

them, interrupting the man's sale pitch. "Attention!" He shouted over the call of the mob. "*Shut your damn mouths!*"

They were too drunken and lusty and angry at this supposed witch to care about him at the moment, and they continued to shout at the stage.

"*I SAID QUIET!*" Gideon bellowed over them, smashing his club down onto the fence pillar in front of him. The wood shattered in an explosion of splinters, spraying the first line of drunkards and wastrels. The men swore and staggered away in a tangled mass of limbs, clawing pieces of wood from their faces, eyes, and necks.

Gideon ignored them.

"Why is it that you men are *here*, making cash offers on a fellow human being—*another man's wife*-- when there is a *MONSTER KILLING YOU!?!?*" He pointed out towards the fields. "It's out there right now! Waiting! Possibly stalking your children and *actual* wives!" He gestured behind him over his shoulder, "Yet here you are, preoccupied with shouting crude things at a buffoon on stage needlessly torturing and humiliating his wife." He pointed away from the square. "Disperse and return to your decrepit, ugly homes, as *it now falls to ME to save you imbeciles!*" He glared at the men, holding up a hand to draw attention to his words. "Frankly, *killing you on the battlefield was much less trouble than trying to keep you alive now! At least THEN your stupidity served a larger purpose and your agonizing deaths made this colony a better place!*"

The entire square was silent for several breaths...

"Eh!" From the stage, the woman up for bid calmly put two fingers into her mouth and whistled loudly to get his attention. "*Capitaine!*"

Gideon immediately spun around to face her, still holding up his raised hand, which he then used to point at her. "I will get to you in a moment, madam. I have not finished castigating these feckless cowards yet. I am going to have them flogged and *then* I will see to correcting your many, *many* palpable and unacceptable deficiencies. *Do not distract me!*"

The woman simply leaned easily against the side of the stockade, looking like she didn't have a care in the world now. An expression of exceeding amusement spread across her scarred face, further showcasing the

beauty—a beauty which had *no* effect on him, obviously.

The woman's husband grinned widely, displaying rows of yellowing false teeth which appeared to be made from carved walrus ivory and gold wire. He pointed at Gideon's raised hand. "*SOLD to the Krehwian captain for three guineas and a crown!*" He tossed the woman's leash at Gideon and practically ran from the stage to the auction's cashier, where he began to collect his payment from the woman stationed there to handle sales.

"And another thing," Gideon turned to continue yelling at the crowd, "why in the NAME OF GOD do you fools pronounce it 'Crick,' when CLEARLY it is..." He trailed off, just processing the man's words. "Wait, what?" He turned back around, then stalked after the man when he found him missing from the stage. The crowd of onlookers began to break up around him, but Gideon paid them no mind. "What was that!?!"

The woman on stage started to sing an irritating song in French, still smiling like she was enjoying a private joke.

*"...Elle chante pour les filles
Qui n'ont pas de mari.*

*Elle chante pour les filles
Qui n'ont pas de mari.*

*Pour moi ne chante guère,
Car j'en ai un joli..."*

Gideon ignored her insanity, as he didn't have time for it. "What did you just say?" He demanded of the man again.

"Thank you for your winning bid." The man bowed his head slightly at Gideon, hopping up into a wagon, dropping the coins into his purse. "I'm sure you'll enjoy her more than I did. She's... difficult. *Lord*, what a difficult road that woman is." The man cracked his whip and the horses started pulling his wagon from the scene. "Good luck!"

"Wait, WHAT!" Gideon shouted after him. "I did not bid! *WHY* would I bid!?! Return at once!" He watched the man's wagon making an escape and immediately turned to give chase, but then remembered that his

own horse was blocks away now.

He glanced over at the woman on stage, who calmly hopped down to the cobblestones next to him.

She stared at him expectantly, but he had no idea why.

He opened his mouth, mind suddenly blank with grim, dawning horror. He let out an aggravated sound, stalking away from her.

“Captain?” The cashier called. “We will accept your payment whenever you’re ready.”

“I am not *making* a payment, because I made no *bid!*” Gideon explained, trying to keep from yelling at them. He instantly failed in the attempt. “*NONE!*”

The cashier did not look happy about that. “Delivery of your new wife has already been completed. We have covered your debt and will now have reimbursement.” The elderly woman’s eyes narrowed. “The contract is sealed. Trying to back out of it now would be the same as theft.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “We *hang* thieves here, *Krewhian.*”

Gideon glared at her, feeling his fury build. He took an angry step towards her and the woman fled as quickly as a hare when the hounds were turned loose.

“We... we shall simply send a bill to your command, Captain! No need to trouble yourself!” The woman called weakly as she ran from the scene. “Wonderful doing business! Congratulations on your new bride!”

He pulled his pistol and considered firing at the woman’s retreating back... His eyes tracked his foe... then his view was blocked by the auctioned woman, as the elderly cashier fled into the building behind her.

The auctioned woman was still standing there, staring at him expressionlessly. She calmly glanced at the pistol which was now leveled at her face, then back up to meet his eyes again.

Most women would have been terrified to have a weapon trained on them. This one looked equal parts amused and bored.

She raised her eyebrows in an expectant “Well? Shoot if you’re going to” kind of way.

He immediately lowered the pistol and returned it to its holster.

Up close, she was a fine woman, even *he* could recognize that. Like this land itself, she was lovely in a wild, unexplored, and dangerous way. She'd certainly make someone a very adequate wife. Just not his own!

"I don't know what you want, woman!" He finally shouted, making a shooing motion with his hand. "Just... just go away. Return to your people, or husband, I do not care! Simply leave me in peace!"

The woman didn't move.

He looked up at the sky, asking God what he'd ever done to deserve this. Well, besides the killings.

He stalked back to his companions, sick to death of this place.

Dákkru was leaning against one of the support posts for a building, reading a patriotic pamphlet and laughing as Gideon approached. It was an older edition and still featured a bold headline about "Newest Massacre of Colonial Innocents by Krewhians!" Dákkru didn't look up from the article, apparently finding it too amusing. "You have been here hardly *an hour*, and you have already collected yourself *several* new enemies, the impossible task of defeating a demon sent by Satan to destroy us all, and a wife."

"She is *not* my wife." Gideon corrected.

"Are you settling down here, sir?" Brophy asked, sounding excited by the idea. "Is that why you'd buy a wife?"

"She is NOT my wife!" Gideon insisted loudly, spreading out his arms in a cutting gesture. "I do not even know this woman! I have *no* desire to get married!"

"Then why did you bid?" Dákkru asked calmly. "It's a *wife* auction. Bid equals marriage, it was abundantly clear."

"Yes, sir," Brophy sounded confused, "why bid on her if..."

"I did no such thing!" Gideon snapped. "I merely raised my hand to draw attention to my threat. It was in no way an attempt to make an offer."

"Seen you threaten people all over the world," Dákkru retorted, looking unconvinced, "never seen you have to resort to *hand signals* to do it

before, sir.”

“Looked like a bid to me too.” Magistrate Duhamel announced as the final word on law and order in town. “Wouldn’t be the first man to get cold feet after a wedding though, right?” He nudged Brophy with his elbow good-naturedly, sharing the joke. “I remember when I married my Sarah, I vomited right...”

Gideon’s expression must have told him to drop it, as the man immediately stopped talking and hurried away.

“Do you intend on using your new purchase as bait for the creature we are after?” Dákkru pressed Gideon, not letting this drop. “Is that why you would want her, despite that scar, minuscule bosoms, and her baffling lack of hair?”

Gideon glared at him, feeling strangely annoyed by the man’s entirely accurate criticism of the woman, for some reason. “No.”

“So she’s what?” Dákkru continued. “A souvenir?”

“I bought a souvenir spoon in Boston once!” Brophy excitedly announced. “It has our new flag on it!”

Gideon and Dákkru ignored him completely.

“She is a momentary inconvenience and *none of your business.*” Gideon snapped at his sergeant. “Our mission here is to get these people back to work, which means you and I need to get to it as soon as possible. *Nothing else matters.*”

“Just put her back up for bid then.” Dákkru suggested, absently gesturing to the stage with a wave of his patriotic pamphlet. “Let someone else have her.”

“You can’t do that.” Brophy shook his head. “The market is closed now.”

Gideon’s head whipped around, just noticing that the crowd had indeed cleared out completely. “When does it reopen?”

“Next month. Orders of the Burgermeister on account of The Beast, sir.” Brophy absently tapped the toe of his boot on the street, knocking mud from his sole. “Market is a dangerous place to be and he don’t like too many

people out and about.” His gaze went to the far side of the street. “The Devil’s eyes watch us from the shadows...”

Gideon looked up at the sky again in exasperated irritation, praying for patience. “Oh, for God’s sake...”

“I warned you! She’s a *demon!*” Patterson insisted, voice filled with the zeal of a man constantly looking for kindling to start burning heretics. “An uncivilized demon! *She’s* brought this curse down upon our heads, most likely, *and being around her will damn you as well!*”

Gideon returned his attention to the man across from him. “I’ve heard enough from you.” He told the reverend flatly. “You may go.” He pointed back towards the street they’d just walked down. “*Now.*”

“We are being punished for exactly this type of sinful behavior.” Patterson insisted, beginning his retreat because he was uncomfortable with any confrontation which didn’t depend entirely upon passively shaming someone for what he saw as their sinful behavior. “Men buying other men’s wives and taking them as their own.” His lip curled in disgust. “It’s an abomination! Your whole blasted race has brought this wrath down upon us for allowing your godless seafaring ways into this war! The Lord won’t stand for it!” He pointed out towards the forest. “Even now, his judgement stalks us! Mark my words!”

Gideon ignored him. He considered himself a deeply religious man, at the heart of him. He had no time for men who perverted the word of God to justify their own petty desires and personal prejudices.

He simply closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself down.

Not over Patterson, because hang that man. No, he was overset at the moment because...

When he opened his eyes, the woman was standing directly in front of him again. Her movement was so silent and so quick that it made him lurch back, startled.

“*Bah!*” He let out a surprised sound, instinctively pulling away from her, as if confronted by the grim specter of death itself.

She didn't appear to notice, taking another step closer to fill the distance he'd created. She continued staring at him expectantly with her wide eyes, one of which was an unsettling milky color.

He made an irritated sound, reaching up to scrape a hand through his hair, only to remember he was wearing his hat. His movement dislodged it and sent it to the ground, where the copper ornamentation clattered on the cobblestone street. He immediately bent to retrieve it, putting another step between himself and the woman.

He righted himself, donning his hat again with as much dignity as he could muster.

She was still staring at him.

"WHAT!?!?" He finally shouted, shaking his hands in front of her to emphasize the question. "*WHAT DO YOU WANT, madam!?!?*"

She arched an eyebrow at him, like that was a stupid question.

"*Are you a mute!?!?*" He demanded, feeling more frustrated than he could ever remember being. He wasn't sure why, but this woman's mere presence was having a truly strange impact on him. Just looking at her made him sputteringly furious and ready to thrash half the world. "*Has this war somehow cost you your tongue!?!?*"

"No." Her voice had an accent, but didn't sound like it came from France originally. She'd obviously grown up on this continent, probably with a French family who no longer spoke the language perfectly either, as his companions had indicated. Her voice was smooth as honey but a tone deeper than her delicate but scarred face would suggest.

It was appealing, in a smoky, mysterious kind of way. Wild and strong.

Gideon shrugged helplessly, completely unsure over what this woman wanted. Or why he was even in this situation in the first place.

As he was pondering why he seemed to continually be beset by disasters caused by the stupidity of others, he took note of the woman's eye. Her left one was a white, endless void. But the right eye was the color of the sea. Swirling in its limitless expanse...

Gideon stared into its fathomless depths for a long moment, lost in thought...

Then he snapped back to reality and noticed that she was still wearing the collar her husband had put her in. "Take that ghastly thing off!" He demanded, all but ripping it from her neck. He pulled back and hurled the heavy collar through the upper story window of the auction house.

Damn them to hell for treating people this way!

And, more importantly, for maintaining that he had made a valid bid, when he *clearly* hadn't! They were making a mockery of the entire auctioneering profession!

It would be noted in his report.

He absently turned to look at the woman again.

Her head was tilted to the side, silently watching him like she was observing some new species of animal which intrigued her.

"Do you intend on staring at me all night?" He demanded. "I warn you: *it begins to grate, madam.*"

"No." She said simply, shaking her head.

"I do not know where you are going, but it is *not* with me." Gideon insisted, marching from the scene. "I say *good day* to you, madam. May our paths never cross again."

Dákkru hurried to catch up with him. "Do we have a plan?"

Gideon shrugged, making an aggravated sound and straightening his coat. "We are going to leave and she is going to run free in the village, never to bother me again. It has already been decided."

"No, I mean about the monstrous beast that's killing everyone."

Gideon paused for a beat. "You believe it could consume her?" He hadn't considered that. On her own... that was a distinct possibility. The Beast *was* eating unprotected women, obviously, and left alone she would be entirely defenseless against its wrath...

"Huh?" Dákkru sounded genuinely confused. "No, the beast that you're going to kill." He pressed. "We were touring this hellhole while you

were forming a strategy, and then you unexpectedly bought yourself a one-eyed, bald wife, who is reportedly mad, has a grotesque scar, and is now..."

"*I did not bid!*" Gideon cried yet again, wanting someone to listen to that vital point.

The other man visibly shrank back from him, fearful of his rage.

"I don't know how many other ways I can say this!" Gideon went on. "I was *not* a participant in the auction and I've told the woman that under *no circumstances* is she to follow us." Gideon continued marching down the street, no longer caring about the mess this awful place was making of his boots. "She's still following us, isn't she?" He asked Dákkru, knowing the answer already.

"No." The woman called from behind him.

Gideon spun around to glare at her. "'No'? 'NO'!?! *Is that all you can say!?*"

"Yes." The woman answered immediately.

"Sir?" Dákkru began, trying to calm him down. "Perhaps we..."

"*This is such a difficult colony!*" Gideon shouted at the skies, ignoring his subordinate. "I *detest* it here! *And the depressing rustics who populate it are even worse! Is it too much to ask that we could still be a part of whatever army allowed us to shoot at these fools!?!?*"

"No." The woman answered.

Chapter Two

He was a demon and madman.

Stories of his atrocities against the Americans were well known, and his recent change of allegiance hadn't stopped them. In fact, it seemed to only give *both* sides of this war an opportunity to fear him.

He had killed her brother.

And now he was here for her.

Chalice de Crisse! Had she known of the man's murderous nature, she wouldn't have accepted his generous bid for her.

Still... what an exciting time to be alive.

"I am a stern man but I pride myself on my fairness." Her new husband was informing her, sounding oddly annoyed for some reason. This madman had a voice so deep it could shatter stone, tinged with an elaborate foreign accent of unknown origin. It was more sinister than it was appealing, but that was not to say that the accent lacked *all* appeal... "Still, I am accustomed to giving orders and being *obeyed*, madam, the *first* time. Without any questions! I will *not* tolerate repeating myself." He clapped the back of one gloved hand into his palm, driving the point home. "Without discipline, there is anarchy. *Discipline.*" He repeated the word more forcefully, like he was helping her to memorize it, apparently having no memory of his previous statement about never repeating himself. He did not appear to appreciate the irony. "I cannot stress that enough. Discipline is what keeps a unit functioning. Anything less is *unacceptable* and will be met with severe reprimand."

She nodded, beginning to wonder if her new husband had spoken to anyone but subordinates and enlisted men in his entire life. It did not seem so. His mother had probably saluted him as he emerged from her womb, already shouting orders to her and the midwife. "Of course, sir."

After a day surveying his new command, they were making their way through town, in a seemingly random path. She had no idea where her husband was going, but he didn't seem to be the best at navigation. But that was okay. No one was perfect. And after all, he had *her* to take care of that now.

They were a marvelous team, she could tell already.

She could simply ask him where he wanted to go, obviously. But she doubted he'd appreciate the help. Some men preferred to showcase their self-sufficiency and protectiveness as a matter of personal pride, and he seemed like that breed.

It was all very gallant. But she *had* married an officer this time, so perhaps she shouldn't have been too surprised by that.

"I will sort this out in the morning, I *assure you*." He insisted, making the forth right turn in as many minutes. "So for the *very* short time we are forced to endure each other's company, I see no reason why the situation needs to be awkward or uncomfortable for either of us."

"Of course, sir." She nodded her head, watching their bootprints cross over each other in an increasingly complicated pattern as they crisscrossed the same streets again and again. It was captivating, seeing the design get more and more intricate as this honeymoon march wore on.

Her husband was truly an artist. She only hoped that this incredible talent would be passed onto their children.

"Just so long as you do as you are told, like anyone else under my command." He continued. "*Follow orders* and we shall have no quarrel."

She made a show of removing her hat with a flourish and held it over her heart, elaborately bowing to him. "*Bien s ur, mon capitaine*."

"And *no one* in my command is to speak French. I *hate* French." He informed her sourly. "I've fought wars there and didn't enjoy a moment of it."

She extended her lower lip in sympathy for his plight, and she returned her hat to her head. "*Quel dommage*. My poor sweet lamb."

He either ignored that or wasn't listening to her. "Now then, we will

simply catch up with Dákkru and go back to the barracks, yes?” He decided. “From there, we can rest for the night and awake tomorrow, and *all of this* will be behind us.”

He seemed stressed. Probably from his new posting here. Or perhaps because it was his wedding night.

Men were confusing animals and she didn't always understand them. They were one of life's mysteries which she was happier not fully unraveling. It kept them cryptic and exciting.

He turned right again, so lost in thought about all of this that he'd forgotten where his barracks even were.

She simply stopped in the street, waiting.

Her beloved Captain continued walking, not noticing that she was no longer trailing behind him. He was a man who would lead, even if no one followed.

This was good. It evinced the spirit of a true pioneer.

She busied herself with calmly sharpening her beavertail knife, absently singing to herself again.

*“...Elle chante pour les filles
Qui n'ont pas de mari.*

*Elle chante pour les filles
Qui n'ont pas de mari.*

*Pour moi ne chante guère,
Car j'en ai un joli...”*

Five minutes and four additional right turns later, her Captain reappeared. He was still talking, mostly to himself. “...The thing of it is, that...” He trailed off when he saw her in front of him, frowned at her, and then looked back down the road, trying to figure out how she'd caught up with him so quickly.

She slipped the knife back into its beaded scabbard and pointed to their left, indicating that it was the direction he should go.

“Ah.” He nodded sharply. “Yes, of course.” He started stalking down the street, like this entire town was simply a model toy created for him. Everything around him seemed so small and breakable and *hideously* endangered by his volume, attitude and frequent rages. He was destined to write his name in letters of blood across the walls of this village!

She had only known him the space of an afternoon, but she could already tell that she was married to someone cold-hearted, vindictive, and *utterly* ruthless. A foreign barbarian, who seemed intent on deliberately crushing everyone and everything around him, simply because violence made him happy.

She respected this, very much.

The terror he could inspire in lesser souls, it was the result of him alone. They saw something inside him which horrified them!

Less daring women, they had married men who were *un Suisse...* the cuddly chipmunk. But Verlaine? Verlaine had married one who was *the furious grizzly bear!*

This was a marriage for experts alone, *experienced* wives who desired to test their skill by blazing trails through the forbidden and dangerous wilds of crazed, foreign devils.

Huzzah, for grand adventure!

Huzzah for marrying men who should never, EVER be married!

Her husband carried a *mace* around, for god’s sake. That was an attention getter, and she respected this too. Her uncle, he had carried a Cree *Notini-Towin-Mistik* war club for many years. But then it was taken away from him by the governor, on account of the trial. And hanging.

Still, she’d never been married to a foreigner before. Well, Charles had been from the Carolinas, but that hardly counted. Her *new* husband though, he was an entirely different race. And he wore the uniform of a godless mercenary band! They were reported to be cutthroats and *murderers*, who slaughtered innocent men and women like swine. They had wiped her youngest brother’s unit out, to the last man, and had considered it such an everyday occurrence for them that they stopped for coffee and pastry after.

It was *very* exciting. This was promising to be the most interesting marriage she'd ever had.

"Where was I?" He asked, still rambling.

The total --clearly murderous-- stranger now in complete possession of her life, body, and worldly assets seemed to be very frazzled at the moment. She wasn't sure why. *She* was the one who had a long list of new marital duties and obligations now, all *he* had to do was continue being a soldier and decide whether or not he would have her tonight, and in which manner.

Being a good wife was always such a burden, but so worthwhile.

"You were informing me that everything will be fine, so long as I do as you command." She helpfully informed him. "*Mais il y a aussi de mauvaises nouvelles*: you do not like it when I speak my French." She pounded her hand against her chest. "I am gutted by this news, *mon capitaine*. It is as if you reached into my gentle female breast, and *ripped out my still-beating heart!*" She acted out the motion, holding her imaginary heart in her hand and emphatically crushing it. "Yet for you, my love, *never again* shall that hated language cross my lips or fill my simple girlish mind!" She spat on the ground to show her newfound contempt for it. "For us, it is now the tongue of Quebec and devils! To be shunned! Forever!" She raised her finger in the air to pledge her total commitment to her beloved's instructions. "*Je le jure, tel que vous l'ordonnez! C'est fini!*"

He turned to watch her for a moment in silent confusion, then continued on his way again. "Yes..." He hesitantly nodded his head, obviously pleased she'd been listening to him but confused about the rest of it. "As a warning, I have no time for weakness, woman. Or girlish laughter, sycophantic flattery, and silly creatures in need of protection. Such women are a liability to me and my way of life. If you cannot stand on your own and contribute in a meaningful way, you are a burden and shall be *left behind*."

"Your words," she made a sniffing sound of pure emotion, "they are so beautiful and romantic that I wish they were a sonnet, so that all could enjoy them. The men of my country, they only *dream* of having so profound an understanding of women and romance." She took on an urgent whisper. "You must teach them, my gem." She gently touched his arm to urge him

on. "Please, share your gift of love with the world."

What a *fairytale* husband she'd found this time. She could already tell that this would be a forever match. True destiny.

She tried to keep from laughing in his face.

"For future reference," he continued, yanking his arm from her grasp, "I *don't* say 'please' and I detest the words '*thank you*' and 'you're welcome.'" He sneered the words. "Do NOT expect them from me. They betray a weakness of character." He shoved past several people on the street, completely ignoring as one of the pedestrians went sprawling into the mud.

She casually stepped over the man, rather impressed that her husband was so solidly built that he'd been able to smash into an innocent passerby like that and not show any sign of even being slowed down. And he displayed *absolutely* no concern for the health or welfare of the man currently writhing on the muddy cobblestones, trying to right himself following the violent collision.

This was her best marriage yet!

She could tell.

Charles was like ice. And Edward, he had been a mere snowball. But *this* husband, he was a towering icy serac! An endless wall of terrifying frozen death, dangling precariously off the edge of an unexplored and foreboding mountain peak!

Such a thing? It was truly *magical* to behold.

"Very illuminating." She had no idea what the hell her husband was going on about, he was simply rambling now. She saw no benefit in pointing that out to him, however. Men who liked to talk seldom liked to be interrupted. "*Thank you* for that lesson, sir." She held up one hand, dramatically, as if inspired. "These words, they shall be the ones which I carry with me, *always*, guiding me through the empty darkness of my own mind."

He noticed her word choices and paused. "Are you mocking me?"

"No, sir." She shook her head, trying not to smile. "*Please*, continue."

His eyes narrowed at her use of another one of his forbidden words, and she could see she might have taken the game too far. “I do *not* have the time nor the inclination to deal with you today, woman. My plate is full at the moment.” He gestured out at the forest in the distance, visible between the buildings. “I am trying to save this village from near certain death!”

She couldn’t argue with that, so she merely bobbed her head in agreement. “Yes, sir.”

Her husband was a very important man, this was not in argument. He was here to kill a beast, and she had great respect for hunters. Even foreign ones, who indiscriminately slaughtered everyone and everything they came into contact with.

“Whatever personal dramas or vexations have brought you to this ignominious state, they will have to remain yours and *yours alone*.” He jammed his index finger into his palm, and she noticed for the first time how large her husband’s hands were. Which was... exciting. “I carry *my own* burdens and will *NOT* have yours foisted off upon me *because a fool born with his arse in his skull decided that I made him an offer on you!* Are we in agreement?”

She opened her mouth to reply to that, but he didn’t give her the chance. Her husband really liked to monologue, it seemed.

Her older brother, he had been that way too. Spent too much time alone in the mountains, and had developed the habit of speaking his thoughts as he had them. Trying to convince himself of views, arguing with himself, that kind of thing. He’d have entire discussions with himself, supplying both sides of the conversation. Sometimes those talks went downhill quickly, and even came to blows.

He’d been killed, of course. Having a knife fight with yourself was a recipe for utterly foreseeable tragedy. He-- more than anyone-- really should have known the kind of quick temper he had.

Her new husband seemed to notice her moment of sorrow, and interpreted it as being related to the events of the day. “I... I recognize that this has got to be an *awful* day for you, what with your cretin husband abandoning you.” Sympathy sounded bizarre coming out in her husband’s

dry, haughty monotone. Everything he said sounded like he was dressing down one of his subordinates, speaking to a particularly stupid child, or issuing a stern command to a bumbling servant. Those seemed to be his only three emotions.

Still, it was at least an *attempt* at compassion, even if it was awkward and still sounded oddly terrifying in his accent and tone. Most of her husbands wouldn't have even bothered.

She debated with herself whether she should correct him: that Charles was her *previous* husband, and that she had since been happily remarried to the *perfect* man, but decided that the distinction could wait until morning. He seemed stressed at the moment and she didn't need to add to that.

Unless it was amusing, obviously.

She always had time for the game.

"Awful." She agreed in a deadpan. "Just awful. Oh, how deep was our eternal passion. You *must* have felt it, like a warm summer wind on your face or a ray of Heavenly light, shining down from above, for us alone." She nodded persuasively. "*Everyone* at the auction, they could feel that sacred connection between my Charles and I, this is why they only mentioned my 'cunny' the once this time."

"However, I..." He stopped his thought in its tracks, apparently surprised by her words and trying to determine if she was being sarcastic with him again. "Wait, what do you mean '*this time*'?"

She ignored that, taking on an emotional tone. "Their restraint on the topic of my 'Altar of Venus' and the womanly secrets she conceals, it was like a wedding gift from the crowd, the generosity of which *truly* touched my simple girlish heart." She took on a more poetic, thoughtful attitude. "*Elle s'est amourachée de quelqu'un,* the story of my life, it could be summarized in this way." She clasped her hands to her breast. "'*She fell stupidly in love with someone,*' as all young people do. Poor Verlaine, her love for that man and he for her... it made them both fools. Doomed *fools!* Rendered but playthings for the cruel gods of romance, no?" She paused for a beat. "His auctioning off my body to strangers and then fleeing town like a hunted

brigand, this was the only way he could *possibly* escape that kind of undying desire, before it consumed him completely in the lust-scented flames of total devotion.” She dramatically pressed her wrist to her forehead, swooning. “To know true love... is to know true pain, *Mon Capitaine*.”

They were both silent for several breaths.

“Are you completely insane, a damned stupid girl, or running some sort of intricate confidence game on me like a pickpocket?” He finally demanded, looking genuinely curious. “Tell me. *At once*.”

She shrugged, then held out her arms to him. “My truest deepest yearning, if I knew the answer to this question, I would tell you instantly.” She declared passionately, snapping her fingers to indicate how quickly his will would be done. “I would cry it to the Heavens! *Even if it meant my own life! I would welcome the headman’s ax, if the answer I provided in my last words would but make you smile!*”

“At the moment, watching you be beheaded *would*, yes.” He rolled his eyes and went back to communicating his instructions. “*However*, once we are in the barracks, I expect you to behave in a *professional* and *civilized* manner.”

She nodded, feeling like she was really going out of her way to start off her marriage on the right foot here. True Love was about giving though, and putting your husband’s needs above your own. That was her wifely duty, after all. “I shall *try* to restrain myself from urinating on the command desks and ordinance, my love.” She shrugged, as if helpless to avoid her favorite activities. “But as you know, your ways, they are yet strange to me. I shall need *constant* guidance and loud, irate instruction from you, on *all* matters of my behavior and thought.” She urgently took hold of his arm, like she was suddenly afraid of being left to make her own decisions. “It is... *the only way*.” She assured him in a tone of desperate, dramatic terror.

This time, he had no difficulty spotting her sarcasm. She’d overplayed her hand.

He angrily yanked free of her grasp again, horrified that another human being would dare touch his pristine uniform. “Are you trying to be difficult with me?” He pressed. It sounded less like he was angry with her,

and more like he was simply trying to figure her out. Perhaps because no one in his entire life would be so incredibly foolish as to play this kind of game with him. “Because I am NOT amused.”

“No, sir.” She shook her head, her tone somewhere between completely innocent and openly mocking. “Just being professional and civilized, as you said.” She pointed back and forth between them. “Our love, she is still new and her roots, they need time to truly grow as deeply into the earth as we both *feel* they are destined to. So I will allow you to lead me where you will, as is my duty as your subservient and grateful wife, until our tree of love?” She outstretched her fingers and slowly moved them up in the air, as if drawing a tree up from the ground. “*Until her roots, they are as strong as the mighty oak!*”

He squinted at her for a long moment, still trying to determine what she was up to here. “No.” He finally decided, his eyes as dark and mysterious as the night sky. “I am *no* fool. And neither are you.” He shook his head, growing certain. “*Are you?*” It was an accusation, not a question.

Her smile faded, not expecting that. She was uncertain how to respond. None of her husbands had been what one might call “clever,” so this was another new experience for her, and it endangered the game.

If he caught on... this could be a truly dangerous situation for her.

“No.” She finally said, shaking her head. She didn’t know what else to say, other than the truth. She met his gaze. “I am not.”

He silently watched her, his mind shifting pieces around, trying to get a better picture of who he was now married to.

It was exciting. Her newest husband was so much better at this than her last one had been. Charles had always been a fool, and didn’t know how to play.

She was glad to be rid of him and it had taken far longer than it should have.

But *this one*... oh, he was promising to be so entertaining!

She studied his face while he studied hers, memorizing the angular lines which typified his people. Cheekbones so severe they gave his face an

almost gaunt appearance. Dark, deep set eyes. Dark hair pulled back tightly under his military tricorne hat, exposing a widow's peak.

He wasn't the most attractive man she'd ever seen. Indeed, none of his features were really what the people of this land seemed to appreciate. He was much too sinister-looking and foreign for that, and not at all the ideal. The angles of his face were sharp, producing an unsettling look when he moved, like his skin was stretched tightly over a granite bust of some furious demon. It got you thinking about his skull beneath and the skin struggling to contain it. It was disconcerting and harsh.

His was not the kind of face that you dreamed about. His would more likely be the face you saw in a nightmare. It wasn't inviting at all. His gaze was too intense and dark, his expression one of near constant annoyance, suspicion, and furious calculating menace.

No, the man wasn't attractive, he was... striking. You could instantly pick him out of a crowd, and it was no wonder that witnesses could always remember the ghastly things he'd done on a battlefield.

He had the slim, muscular build of a man who spent his life doing active things though. Fighting, traveling, dancing... Well, probably not dancing. He seemed like the kind of man who would call it "idiotic folly" or "a waste of my precious time on this earth."

She almost smiled at the thought, for some reason. There was something almost charming about him being so spectacularly unlikeable.

Truly, an imposing and terrifying figure.

It was very exciting.

She'd never been married to someone so horrible before. Just looking at him made her entire body feel so *alive! And terrified!*

Such a wonderful wedding day this had been.

He continued analyzing her, trying to determine her character and motivations. "They tell me that you're a witch. And mad. From a family of madmen." He finally informed her, his voice once more returning to its calm, clipped monotone, rather than the slightly panicked one he'd had for the majority of their marriage. For some reason, she now found his haughty

tone impossibly attractive. His was an accent fit only for complaining to his maid that he was dissatisfied with the effectiveness of her dusting and would thus be having her impaled on a large wooden stake in the front garden, as a warning to the rest of the recalcitrant staff.

She found it rather appealing.

Distressingly so, in fact.

“They tell me that you are a ‘Grave Digger.’ And a murderer. From an army of murderers.” She retorted, trying to sound calm and not give away how fast her heart was beating at the prospect of having an exciting and clever husband. For once.

Or perhaps because he seemed on the verge of killing her.

In either case, she was thrilled to be feeling it.

He arched an eyebrow. “Do you believe them?”

There was just something commanding and confident about his voice, and it was appealing in an odd way. She enjoyed watching the way it made lesser men scuttle about to do her husband’s cruel bidding.

Plus, if she were being honest, there was a darkly sexual attraction to it as well, bringing to mind obscene handbills of atrocities committed by the hated enemy against innocent patriot women.

Verlaine had seen these publications. Some of them were quite detailed, both in terms of story and the illustrations. They shocked and horrified the citizenry here. Personally, she found them much less upsetting than she was expected to, however. In fact, they were one of her favorite kinds of reading material. She tried to gather up as many of them as she could, to entertain herself while alone at night in camp.

Her new husband featured prominently in *many* of them. Still, standing here in front of the man himself... the woodcut illustrations did *not* capture the totality of his delightful, exhilarating menace.

She started to imagine him in some of the scenes depicted, his hard body pitiless and utterly demanding...

“*I asked you a question, woman.*” He snapped, cutting off her silent thoughts. “Do you believe them?”

She considered that for a moment. “I believe that if you dug a grave for every man you’ve killed in war, you would have time for little else in your life. Like trying to empty the sea with a bucket.”

“Do you believe that I am capable of murdering surrendering men?”

“Absolutely.” She nodded without any hesitation. “If they angered you or disrespected your rules. I believe you would ride them down and then lecture their roughly hewn corpses about the lack of discipline they displayed by being dead.” She arched an eyebrow. “Do you believe that I am a witch?”

He likewise took a moment to think the question over. “I believe that things seem to happen by your design. Even your apparent misfortunes.” He watched her reaction, waiting for her to object... but she didn’t. If he was disappointed or reassured by that, he didn’t show it. “I believe there is more to you than mere magic.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but then stopped when she caught his expression. Instead she simply admitted the point. “But do you believe me mad?” She asked instead.

He immediately nodded. “*Absolutely*. You are absent your damn mind, woman.”

She shrugged unconcernedly at that appraisal of her sanity, flashing him a genuine smile. “‘*Un brin de folie égaye la vie,*’ my most precious love, ‘*a touch of madness, it- it brightens up a life,*’ does it not?”

“You are speaking French *again*.”

“I would never do that to you, *mon petit chou*.” She swept out her arms dramatically, in furious denial. “I know how those *ghastly* people treated you, after you attacked them. *Their hateful language is dead to me! Forgotten!*” She clasped at her mouth. “*I would sooner cut out my own tongue than speak it and cause my beloved such pain!*”

He shook his head in amazement. “Completely mad.” He repeated, continuing his thought. “But you still seem a clever and calculating woman, who has many secrets.” He squinted at her appraisingly. “Which is perhaps even more dangerous than one who possesses magic powers.”

They stood in the chilly wind, finding a common understanding of each other at last.

One moment drifted into two.

Finally, her mouth spread into a wide, genuine smile and she extended her hand to him in the manner of a lady. “Verlaine Gévaudan. ‘The Mad Trapper’s Daughter.’” She curtsied in respectful greeting, something she NEVER did with anyone. But since she was introducing herself to her husband for the first time, it seemed to call for something more formal. “People, they are wrong about me. I am neither mad nor a witch.”

She had expected him to kiss the back of her hand like a gentleman, or whatever the hell men from overseas where *supposed* to do in cases like this, but instead he simply started walking away again. “Captain Gideon Wlkwos. ‘The Grave Digger.’” He announced in a gruff voice. “People are entirely correct in everything they say about me. But I gleefully light my candle from their torches.”

He apparently did not believe that their marriage should bother with formalities.

Which was good.

Verlaine had grown up among hunters and trappers, in camps hundreds of miles from anything resembling civilization. She didn’t really know anything about how to be a proper European wife anyway.

His terse manner, grim disposition, and the omnipresent threat of his looming violence-- towards literally *everything*—was exactly what she was accustomed to. It was like being home.

It was *amazing* how well her new husband understood her already!

“I never dreamed that I would one day become a fine Krewhian lady!” She beamed widely, spinning in a circle and taking on a dramatic tone. “*Beautiful Goddess Striferia below the waves...*” she began to recite, then her husband cut her off.

“I *will* shoot you.” He warned darkly, tone dead serious. “I would rather gun you down in cold blood right here on the street than listen to a dramatic recitation of that damned play...”

She ignored that, holding up her arms towards the heavens, praying to her perfect, loving husband's pagan gods of the sea. "*...Send your winds to fill our sails, let our swords be sharp as lightning and our cannons true as thunder! Ahoy destiny! Onward to glory!*"

Chapter Three

Verlaine hurried after her beloved, her deerskin boots nearly silent on the wet stones. “Should I take your surname, my Giddy?”

“Don’t call me that.” He quickened his pace, apparently believing that she was that easy to escape. He was wrong. “And no, *most definitely* don’t change your name to mine. *Good Lord*, no. I have already told you, we are *not* married by any stretch of the law or delirious imagination, and we shall have all of this sorted out in the morning.”

She took on a tone of the upmost, refined dignity. “*Verlaine Angélique Wlkwos.*” She repeated to herself, finding it so filled with power and respect that it gave her goose pimples all over. “*Lady Verlaine Wlkwos.*” She added a deep curtsy, preparing to be introduced at Court and meet the royalty of whatever the hell country her husband was from.

“I hold no lordship.” He corrected. “And...” He made a face, just processing that. “*What are you going on about? Please stop, madam!*”

“I do not *say* ‘please.’” She informed him innocently, quoting an expert on the matter. “It betrays a weakness of character.”

He stalked towards her angrily. “You are either insane or you are so insane that you believe you can mock me.” He towered over her threateningly, face dark with furious shadows. “And either one of those is liable to end in me *STRANGLING YOU, WOMAN!*”

The vicious threat of deadly violence hung in the air for a breath...

“The ways in which a woman can love her man, they are as numerous as they are mysterious.” She told him softly, meeting his eyes through seductive lashes. “Are you *absolutely* certain that I would not enjoy that?” She arched a provocative eyebrow. Taking on a huskier voice. “Truly?”

...Oh, that might have taken the game too far.

His expression went from angry, to confused, to... something? Then it returned to furious, which was its all-purpose default. “*You have abandoned your senses right now, woman! You are making a scene! It is the height of distaste!*” He pointed towards the barracks. “Just go inside, so that I may get some sleep and try to forget this day ever happened!”

“I do not want to sleep in the barracks.” She informed him, shaking her head. “I will not stay here.”

“Then go somewhere else!” He shouted. “*No one asked you to follow me!* If you’d like to wander the streets, waiting for The Beast to slaughter you, be my guest! But *I* am staying in the barracks!”

She rolled her eyes.

He was a very dramatic man, it seemed. But he had had a big day, that was true. And he did have a lot on his mind, obviously.

Verlaine obediently opened the door to the barracks, already knowing what she’d find inside. Really, if her husband hadn’t been so tired and nervous about his wedding night, he could have anticipated it too.

Sure enough, as the door swung open, the five soldiers and his sergeant were lounging around the small confines of the room in various stages of undress, smoking and playing cards.

They all looked up as she entered, their expressions appalled and shocked that a woman would be there.

She ignored them and flopped down onto one of the small hammocks, which was cramped, even for her. She’d slept on ice-covered boulders which were more comfortable than this.

Her husband immediately began to quarrel with his sergeant about something, because he was incapable of seeing another human being and not *instantly* attacking it.

“Hell of a place to spend my wedding night.” She complained aloud to the room at large, voice filled with dramatic regret. “But at least we shall be able to entertain your friends, I suppose.” She glanced over at the man closest to her. He was terribly young, his face still so fresh that she doubted he even shaved yet. “I. Am. A. Screamer.” She warned the boy, punctuating

each word to draw out the weight of the statement. “And, not to be *uncivilized* and provide you too many private details, Private... but you are liable to get wet.” She shrugged helplessly, gesturing to how close his bunk was to the one she’d just claimed. “I am so sorry, but I shall have no control, I’ll just be too excited by my darling husband, and...” She spread her hands out to indicate the range of her looming orgasm and the explosive spray it promised.

The private’s eyes widened in confused, awkward horror. His face growing redder and redder in embarrassment, breath quickening, gaze focusing on random objects around the room. Anywhere and anything but his commanding officer’s new bride telling him these things.

Verlaine ignored that and gestured to her husband, pointing out his handsome features and strong shoulders. “*Look at this man!*” She pointed at the far bunk, expression now uncertain. “I mean, truly, I start to fear for the poor souls over *there* now too.” She pointed between her legs. “My body, she is like a *fountain* sometimes, especially once an attractive man has supplied his strength and the handle has been rigorously *pumped*, no?”

The boy’s eyes instinctively went to where she was pointing, then he blushed even deeper and stared at the floor, breathing hard.

If she pressed the game, this boy was liable to faint from embarrassment and shock, or spontaneously achieve his first step into manhood and require an immediate change of trousers.

Verlaine pressed the game. Obviously.

She took on a more serious tone, leaning closer to him and lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, as if softly telling gossip to a girlfriend about the bedroom secrets they clearly both already understood, as women. “I mean, if he gets me there? If he truly knows me in the way of a man and a maid, and I am lost in the blinding light of that fiery carnal desire?” She arched a knowing eyebrow at the young man. “And I am *sure* that he will-- because as you might have heard from my previous husband at my auction today, my woman’s sheath? She is still *acceptably* tight and always *desperate* for rough passion from the highest bidder.” She shrugged, like she had accepted the inevitable. “...I shall *try* to hold back the consequences of my whimpering female completion, obviously,” she put one arm around the

boy's shoulders in a friendly manner, pointing at her intimate region again with her free hand, "but you *know* that my 'lady star,' she shall undoubtedly erupt with a flood of desperate rapturous fulfillment so complete, that this room shall soon require the appearance of Noah and his biblical Ark if there is to be *any* hope of..."

"Sir!?!?" The private desperately pulled away from her and jumped up from the bed, looking terrified by such talk. He stumbled away, young voice breaking in panic as he called to his Captain for assistance, like a child reporting a bully to a parent. "SIR!?!?"

Verlaine couldn't hide her smile.

These soldiers were soft. None of them would last a day in a trapper camp.

Her husband was really going to have to toughen them up if he wanted to win this war. Or her game.

"*Stop scaring Brophy!*" Gideon snapped at her, stalking over to lightly whack at her foot with the back of his hand in order to get her attention, as she lounged on the hammock. "Come on, *up!*"

"But I thought we were staying in the barracks?" She frowned in apparent confusion. "Was this not your command? I am your wife; I obey you, *always*, and you have ordered me to stay here."

"You're getting out of here!"

"What have I said?" She took on an innocent tone, sounding dramatically confused by his reaction. "I am merely excited about sharing my special day with your friends, this is all! They might even learn something." She pointed towards the door. "That nice gentleman at the auction, he was willing to pay a half-crown for what I now offer to show your young private for free! This is *generosity*, my love! *I do this for you!*" She looked over at Brophy again, taking on the soft tone of a teacher. "Truly, I will be your guide, my sweet, darling boy... the Virgil to your innocent blue-coated Dante, gently taking you by the hand and guiding you through the many layers and folds of a woman's *divine underworld*..."

Brophy tried to take another terrified step away from her but only ended up tripping and falling to the floor. He quickly scrambled to his feet,

retreating to a safer distance lest her vagina somehow develop tentacles and drag him into its depths, as he screamed and flailed like a kidnapped virgin.

Verlaine smiled, enjoying that to no end.

Men were such innocent and ridiculous creatures.

“*NOW!*” Gideon commanded, once more pointing at the door, ordering her to go.

Verlaine rolled her eyes. “There’s no need to get angry, my eternal star. Save this vigor for later, please, when we are alone.” She made a show of looking over her shoulder at the men, as if intrigued by the possibilities again. “...Or don’t.” She added seductively, biting her lower lip in theatrical anticipation of the exhibition she could put on for them. “*Now is fine too...*”

Gideon’s Sergeant opened his mouth to say something, but her husband whirled around to glare at him. “*NOT A WORD, Dákkru!*” He yelled, pointing at the man. “*NOT A SINGLE WORD!*”

Dákkru held up his hands, surrendering whatever he’d been about to say, then calmly went back to his cards.

“Come on!” Gideon took her by the arm and escorted her towards the door. “Your point is made. Now we’re leaving!”

She allowed herself to be pulled away, waving at the soldiers as the door closed. “Lovely to have met you all!” She grabbed hold of the doorframe as he attempted to tug her from the building, trying to remain in the room for a moment longer. “*I feel as if we are family already!*”

She finally lost her grip and he slammed the door as soon as she was clear of it.

He marched out into the street, his expression furious. “*Care to tell me what that was about?*”

“You did not want me to sleep in the same room as six other unattached men, which is actually rather sweet, honestly.” She smiled at him pleasantly. “You are truly taking such good care of me.” She reached up to straighten the lapels of his jacket and brush imaginary lint from the shoulders of his spotless uniform, then she let out a contented, blissful sigh. “I feel like the fairytale princess right now, married to her heroic prince.” She

swallowed, voice breaking in emotion and eyes welling up with tears of joy and fulfillment. “You have made me so happy, Gideon.”

“You are *intentionally* being difficult.” He snapped. “But I do not understand why?” He took a step towards her, voice lowering dangerously. “*What is in this for you!?!?*”

He was genuinely furious now.

No longer simply “yelling” angry. He was now “violence” angry.

She frowned slightly, considering the situation.

Yes.

Perhaps she had pushed the game too far and should have considered the brutal proclivities of her audience. And now, there was a high likelihood that he was about to kill her.

Sometimes, as you blazed a trail through the unknown... you unexpectedly found yourself standing upon very dangerous ground which promised certain death.

That was the risk one took, as an explorer and adventurer. Death was the price of living, sometimes.

“I DO NOT...” he began, grabbing for her arm to prevent her escape while he yelled at her some more.

But his tone and obvious anger were unsettling, and Verlaine’s survival instincts kicked in without her even thinking about it. She desperately pulled her arm away, stepping back to gain a better footing in case he hit her. It would still be a short fight, given their size difference and his military training, but Verlaine wasn’t about to make it easy.

He saw the movement, recognized it, and withdrew his hand.

“Someone has struck you in the past.” He surmised, his voice taking on a strange tone, but at least he didn’t sound as furious with her. It was a statement of fact, not a question. “Someone considerably larger than you.”

She didn’t reply.

They were both silent again, trying to determine the new bounds of their relationship.

“To be clear: I am a demanding man.” He admitted, voice still firm but no longer hoarsely enraged. “I am loud and have no time for needless emotion. I *will* yell at you. I’m sure I will hurt your feelings and wound your female pride, as such things are not in any way my concern. If the past is any way to judge, I will make you cry. Most everyone does around me, so I do not anticipate you being the one exception. I have *no* interest in marriage, and I am deeply upset by people who *go out of their way* to embarrass me in front of my men. Men I have only just now met today, who I am counting on to help me stop a monster which is eating children.” He paused, meeting her eyes, his tone serious. “But I am no physical threat to you, no matter the *irritating insanity* you rejoice in sowing throughout my life. My hand will never be raised against you in anger, at any time or for any reason.” He quickly bowed his head respectfully. The gentlemanly movement looked practiced but not used in some time. “That is my promise. And I *always* keep my promises, even to mad women whom I quickly loathe.”

She hadn’t been expecting that. She was taken aback for a moment.

Her expression didn’t change though and she remained braced for a physical blow. “And in return?”

A man *didn’t* spend two weeks wages on a woman unless he expected something in return.

She recognized that.

Granted, he was her husband now, so it was her duty. And... it promised to be *thoroughly* enjoyable, if those illicit pamphlets were any way to judge.

But that was *her* decision to make. She’d had that conversation with all of her husbands. Well, the ones who weren’t chased off by the game, anyway. Some of them had been upset about the conversation, but through guile, insanity and occasional violence, she’d gotten all of them to agree with her in the end. Few of them had even tried to press the issue, once she’d explained how things would be in their marriage.

And even then, they only ever tried to press it *once* before they regretted that mistake and avoided the subject of marital relations entirely thereafter.

But this man? He didn't seem like someone who would be easily dissuaded from something he wanted.

If he'd paid two week's salary for her, she anticipated him expecting her to work off that debt, no matter her thoughts on the matter. He did NOT seem like a man who was easily scared by demonstrations of violence or madness.

This was not a man who could be intimidated. Not by anyone.

If he wanted his money's worth from her... he would almost certainly have it. And he was strong enough and seemed cruel enough that he could easily make certain she learned to *never* attempt to deprive him of his marital right again.

Verlaine's heart continued pounding in her chest, both frightened by the thought and shamefully excited about the other possibilities his desire would present her.

New and *much* more dangerous aspects to the game...

"No." He caught the unspoken subtext of the question, shaking his head. "I am not interested in... in *clicket*."

He said the word with a rare show of awkwardness, apparently unable to come up with a dryer or more gentlemanly word than that. Which was oddly adorable, coming from such a mean and confident man. He could threaten to murder her without any difficulty, but he was on the verge of blushing from the mere possibility of saying the word "*fucking*."

An odd man.

"My body does not work that way." He finished.

"What is this 'clicket'?" She asked in a serious tone, relaxing now that she was fairly certain there would be no fight. For whatever reason, she believed him. He wasn't going to hurt her. A man who was interested in forcing himself on a woman would not awkwardly stumble over the words for it. "Is this a Krewhian custom I should know about? Something barbaric and darkly forbidden?"

She knew what it was, of course. It was when foxes were in heat and mated like furious demons.

She just wanted to hear him explain it. It would be amusing.

She smiled innocently, patiently waiting for this absolute *monster* of a man to awkwardly explain intercourse to her while he blushed and stammered like a virgin schoolmarm.

He looked like he was about to say something, then decided against it.

Damn.

“I simply want you to stay out of my way and allow me to do my job here. *Stop* purposefully making my life harder and embarrassing me in public, simply because it amuses you for some demented reason.” He stood straighter. “I will kill this beast, and then I will return to the war. I will go somewhere civilized, which recognizes that ‘wife auctions’ are a ridiculous and horrifying idea, and won’t try to hold us both to the draconian terms of one. I will drop you off with your people, wherever they may be and however *overjoyed* they undoubtedly are to currently be rid of you, and then we may both continue on with our lives and forget that this sorrowful event ever happened to either of us.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Agreed?”

“So... ‘clicket’ would be...” She made a circle with the fingers of one hand and then inserted her other index finger through it repeatedly. She raised her eyebrow questioningly. “‘Putting the devil into hell,’ yes?” She watched the mock sex act taking place with her fingers like she was captivated by it, and then took on a hoarse, excited tone. “And he burns so *sweetly...*”

Gideon made an irritated sound and decided that the conversation was over. He started to stalk away from her. “Goodbye, madam. I tire of you.”

“Why doesn’t your body ‘work that way’?” She pressed, hurrying after him. “What is it? A war wound? Has your beautiful, magnificent manhood been injured, my pet?”

“No.”

“Do... do you simply not find me attractive?” For some reason, she stumbled over the question. She wasn’t certain why, but she didn’t like the

idea.

He shrugged. “I don’t know anything about you, woman.”

“When has this ever stopped a man!?!” She was oddly insulted by this now. Her husbands thought she was insane, annoying, violent, and possibly a curse... but none of them had ever expressed a lack of interest in her body before, aside from rare mentions of her scar and flat chest. “Never! Never once has this fact held back a man’s attentions!”

She didn’t know how to deal with that news.

Bizarrely, it... rather hurt her feelings, as crazy as that sounded.

“Even if I *were* interested in frivolous contact like that, it could be had easier elsewhere and with *much* fewer maddening complications.” He finished. “I have zero interest in being married to you, I want out of this false union as swiftly as possible.”

“So, you are saying that you have absolutely no husbandly interest in me? None at all?” She paused, a new idea occurring to her. “Are you and that man ‘*Dákkru*’ a couple? Because this is fine with me. You and he can...”

“No!” He sounded horrified by the idea of so much as shaking hands with his sergeant, or anyone else, really. “I do not even enjoy his company *platonically*, let alone romantically. I am simply not excited by random women who...” He let out an annoyed sound. “WHY AM I EVEN TALKING TO YOU ABOUT THIS!?! I owe you no explanation of my thoughts or emotions.” He stormed off down the street again. “*We shall find other lodgings!*” He announced loudly, like that was somehow a brilliant plan he’d come up with on the spur of the moment, saving the army from disaster. “*Somewhere with TWO rooms!*”

“What shall we do with the second one, my most exquisite treasure? Will we make the first unfit with all of our vigorous love-making?” She hurried after him. “Do you really expect our ‘clicket’ to be so messy and destructive? Because, again, my family was from *Quebec*, so you are going to have to show me some *truly* unique and explosive acts of love for me to be *at all...*”

“You are trying your best to annoy me again.” He cut her off, voice

hard. "I still do not know what you hope to accomplish with that, but it is not going to work!" His proclamation was so loud that it surely woke everyone on the street. "*I am onto you, woman!*" He pointed at her in accusation. "You enjoy your little power games, deliberately poking at me, trying to make me furious by unleashing the full crushing weight of your baffling madness, because *you know* I have absolutely no recourse. I cannot kill you, or strike you, or lock you up in a cell which leaves you open to attack from the monster of this town..."

"Well, there is always 'clicket.'" She suggested innocently. "That would be an entertaining way for you to communicate your displeasure with me, *mon canard*. Bend me to your iron will, and break my high spirits. Take command of my soft, yielding flesh, as though it were a hostile army meekly surrendering before you, only for my womanhood to be struck down by your mighty spear, without mercy. There are no 'white flags' in love, eh?" She nodded knowingly, like it was something they both realized. Then frowned slightly. "Provided that it does not leave you too sore in the morning to stop whatever is in those woods."

"*AND* you keep bringing up unladylike matters like *that!*" He pointed at her, apparently believing that she had just proved his point. "Because you *know* it makes me uncomfortable!"

"A demonic beast stalking the town would make anyone uncomfortable. Feel no shame, my gentle lamb of romance." She agreed, her tone serious as she deliberately misinterpreted his words. "And do not fear. You are my husband now." She set her jaw in mock determination. "*I will protect you from its fiendish wrath*. If this beast-- if he takes you?" She pounded her hand against her chest again. "He takes my own heart with you! And I shall *demand* that I be sealed inside your burial crypt as well—*alive*-- clutching your noble broken body to my soft bosom, weeping for you until I can weep no more, so that we may be *forever* in each other's arms, never to part!" She crossed her arms over her chest and closed her eyes, like the dead. "Our bodies, as one-- like they so often were while we yet lived-- for all time."

"*You're doing it again!*" He complained, letting out another furious sound. "I've *asked* you to stop this game, woman! I've threatened you! I've

warned you of the consequences! But you continue to play it!” He stalked away again. “You can play with *yourself*, as I am withdrawing from the field. This is madness and I will have no part of it *or* you. If you continue to persist in this way, *I WILL NOT be responsible for what happens!*”

“You don’t want to stay here and *watch* me ‘play with myself,’ *doudou?*” She called after him, trying not to laugh. “I would allow you the sight, if you desired it! It would not even cost you a half-crown!”

He simply held up his hand in reply, either in farewell or in an annoyed dismissal of her completely, no longer engaging.

She couldn’t help but laugh, enjoying the game and his reaction.

She very seldom had anything truly *fun* in her life. And her Captain was like a breath of fresh air.

He really was shaping up to be the best husband she’d ever had. What a marvelous man. Yes, he was constantly filled with rage and had murdered her beloved family member, but still a marvelous man.

She’d chosen right.

Oh, she’d had a few misgivings at first, sure. Thoughts about other candidates. But she could tell that this marriage was going to be one of the better ones.

Provided he didn’t kill her, obviously.

The game always needed to be tailored to the target audience-- what would unnerve them the *most*-- and she had this target dead to rights. It was going wonderfully.

He’d flee this town to get away from her within mere *hours* at this rate. It might just be a record time.

She hurried to catch up with him again. “You’re really not going to talk to me anymore?”

“No.” He snapped. “I dislike this game *immensely*.”

“Very well.” She nodded sharply. “I’ll stop.” She paused for a beat. “Well, *try* to stop, anyway.”

“Endeavor to refrain.” He suggested. “As though your life depended

upon it.”

“Of course.” She nodded seriously. “The last thing I would want is to make you angry, *mon poussin*. My life without you? It would be a bottomless cave, with no hope of rescue or escape, forever wandering the solitary darkness.”

He let out a deep, tired sigh at that, not bothering to comment. “Does this horrid village at least have a lodging house of some kind?”

Verlaine helpfully pointed to the road to her right. “We are but *moments* away from falling into bed together, beloved.”

He started trudging in that direction, out of the main part of town and into the surrounding area. The street went from cobblestones to dirt, and the buildings started to be replaced by trees and open fields. The town had placed lanterns every few dozen yards, in order to chase away the supposed monster which stalked them, but even with them lit and the moon shining, it was still rather dark.

Gideon stopped walking, obviously considering something. “Can you use a long gun, woman?”

“My skill with one and my eternal desire for you, *these* are the two things I am most known for, my illicit rapturous passion.” She assured him. “They are the immutable constants of my soul, gifts from...”

“Yes or no?” He demanded, cutting her off.

“Of course, *yes*.” She was rather insulted that he even needed to ask, and her tone let him know that she considered him a fool for questioning.

He handed her his musket and removed a pistol from the holster at the small of his back. “The inn is on the right-hand side, correct?”

She nodded.

“I will watch ahead and to the right of our forward progress, you guard the left and rear. Agreed?”

She tried not to roll her eyes. This town’s paranoia was rubbing off on him, it seemed. Verlaine had only been in town a few days, having just returned from a hunt of many months, but all she seemed to hear about now was this “Beast.” Well, that and her previous husband’s shrill complaints

about her.

Still, making her Captain feel safe and secure was her responsibility now. Men were often skittish, frail creatures. Always in need of comfort and protection. So she obediently hefted up the musket, pleased that he had maintained his weapon in such fine condition. You could tell a lot about a man by the way he kept his weapon. And this man's musket was positively *immaculate*, yet looked battle tested.

"Has this creature killed anyone in town you knew?" He asked conversationally, watching for attack.

"The people of this town and I?" She shook her head. "We are not close, sweet one. This is the one benefit of being shunned and always away: when the populace is torn to shreds by a monster, you are not *personally* impacted by their horrible deaths."

He considered that for a beat, then accepted the thought with a small nod. "I have been spared many such similar bereavements in this war." He decided.

A genuine smile crossed her face. "Yes, I'll bet you have." She turned, walking with her back to his, watching for hidden beasts behind them. "There are those within the herd and those which feast upon them, my soldier of passion. This is why our love holds such remarkable power, yes?"

His eyes started scanning more and more of the shadows which surrounded them as they walked past, just in case they concealed the monster.

He was a determined man, it seemed. He kept his mind on his responsibilities, no matter what else was going on. He might get distracted while on a walk to the barracks, true, but not when lives were on the line.

She respected that.

Truly.

"How many people would you say die due to wolf attack each year in an isolated place like Nevermore County, at the edge of the wilderness?" He asked randomly.

Verlaine shrugged. "Not the wedding vows I was *expecting* to hear on my special day, but..."

“How many?” He pressed, sounding impatient.

She did some rough calculations in her head, comparing this village to others in a similar situation and climate. “Forty-five.” She estimated.

He considered that silently. “So... if almost seven score of them were to die in a given year in this one village alone, you would consider that an aberration indicating the presence of some kind of beast?”

“Or three perfectly ordinary wolves.” She deadpanned. “The math would be the same.”

He made a considering sort of sound again, obviously debating the matter with himself.

A mile outside of town, they finally arrived at the doorway to the village’s makeshift inn.

The door was locked, however. Probably due to the beast supposedly killing people.

Gideon pounded on the door. “Open this door! At once!” He demanded. “I require a room!” He paused. “*Two* rooms!” He corrected.

“How do I know you are not The Beast?” The unseen woman asked from inside, sounding suspicious.

“I am fully capable of breaking this door down, madam!” He assured her in his dour and disapproving tone. “If I *were* The Beast, I already would have done so and ripped you to pieces. Particularly once you made me suffer the unbearable indignity of shouting answers to your daft questions!” He slammed his fist against the door again, drawing her attention to it. “This door remains standing as a courtesy, something that a beast would never show! *And something which I begin to tire of granting!*”

The woman considered that. “Coin in advance.”

“Very well.”

“And I only have the one room.” The woman started fiddling with the makeshift barricade inside.

He considered that, glancing at Verlaine and then back to the door. “Very well.”

The door swung open. “Agreed. That will be...” The woman trailed off, catching sight of Gideon for the first time. She obviously hadn’t known that he was a Krewhian. “...Oh.” The woman’s expression and tone changed completely, now looking vaguely disgusted. “We don’t have any rooms.” She slammed the door again and quickly proceeded to secure it. “*Now go away!*”

Gideon stood on the doorstep, clearly running through a thousand different angry things he could scream or things he could break or...

But instead he just heaved another tired sigh.

Verlaine leaned against the side of the woman’s house, watching her new husband process the prejudice leveled against him.

He seemed used to it.

And there was something so very sad about that. She considered apologizing to him, but she wasn’t certain for what. Instead, she simply started to get angry on his behalf.

He glanced over at her, obviously thinking about something, then nodded slowly like he’d come to an important realization.

“It is difficult to live in a world which hates the sight of you. To be seen as a monster.” She agreed, knowing the pain of that. “To endure it and not let it change you into the beast they fear.”

“Perhaps...” He agreed softly, then took a step away from the door. “But then again, no change is required if you have legitimately always *been* the thing they fear.”

She opened her mouth to reply to that, but her words were cut off as her new husband smashed his full weight against the door, crashing into the home.

Verlaine stumbled away from the doorframe in shocked surprise, not expecting that. She swore in fluent Cree, amazed that he’d just... *decimate* the woman’s door. Without warning!

The innkeeper toppled to the floor, knocked down by the force of Verlaine’s new husband’s violent entry into the building.

“*Stay down.*” He growled at the woman as she tried to get to her

feet. “Her Majesty’s 1st Grenadier Guard of Segheyk.” He absently looked around the room. “I have reports of this being a clearing house for Rebel propaganda.” He glared down at the innkeeper. “If I find so much as a embroidered *patriotic pillowcase* in your possession, *I will string you up in the front yard like the traitor you are!*”

“You... uh,” Verlaine began weakly, still too shocked and rather terrified to properly articulate the issue, “*you are the Rebel now.*” She reminded him hesitantly. “Different... different flag...” she stammered out in amazement, mind fogged with surprise and horror, “you switched sides...”

“Yes. Of course.” He nodded, accepting that. “As I said: if I *don’t* find so much as an embroidered patriotic pillowcase, I will string you up and incinerate your family like the loyalist filth you are.” He corrected, pointing at the woman angrily. “You had better pray that you or your husband are at the very *least* signatories of the Declaration of American Independence, or so *help me...*”

“Will you murder her?” Verlaine wondered, genuinely curious yet afraid of his answer. “Cut her head off, like they say you did to all those innocent men?”

He put on a show of considering that. “At the moment, I am merely planning for her to be sealed inside when I torch this dwelling in the morning.”

The woman let out a terrified sound.

Verlaine snorted in nervous amusement.

Her husband didn’t laugh. Chances were very good that he was being entirely serious.

Which simply made Verlaine smile wider.

It was... madness. Pure foreign devilry, exactly as advertised.

Again, this was senseless violence which reminded her so very much of the hundreds of trapper camps she had grown up in.

She spread out her arms, inviting a passionate hug from this captivating madman. “*Mon petit fossoyeur*, my heart, she burns only for you when you talk of cruel arson. If the masses cannot understand a love such as

ours, let us seal the entire world into a civilian building and set *them all* alight! We shall dance passionately, to the music of their screams.”

He ignored that, refocusing on the innkeeper. “Now then, madam, admit your crimes so that I don’t have to ransack this building searching for deserters or enemy couriers.”

“We shall search for contraband... yet find only our illicit desire.” Verlaine called to him, dramatically holding up a hand towards the sky as she helped herself to random objects from a drawer. “If love is criminal... then give us *death!*”

He didn’t reply to that, which was disappointing.

“What the ‘ell is this, then!?!” A man’s voice shouted from the room to their left. A huge man wearing a dirty nightshirt appeared in the doorway, glaring at her in fury. The angle prevented him from seeing the Captain, just the cowering woman on the floor and Verlaine. “This your doin’, you damn witch!?!” He demanded stalking towards her.

Verlaine put up her hands in denial. “I am but an innocent bride, having a *particularly* dramatic wedding night.” She assured the man seriously. “I was not expecting hostages to spice up the carnal festivities, but...”

“I’m ‘bout to take the cost of that door out of your ass, girl!” The man assured her furiously, ignoring the fact that he literally had to step over the woman on the floor.

Verlaine took a step away from the man. “My ass costs three guineas and a crown, so...”

Verlaine’s new husband materialized from the shadows of the entryway like a ghost, catching the man from behind in a chokehold. “I advise against that plan.” He pressed his pistol against the man’s temple and cocked the weapon. “*Emphatically.*”

Verlaine’s eyebrows rose in surprise again.

Her husband was... absolutely terrifying. And he was about to kill a man in the man’s own home. Probably *two* people, in fact. Simply because they refused him a room at their inn.

Truly, the Christmas story, it would have been so VERY different if it had involved her new husband.

She swallowed, recognizing that the situation... was getting very real. Verlaine enjoyed some mischief, particularly when it was at the expense of bad people. But for the first time, she saw that her “husband” was entirely capable of killing this couple. Of shooting them both right here, in this hall, and then calmly going to bed.

He was a monster.

And *maybe* it wasn't such a good idea to egg on a monster...

The Captain caught her expression and it apparently betrayed more uncertainty about the situation than she'd known she was showing.

“It's okay.” He assured her with calm determination. “This will not be a massacre. I am merely overcome with patriotic fervor at the moment.”

She let out a snort of laughter, strangely relieved by his assurance.

Her husband motioned towards the door with his pistol. “Out.” He ordered the man. “I am seizing this house for the night.”

“But The Beast is out there!” The woman protested as her husband helped her to her feet. “It'll eat us up!”

The Captain shrugged, as if helpless. “We don't have any rooms.” He shoved the pair through the doorway and out into the night. “Now go away!” He pointed towards one of the outbuildings, which appeared to have a heavy door. “You will be fine in there.”

The pair stood in the doorway of the inn, debating.

“If you do not follow my command at once, I shall have you hanged.” Gideon warned.

“It ain't legal to hang a married woman, Captain.” The man informed him, shaking his head. “Not in Nevermore County.”

“Well then, we can't have that, now can we?” Gideon made a show of considering that for a breath. “I suppose I shall have to hang you *first*.” He warned the man, his voice retaining its usual even, icy nightmare quality. “When you have finally finished your dance at the end of the rope... she will

no longer be married. She will be a widow. And there's no law in Nevermore County against stretching the neck of a widow." Gideon smiled like a madman anticipating the carnage and death. "Isn't the law wonderful?"

The pair ran from the scene, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the crazed man who'd just invaded their home as possible.

The Captain watched from the doorway, his pistol in hand. He was either ensuring their safety on their voyage, or that they didn't try to sneak back into the home. "Did I or did I not tell them to sleep in the barn?" He complained, watching them flee. "I said nothing about running a mile back to town, while a beast stalks the night."

Watching them until he was satisfied that they were going to make the journey and weren't going to be eaten by The Beast, he then closed the door and secured it.

"Patriotic fervor." She repeated, trying not to smile.

"It springs from me in a rushing fountain, obviously." He assured her sarcastically, holstering his weapon and stalking down the hallway and into the home. "I idolize each and every traitor I am charged with assisting in this war. Surely I will name at *least two* of my children 'Benjamin Franklin,' whether they be boys or girls."

Verlaine followed her husband into the home he had just stolen for them. "Was that because of you being another race?" She pointed towards the street where the innkeeper had fled. "Or because of all the Americans you put to the sword before joining up with them?"

He shrugged. "I've stopped caring. The thing of it is, that..." He stopped in his tracks, suddenly looking around and realizing that he was randomly walking through a stranger's home. "Where are we going?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea, it was not *my* plan to take this residence through force of arms. But I follow *you*, always." She placed her hand over her heart again, pledging herself to him. "To the ends of the Earth and back, *Mon Capitaine! Neither gods nor beasts shall ever make me stray from your side!*" She looked around the interior, nodding in satisfaction. "So... at long last... I am a *homeowner*."

“You live in this town and yet do not own property?”

She shook her head, sifting through random drawers again. “The wild trail, *she* is my true home, my love. As you see, there are no inns which would accept an impotent Krewhian mercenary or a horrifically scarred voyageur mad woman. The people in this village? They have no joy or imagination, have you noticed this?”

“I am *not* impotent,” he corrected angrily, “I simply have no desire to fornicate with random *insane* women I have just met, know absolutely nothing about, *and find exceedingly annoying!*”

He’d said the word “fornicate” this time, which was a step up for him. There was only the barest hint of hesitation before he’d shouted it at her. And it was adorable.

“Again, my love, this fact sets you entirely apart from the rest of your gender.” She broke this hard news to him. “Did a woman shatter your innocent heart and take it with her? Is this why you cannot be excited by the mere sight of strange yet beautiful women now? That this is how you met her and your poor soul cannot take this kind of pain again?”

“No, don’t be preposterous.” He scoffed at the idea. “I have no hidden romantic trauma. I was simply born this way and am perfectly happy.”

“Truly?”

“No one holds my heart, assuming I even have one.”

“You are a very strange man, my love.”

“You being the arbiter of ‘normal,’ obviously.” He rolled his eyes. “This is not a complicated issue or a topic which is even fit for discussion. Since, again, we are complete strangers. I do not care what other men do or feel or want from strangers. I am not employed to understand the vapid exigencies of their hollow love lives, my career involves *shooting them*. The intricacies of their romantic existences are immaterial to whether or not the lead ball I propelled into their hearts causes the organ to cease beating.”

She blinked at him in amazement again. “You are very special, but I knew this already. It is one of the reasons why our love, it is so magical.”

She gestured back and forth between them. “You and I, sweet one? We are unique and lustrous unicorns, housed in a shed crowded with mundane baying jackasses.” She nodded to herself, closing the drawer and opening another. She casually bit down on a coin she found there to see if it was gold, then slipped it into her pocket. “It makes me happy to recognize that you will soon slaughter them all. Or at the very least, send them all fleeing into the night.”

He pointed at her pocket. “Return that coin.” He demanded. “*At once.*”

She rolled her eyes, but dropped the coin to the floor.

“No one under my command will resort to *looting.*”

“I am not *under* your ‘command,’ I obey merely because I am under the influence of the romantic magic my Gravedigger *exhumes* from the earth whenever he practices his pitiless trade.” She slammed the drawer shut in frustration. “The same mysterious force which also prevents me from reminding my beloved that, according to reports, his main difficulty in this war is remembering to pillage and *then* to burn, and not the other way around.” She gestured to their surroundings. “And, obviously, I refrain from pointing out the fact that he has already looted this entire *dwelling*, and thus everything inside it, whether the coin is in my pocket or on the floor.”

“No. Looting.” He insisted flatly.

They made their way towards the back of the house, where the kitchen area was located. “At last... it is *ours.*” She informed him, picking up a parcel of fishing hooks from the table and then glancing around for somewhere to store it. Not finding anywhere, she simply tossed it into one of the baskets hanging from the ceiling.

“This is temporary, obviously.” He slowly sat down in one of the chairs next to the stove. “Tomorrow, I shall settle things with the innkeeper or arrange a solution inside the barracks.”

“You aren’t happy here?” She made a show of turning in a circle in the small interior, smiling widely. “Our first home! Is this not everything you ever dreamed, my love?” She absently gestured to the unlit fireplace, waving a hand at it in dismissal. “We need no fire to keep out the cold, our

burning desire will keep us warm this winter!”

“You’re doing it again.” He shook his head. “*Don’t.*”

“You’re practically a landed gentleman already.” She decided, tapping her finger against her tooth, trying to think of what she was forgetting. “You take on that commanding tone, and I immediately think you the lord of this manor. I would kneel... but I fear, deep in my anxious female heart, that I may fall to my knees and then be carried away by my *desperate yearning* hunger for you and try something else, *mon petit chou à la crème.*” She shook her head. “That would be a sin before God to do such a forbidden, unspeakable thing. Even for husband and wife.” She took on a huskier voice again, as if eager and aroused by the possibilities. “Unless you were to *force me...*”

He showed no outward reaction to that, which was rather surprising.

Most men would have at least had a change of expression when you basically told them to push you to your knees and force you to pleasure them with your mouth, implying that their climax would taste like a cream puff.

But not this man.

He really wasn’t lying about his lack of interest in casual love.

He was an odd fellow, her husband.

This marriage was so exciting!

“You simply do not stop, do you?” He finally said, sounding equal parts tired, annoyed, and halfway amused. “I have never met anyone so single-mindedly dedicated to lunacy. It’s almost inspiring, really. I wish I could find soldiers able to drum up that kind of commitment to something.”

She opened one of the side rooms. “Our room is here.” She elaborately swept out her arm towards the bed. “*That’s* where the magic will happen, my love. Where our many children will be conceived and your noble dynasty secured.”

“Thrilling.” He rested his elbow on the table in front of him and gestured to their surroundings with his other arm. “To think, one day this shall all be theirs.”

She snorted in amusement again, enjoying that.

“What am I forgetting?” She asked herself, squinting at her surroundings.

“Sanity?” He tried. “The social graces? Reality?”

She laughed pleasantly. “Oh, surely not. I never had any of those. If I had, obviously I would share them with you *immediately*, my love stallion.” She snapped her fingers. “A-ha! Food!” She pointed at him. “You are hungry, yes? Men, they are *always* hungry, I know this, surely.”

And she was a married woman again, which meant that it was *her* responsibility to provide for her loving, beautiful husband. What a wonderful and joyful burden, hers was.

“I have some rations in my satchel, if you’d like to share, we...” He began, clearly frightened by the idea of her cooking.

She ignored that, stalking towards the fireplace. She lifted the musket off the mantle, quickly loaded it from the supplies on her belt, then opened the back door and fired it off into the darkness.

Gideon let out a surprised sound at the explosion of powder so close to his head, nearly falling from his chair. “*Mother of Christ!*” He scrambled to his feet, hand falling to his weapon as the interior of the room filled with black powder smoke. “Are we beset by...”

She ignored that, marching off into the darkness and returning a moment later with a dead mockingbird. She tossed it onto the table in front of him, then removed a knife from her waist and jammed its point down into the tabletop next to him, missing his hand by less than half an inch. “You clean this one, I shall go shoot you *many* more.” She promised him, already heading for the door.

He stared down at the twitching, shattered remains of the small bird for a long moment, then shook his head sadly. “I truly detest this marriage.”

Chapter Four

The next morning, Gideon was awakened by a pounding on the door. The sound caught him off-guard and he leapt to his feet, hand immediately falling to his waist for a weapon. In the process though, he smashed his head on a basket of fishhooks which was hanging from the ceiling—for some damn reason-- and nearly succeeded in gouging out an eye.

His sleep-fogged vision rapidly scanned the unfamiliar space, trying to determine where the hell he even was and who the hell had kidnapped him to this awful place...

Then he remembered.

And he let out an annoyed groan.

He set about trying to pry the hooks from his uniform and skin, while walking to open the door, cursing this room, county, country, and life.

He had insisted upon sleeping in the main area of the inn, literally as far from the woman as possible. Not only so that there were no misunderstandings, but also because he wasn't quite sure what she'd do.

The woman was quite mad, clearly. He wouldn't put it past her to stab him in his sleep.

The knocking at the door continued.

He had ruined the woman's reputation, such as it was. If and when her *actual* husband returned, he would NOT be happy to learn that Gideon had slept in the house alone with the woman. If the situations were reversed, this was a matter of honor which only a duel could settle.

If another man was anywhere near *his* sleeping wife, Gideon would have shot the man dead and thought nothing of it.

But Gideon had a long list of complaints to yell at the woman's errant husband in return, and was already planning on calling the man out to

settle this. Both because of his treatment of Gideon and because of his treatment of the woman. He'd had *enough*, and would take great pleasure in ripping that man to pieces at the next opportunity.

Gideon grabbed the handle and wrenched the door open. "WHAT!?!!" He demanded loudly, angry at being disturbed and ready to unleash that fury upon this interloper.

Dákkru did not react at all to the door suddenly opening or to the volume of Gideon's greeting. He'd known Gideon for years at this point, and apparently expected the reaction. "Ah, *here* you are." The man invited himself in, looking around the space. "Been searching for you half the night. Had to start asking around town to see where the Mad Trapper's Daughter might kidnap one of her victims." He frowned slightly at the fish hooks scattered everywhere, but didn't ask about them. "Had it been anyone else but you, I would have reported them to the provost for desertion and prepared for a hanging." He nodded at the idea. "Killed by your insane one-eyed bride on your wedding night." He made a mock regretful sound. "That'd be a helluva way to die, sir."

"I have had the Devil's own night, Dákkru." He shook his head angrily, throwing one last fish hook against the wall in irritation. "I am in no mood this morning, I warn you."

"Well, it's your first night of wedded bliss, sir." Dákkru frowned at the collection of mounted heads on the wall, some of which were animals that looked bizarre. "It... it will take some getting used to." He pointed at one of the trophies. "Does that animal have two heads?"

Sure enough, the buck on the wall had two faces: a normal one and then a smaller and misshapen one running up the right side. The disturbing birth defect gave the animal a frightening and grotesque appearance.

It had *not* been there last night. So his new bride must have retrieved it from somewhere and placed it on the wall as a sign that she claimed ownership of this establishment, or she somehow hunted the animal in secret during the night and silently mounted it.

Gideon didn't have time to debate which option he found more disturbing, as both were frightening portraits of her diseased mind.

“Who cares about some damn animal head!?!” Gideon glared at him, buttoning up his shirt and searching for his jacket. “*My night* was spent wandering the streets, searching for lodgings.”

“I heard.” Dákkru nodded. “The innkeeper and her husband apparently told half the town that some ‘foreign savage and his demon whore of a wife’ stole her house.”

“She is NOT my wife!” Gideon protested.

Dákkru gestured over his shoulder, ignoring that correction. “They’d already fled town by the time I got there though, I doubt they’ll ever be back. Whatever you told them here, scared them so bad, I don’t...”

“I simply asked to sleep here.” He pointed to the chair next to the table. “*Alone.*” He wanted to make sure that there was no misunderstanding on that issue. He grabbed his hat from the table, angrily waving it at his subordinate. “*And I am in no way married to anyone!*”

Dákkru shrugged. “I don’t care if you break into some Colonials’ home so that you have space to diddle the longhunter woman, Captain, no matter to me. Don’t think it’d matter much to anyone, frankly. Whole town seems fine with you doin’ whatever you like to your new ‘bride.’ She is possibly the only person in this colony even *less* popular than you are. If you wanted to mistreat the woman in your bed, half the town would pay to watch her cruelly humiliated.”

“I do not.” Gideon told him flatly, trying not to think about such a thing. There were rare occasions when his own terrible reputation bothered him. This was one of those times.

God, he hated the people of this town.

He might have... *dramas* with his new “wife,” but the thought of anyone rejoicing in her suffering made him furious.

Dákkru frowned down at the remains of the dinner of dead birds, which were still arranged in an orderly pile on their blood-soaked plate. They reeked of death and black powder. The man apparently decided not to ask about them. “Not to contradict you though, but I did follow your orders from last night?”

“Yes?” Gideon perked up, hoping for a delivery from this hellish situation.

“Took me all morning, while also looking for you, sir. But Judge Sharpe? The closest thing to a ‘legal expert in these parts aside from the Magistrate what’s-his-name,’ you ordered me to find?” He leaned against the fireplace surround. “Found him outside of town, headed for Eiji Bay for a hanging. Frankly, I think he was just using that as an excuse to escape ‘The Beast.’ Anyway, he says that despite your claim... according to the laws followed by Nevermore County, that woman is now your wife.”

“*Preposterous!*” Gideon erupted, already planning on hunting that man down and forcing some sense into him. “I’ll go over his head! *Someone* in this blasted county has got to see reason! I need to get out of here, away from this woman, and back to the war!” He gestured to his surroundings. “I *don’t* belong in this town! I am a *Colonel!* *NOT a Captain!* And the longer I am stuck here, wasting my time in this god-forsaken place, trying to juggle a supposed ‘beast’ and an *entirely* illegitimate ‘marriage’ to a crazy woman, the more likely it is that I’m *never* going to regain my former rank!” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Did you tell him this? That I *demand* to be freed from this illegal sham!?!”

“He says that there’s ‘the law’ and then there’s ‘the rules people follow,’ and that you’ll never be able to convince anyone in this county that she’s not yours. You bought her, you’re stuck with her now. To them, it’s all legal and proper.” Dákkru shook his head helplessly. “He says that people here don’t like the ‘Mad Trapper’s Daughter,’ they think she’s not right in the head, and they’ll be glad to foist her off on you, no matter the laws. Because they don’t like you either. He thinks that ‘you deserve each other.’” He shrugged. “But she’s not a whore or anything, just crazy, if that matters to you.”

“It does not.” Gideon told him, his tone having an edge he had not even intended. “In the slightest.”

“Of course not, sir. Sorry, sir, just reporting what I was told.” Dákkru nodded, recognizing his commanding officer’s unhappiness with the topic of Gideon’s wife’s chastity, whether or not he was legally married to the woman. Dákkru wisely backed off the matter entirely. “He suggests you

resign yourself to wedded bliss, sir, or leave the county and never return, as you'll be charged with abandonment if you do. It was implied that they would all *love* to hang you, if you give them even the slightest reason.”

Gideon opened his mouth to swear a vicious oath of hatred and revenge against the legal profession of this whole prospective country, but he didn't get the chance.

“My pet?” The bedroom door flew open and Verlaine stood in the doorway, wearing only a blanket wrapped around her. “Are you coming back to bed? You know I get so lonely. Come tie me up and pretend I am a captured patriot woman again, and you are...” She trailed off when she saw Dákkru, quickly pulling the blanket further up onto her shoulders. “Oh, we have guests! I am so sorry, I feel so embarrassed.”

Gideon's mouth fell open in absolute astonishment.

She was just... standing there, half dressed! It was shocking! Such behavior was unacceptable!

The blanket was pulled tight across the woman's small breasts, leaving very little to the imagination. One leg was naked up to her hip, without any kind of stocking or covering of any kind...

Gideon's eyes drank in the naked flesh, particularly noticing how the woman's chest rose and fell, pressing her breasts against her wrists as she held the blanket up to cover her shame.

For some reason, he started imagining her dropping the blanket...

He still wasn't interested in the woman like that. He'd just been at war a long time, and the sight of a female body so unclothed was liable to make him pay attention, even if he wasn't ever overcome with lust for strangers. There was a difference between noticing the woman's delightful and demure little breasts, and wanting to immediately have sex with her though. Especially since the body in question belonged to an absolute stark raving *maniac*.

He didn't know this woman, and he'd seen lots of attractive, half-naked women in his life without losing his senses.

She knew this. He'd told her all of this last night, for some damn

reason. She knew he was not in any way interested in her in that way. She was *deliberately* mocking him now, and further ruining her own reputation in the process!

And Dákkru was in the room, which made this depraved behavior even *worse*.

He briefly considered yelling at the man to get the hell out, but then remembered that HE wanted to get the hell out too. No matter what kind of game this woman was playing, he wasn't interested in it.

"Put some clothes on, woman! For God's sake!" He gestured at Dákkru. *"Do you not see him standing here!?! You are not decent!"*

"This is not what you said last night, my love." She retorted in a teasing voice, which shouldn't have had the impact on him that it did. *"Last night... you told me I was 'amazing.'"*

"She is mad, pay no attention to her lies." He advised his sergeant, tearing his gaze away from the woman's appealing but insane form. *"She is just trying to get a reaction from me. But it's not going to work."*

Dákkru continued staring at the woman.

"I said: don't. look." Gideon warned him, voice dead cold and with a dangerous edge, which this time was *very much* intentional.

Dákkru caught the note of furious warning in the words, and his gaze immediately fell to the floor. *"Sorry, sir."* He stammered. *"I'll try not to, sir."*

"Was your friend staying for breakfast?" Verlaine asked innocently, then lowered her voice into a husky whisper, slipping the blanket an inch lower. *"Or... for something more?"*

"You are being inappropriate again!" Gideon screamed at her. *"You're making an embarrassment of yourself, woman! Show some pride! Discipline!"* He pointed at her room. *"Dress yourself at once!"*

The woman retreated into her room, disappearing from the doorway.

"Was... was that the reaction she wanted?" Dákkru wondered, looking uncomfortable yet intrigued by the strangeness of this situation.

Gideon shrugged angrily, making his way further from the door and lowering his voice so that she couldn't hear him. "Our main goal should be to foist this maniac off on someone else, Dákkru. *Anyone*. Just so long as we are free of her."

"Perhaps our main goal should be to stop The Beast that's eating people, sir." Dákkru argued. "That's why I came looking for you."

The woman suddenly appeared in the doorway again, now fully dressed in her hunting buckskin jacket and pants, which she'd either retrieved from the same mysterious location as the malformed deer head on the wall, or simply stole from the belongings of this building's previous owner. The outfit covered almost all of her skin, but now that he'd seen her wearing so little, he couldn't help but imagine her that way again.

Her body moving beneath the fabric...

Which had been her plan all along!

DAMMIT! She wouldn't win this!

"Ah, now I am ready to face the day." She spread her arms wide at seeing him. "And spend it in your strong arms, *mon ours*." She walked by him, reaching up to pat his face affectionately. "'*Je t'aime chaque jour avantage*.' Every day. Every day, my love for you grows."

"I said: *NO FRENCH!*" Gideon reminded her, yet again.

"Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, I hate to impose on your home like this, especially on such a special day." Dákkru respectfully removed his hat to talk to the woman, then refocused on Gideon. "But there's been another attack, sir." Dákkru informed him, voice tight. "A bad one. A few miles from town."

Gideon nodded, considering that. "How do you *know* that 'every day your love for me grows,' *SINCE WE HAVEN'T EVEN KNOWN EACH OTHER TWENTY-FOUR HOURS YET!*" He yelled at the woman, feeling irritated by her attitude, particularly with someone else around. "*Make sense, damn you!*"

Dákkru cleared his throat. "Sir?"

Gideon let out another furious sound, feeling frustrated. His entire

morning was ruined by this woman's madness. And, possibly, his sergeant's presence.

"*I heard you, yes.*" Gideon snapped, glaring at the man. "Very tragic, but not unexpected given the situation."

Unfortunately, if he went to the scene now, that madwoman would follow him there. He was certain of it...

"We shall have something to eat, and then go." Gideon made a show of innocently looking around the room. "I see no food though..."

"If my loving husband requires food, I would beg on the streets for it." His sinister false bride announced dramatically. "I would *crawl*, over burning hot coals, in order to feed him, even if it were but a crumb." She casually grabbed her weapon from the wall and strolled towards the backdoor of the cabin, expertly loading the weapon faster than anyone in his army could have managed. Despite her madness, the woman seemed to have genuine talent with the weapon. It was... impressive. Truly. "I will go and find my darling his breakfast." She pointed at Dákkru. "And for his dear friend, who I do not know in the slightest, but whom already, I love so fervently as well." She blew Gideon a kiss. "Farewell! Every moment we are parted, my heart, she will cry out for you in desperate, manic torment!"

Gideon made a non-committal dismissive sound, watching the door close.

"Sir, shouldn't we..." Dákkru began.

Gideon quickly held up a hand to quiet him. "Shh!" He pointed towards the door. "Wait." He mouthed, eyes squinting in paranoid suspicion.

She was still there. Listening. He could *feel* it.

They were both silent, listening to the sound of her footsteps as she finally walked away from the inn. When he was certain that he'd waited long enough, he rapidly moved to the front door.

"Run." He commanded his sergeant, moving with all haste. "Quickly, man! Quickly! *She will be back at any moment!*"

He sprinted towards the small stable area, not even bothering to

ensure that Dákkru was still with him. At this point, if the man fell behind, he was on his own.

Dákkru had brought Gideon's horse with him this morning, and Gideon quickly checked the saddle on his mount to ensure it was attached properly. A breath later and he was racing from the scene, thankful that he'd left that insane woman behind him forever.

1 Hour Later

"You keep looking to our rear." Dákkru observed, turning in his saddle and trying to determine what the issue was. "Why?"

"Nothing." Gideon shook his head, spurring his horse onward. "I am simply ensuring that there are no 'beasts' following us." He checked the road behind them again. "The attack? It didn't happen anywhere near that inn did it?" He wondered, trying to sound casual. "The Beast of this town, it is..."

"The attack was miles away, no." Dákkru confirmed, pointing down the road in front of them.

Gideon nodded, oddly reassured by that for some reason.

Not because he was concerned about the woman, as that would be ridiculous. He simply felt partially responsible for her being outside of the safety of the building, and if she were hurt by this monster as a result of his asking her to go hunt food, that would be a terrible way to begin his campaign against The Beast.

But now that he had checked into it, he could forget about the safety of the citizenry in town and return to his duty of hunting The Beast itself.

He looked over his shoulder again, just to make sure.

He should have locked the crazy woman up, he decided. Dragged her from the isolation of the inn and tossed her into a cell in the village center. Put some guards on the doors.

He paused, wondering if his mind was creating that scene in order to keep the crazed woman from pestering him or to keep The Beast from slaying her.

In either case, it is what he *should* have done.

As he was still debating the matter, he spotted something a hundred yards off the road. He immediately halted and dismounted, hand going to his pistol.

Dákkru followed suit, hurrying to keep pace as Gideon stalked through the dying weeds and underbrush in the late fall weather. “Sir?”

Gideon ignored him, gaze remaining fixed on his target.

Ahead of them, half-hidden behind a tree trunk, was a massive animal.

Gideon leveled his pistol at it, preparing to fire as he continued forward. When he got within twenty paces however, he could tell that it would not be necessary.

He could smell that this animal had been dead for some time.

Sprawled at his feet was the mangled, decomposing body of a giant grizzly bear. Bigger than any Gideon had ever seen before, although admittedly, his travels on this continent had not been extensive.

Still... this creature had to weigh close to fifteen hundred pounds. Its paws were *massive*, with claws as large as boot knives. This was a monster which could easily kill anything else in the forest, men included.

And something had torn it to shreds. There were large bite marks on its neck and stomach, blood and entrails strewn about the forest floor.

It was not the work of scavengers. Something had killed and made an easy meal of this monster.

Gideon stared at the carnage in silence, breathing through his mouth to keep from retching from the stench of a thousand pounds of bear meat rotting away. It was the kind of smell you could taste, it seemed to permeate your entire consciousness until all there was left inside you was that ungodly stench and the writhing mass of maggots which had once been this animal's eyes.

“You ever see anything like that?” He asked his sergeant, gesturing to the mangled bear’s wounds, making an effort to keep his voice steady.

Dákkru simply shook his head, swatting at the swarm of flies which were buzzing around the area like a storm cloud. “No, sir.” He said softly, transfixed and looking nauseated by the bloody horror. “I have not...” He swallowed, face pale. “What could have done something like this to such a creature...?” He whispered, like it was a plea to the Heavens for an answer or for protection.

Gideon turned to look back into the forest, suddenly feeling exposed here. This animal had been dead for at least a day, but there was something about it which prompted feelings of paranoia.

He *deeply* hated the thick woods.

He motioned for his sergeant to follow him back to their mounts, and a moment later they were riding away.

To the scene of some other horror which had befallen this village.

Chapter Five

It took them another twenty minutes, but they finally arrived at their destination and Gideon dismounted, scanning the new location

On the side of the road was an overturned wagon, and there were footprints and drag marks running off into the field to its right.

Something horrible had happened here. This was going to be so much worse than whatever had happened to the bear.

You could feel it in the air.

As was his custom, Gideon quickly double-checked all of his supplies and arms, ensuring that they were all present and in working order. He couldn't determine fate. Only God knew what destiny held for him each day. But by being meticulous about his arms and supplies, Gideon felt like he was helping to make his own survival more of a possibility. It gave him the illusion of control, if nothing else.

Discipline kept you alive.

He nodded at Dákkru as the man finished up his own check of equipment, and then they both made their way towards the scene.

Brophy hurried over, looking sick.

“What is the butcher's bill today?” Gideon demanded.

“Looks like two more victims, sir.” The boy reported, voice breaking. “The man in the wagon and Joseph Marcy's youngest girl.”

Gideon nodded, continuing to survey the area.

A balding man was crouching down near one of the bodies, writing something in his book. He looked up as Gideon approached, squinting up at him in the morning sun. “Oh, excuse me.” He quickly got to his feet and extended his hand. “Doctor Oliver Shaw.”

Gideon looked down at the blood covering the man's hand and

ignored his attempt at the handshake. “What can you tell us, Doctor?”

Shaw looked taken aback by the social slight for a moment, then glanced down at his own bloody hand and quickly wiped it off on his pant leg. “Well, Captain, not much.” He squatted down by the mangled remains again. “There’s not much left of young Alice here, as you can see.” He started pointing out the pieces with his pencil. “An arm, one of her legs, part of her torso...” He trailed off, looking sick. “I have tended to her family since her father was a lad, Captain.” He stood back up, chin quivering. “But this...”

“Sir?” One of his men came running over to Gideon. “Sir, your...” He spotted the body and froze, staring at the bloody horror which had been a young girl the night before. Then he started retching and moved to the side to vomit into the grass.

Gideon had seen countless corpses in war. Been responsible for many of them. Ordinarily, he would severely castigate any soldier who had such a weak stomach for seeing the dead. And he’d immediately put them on burial detail until such time as they grew out of their childish nonsense.

In this case though, he entirely understood. This wasn’t merely a corpse, this was a massacre. Whatever had gotten to this teenage girl had chewed her up and spit her out. This was senseless violence and horror.

And Gideon was truly grateful that he hadn’t had breakfast this morning.

...For reasons *other* than it most likely being another helping of raw, twitching mockingbirds, obviously.

“We... we haven’t found her head yet, Captain. It is simply not here.” Doctor Shaw swallowed, looking similarly ill. His gaze was fixed on the horizon, like he couldn’t even stand to see the reddened ground where he stood. “I’ve... I’ve been at the scene of most of these attacks.” He met his eyes. “They are getting worse. More brutal. More brazen.” He turned to look off towards the nearest section of woods, which ran along the field beside them. “Whatever this thing is? It’s... it’s not going to stop.”

Gideon stared into the dark woods, feeling the familiar sensation of being watched.

He finally tore his gaze away from the tree line, trying to ignore the primitive sensation of alarm. He refocused on the soldier who had just finished vomiting. The lad coughed again, then spit into the grass, trying to regain his breath and composure.

“Have you collected yourself, Perkins?” He asked calmly.

The man nodded. “Yes, sir.” He swallowed again, still looking nauseous. “Sorry, sir.”

“It’s quite alright.” He assured the boy softly.

Perkins stared down at the ground at his feet, which was stained with the girl’s gore and his vomit. He quickly looked up at the sky, the sunlight reflecting off his tear-stained cheeks. “It’s just... it’s just I *know her*, sir. I recognize the dress. That’s Alice Marcy.” He sounded a thousand miles away. “...I just saw her at the dance. She... she was wearing blue...” His voice broke, tears starting to stream down his face once more. “She looked like an angel...”

“I see.” Gideon nodded at the boy. “We will ensure that she is treated with dignity, son. You’ve done enough for her at the moment.” He spun on his heel and whistled loudly at Dákkru, making a motion with his hand. “Go over there and see to the horses now, Perkins. That’s an order.”

A moment later, his sergeant arrived to remove the lad from the scene before he fainted in the blood.

Gideon watched him go, feeling like he hated his current foe more intensely than he’d ever hated anyone in war.

These kills were... senseless.

War should kill soldiers who were prepared for it. Not little girls.

“Sir,” Brophy called suddenly, interrupting his silent musings, “sir, your wife is here, sir!”

“My what!?!” Gideon’s head snapped around in amazement. “She is *not* my wife! You cannot simply buy a wife at auction, Brophy! Particularly when you offered no bid for her!”

Brophy began to reply to that, but was then pushed aside by Verlaine, who was making her way onto the scene, as if she didn’t have a care in the

world. She smiled when she saw him, spreading out her arms in greeting. “Ah, how I’m missed you! But our reunion, it will be sweet enough to make us forget the bitter sting of ever parting, no?” She pointed back towards her horse. “Fear not, I have packed your breakfast with me. So fresh the bird yet struggles for breath, praying to unknown avian gods to spare its feathered soul!”

Gideon looked up at the sky, trying to resist the urge to simply draw his pistol and shoot either himself or Verlaine. Possibly both. *Anything* to end this irritation.

Doctor Shaw wandered back over, more blood on his coat. “Captain, I wonder if you’d like to inspect the other body now? It’s...” He trailed off, noticing Verlaine. “Who’s that?”

“That’s...” Gideon tried to think of a sane way to introduce her, then recognized that he didn’t care enough about the man to even attempt it, “*never mind her*, focus on the corpse, damn you.” He snapped his fingers several times and pointed at the body, drawing the doctor’s attention back to his work and away from Gideon’s fake wife. “The corpse, man! *The corpse!*”

Verlaine absently began to look around the scene, apparently even more used to the sight of bloody carnage than he was. She frowned slightly. “Have you vomited, my pet?” She pointed at the grass nearby and made a commiserating face. “Your stomach, it is as gentle as your soul, it seems. My poor, innocent lamb.”

“A girl is *dead*.” He reminded her flatly. “We are standing in her blood. And whatever did this, it’s going to do it again.” He took a calming breath. “I understand that your madness commands you to do nonsensical things to irritate me, but can that wait until a time when I’m *not* up to my ankles in the Marcy girl?”

The woman’s amused and teasing smile faded, and she nodded at him solemnly, acknowledging the gravity of the situation.

He stalked towards his men, who were assembled in the road. “I want a firing line, right here.” He gestured to the sunken ditch running along the edge of the road, providing them some cover. “If anything unknown

approaches from the woods or the field, I want you to fire a volley. *Bring it down.*”

“Sir!” Brophy suddenly called, leveling his shaking musket at the road. “Someone is approaching, sir!” He sounded panicked. “*Should we fire!?!*”

Gideon turned to look down the road, where a carriage was approaching, along with an honor guard. The horseman in front was flying the American flag.

“*Give me that!*” Gideon grabbed the musket out of Brophy’s hand. “I said I wanted you to shoot at deadly animals in the woods and field, *not* open up upon every passerby on the road.” He slammed the weapon back into the boy’s hands, knocking him back a step from the force of the motion. “I have enough trouble on this assignment without needing to explain to my superiors why one of my men set up a sniper position on the only road in or out of Tarasque Creek and began *picking off the town’s administrators.*”

“Sorry, sir.” Brophy choked out weakly, still fumbling with his weapon. “Won’t happen again, sir.”

Gideon rolled his eyes, wishing that he’d been given Segheyki troops, rather than these Colonial children.

The carriage stopped nearby and the men inside walked towards him. Gideon immediately recognized Magistrate Duhamel, but the other man was one he didn’t know.

Which could only mean that the city’s chief official had arrived.

Perfect. Just what Gideon needed today.

“Captain Wlkwos!” Duhamel rushed forward, extending his hand in greeting. “We heard the news about there being a new attack.” He shook his head. “Such a damnable pity, obviously. But don’t worry, no one blames you for not having prevented this.”

Gideon stared at him, not feeling the need to react or reply. He was of the opinion that if you acknowledged such stupidity, it simply multiplied.

The Magistrate looked momentarily confused by his non-reaction, but quickly moved on. “Captain, I would like to introduce you to

Burgermeister Otto Portefaix.” He gestured to the man walking up next to him. He was older and as thin as twice skimmed milk, carrying himself with an importance which Gideon did not believe he held. “He answers directly to Governor Carpenter *himself*.”

“I’m sure I would be impressed by this news, if I knew who that was.” Gideon heaved a sigh. “Is he here for a *reason*, or...”

“Captain!” The man in question extended his arm in an exuberant and friendly greeting, which was entirely an act. Personally, Gideon would rather be greeted by a pistol than with feigned friendship. At least with the former, you knew where you stood. “I wish we could be meeting under different circumstances, but your reputation has preceded you.”

“Yes, I’m sure it has.” He knew *exactly* what his own reputation consisted of, and he didn’t care a toss about it. He glanced around, trying to spot Verlaine and ensure that she was staying out of any insane mischief. But thankfully, at the moment, she seemed to simply be walking the road, staring down at the dirt. Then he refocused on his guests. “*Why are you here, Burgermeister?*”

The man didn’t seem insulted by the sharp tone Gideon had used. Instead, he merely readjusted the powdered wig he was wearing. “Captain, I am simply here to represent the town’s best interests, I suppose you could say. That is my job, after all.” He pointed at Gideon. “The Governor, he heard of our troubles and in his great wisdom, he chose to contact *your* superiors for help. And they have sent you to us.” He started to walk down the road, obviously expecting Gideon to follow. “I just want to make sure that in all of this, we don’t lose sight of...” He noticed that Gideon hadn’t moved from his original spot, and quickly retreated to where Gideon was still standing. He pretended not to notice. “Well, that we don’t lose sight of the fact that, in essence, you are doing the city’s business right now.”

“Am I?”

The Burgermeister nodded. “And as *I* am in charge of this city, I wanted to contact you and ensure that you understood that anything you need to aid you in your work, I would be only too happy to provide. The last thing we need is someone unfamiliar with this area and its people shouting to the heavens with more of this ‘beast’ nonsense everyone is going on about. It

would be much better—for the community—if we just kept things in-house, so to speak.” He gestured to another man who was arriving on the scene in another carriage, flanked by a team of men on horseback. “That’s why I think it’s best for you to remain in a strictly *advisory* capacity, I suppose you could say.” He puffed out his chest in obvious pride. “I have brought in an expert to deal with this pest.”

A man exited the carriage and started toward them. He was tall and dressed in fine silk. He did not look like a man from the frontier or the military, he looked like he’d just arrived from the Parisian court.

He moved with an easy confidence and from the way the other men hurried to get out of his way, this man had great respect among his command.

The man gave a perfect gentlemanly bow. “Ah, good afternoon, Captain. How fortuitous, I am Jonah Ceely.” He paused, clearly for added drama. “*Wolf hunter.*”

Gideon glanced down at his extended hand but did not shake it. He made a doubting sound, his expression unchanging. “Brilliant.”

Ceely looked Gideon up and down, smiling. “*Beautiful Goddess Striferia below the waves, send your winds to fill our sails, let...*” he began in an overly theatrical tone, reciting the most dramatic moment from *Oath of the Tattered Flag*, as the Segheyki hero prepared to launch his final doomed naval voyage.

“That is *not* necessary.” Gideon immediately cut him off. “I am familiar with the play.”

Ceely was too involved with his monologue to hear him. “*...our swords be sharp as lightning and our cannons true as thunder! Ahoy destiny! Onward to glory!...*”

Magistrate Duhamel started to clap, looking truly moved by the reading. “Marvelous...”

Ceely nodded, accepting the praise like a man who knew he’d earned it. “I was once a guest of Sebastian Sinclair, at his estate in Kestlefordshire.” Ceely bragged, obviously thrilled with this fact. “A majestic man.”

“Were *I* the one locked in a dwelling with the man, only one of us

would emerge alive.” Gideon informed him, voice dead. “His work is pure sentimental tosh.”

Ceely straightened his spangled jacket, ignoring that. “My role here is simply to take some of the weight off of your shoulders.” The man assured him, the gold trimmings and sparkly bobbles of his coat shining in the sun. “The important thing is that we stop this beast.” His eyes narrowed at Gideon, arriving at last to his main point. “I do not need *amateurs* interfering with my work and delaying my success.”

Gideon did not reply to that, debating whether or not to simply shoot him and get on with his day. “To be clear: it makes no difference to me whether you kill this animal or I do.” He finally informed him, going with reason and calm for the first time ever. “So long as it is dead, I am satisfied.”

“All I need from you is to stay out of my way.” Ceely repeated bluntly.

“Nothing would make me happier than to never see you again.” Gideon agreed, believing that the man had just done him a personal favor and offered the very thing he craved. He pointed to the road. “I should warn you however, The Beast has killed thirty-two men on this road in the last two weeks alone. So if you choose to go down this path to chase your ‘success,’ make sure to write your name on your boots so that we can identify your corpse when we find it.” He paused meaningfully. “*If we find it.*”

“Those were all isolated and tragic incidents, Captain.” The Burgermeister corrected.

“Thirty-two.” Gideon repeated in a deadpan. “On this one stretch of road alone. That doesn’t form a ‘pattern’ of identical isolated incidents, it’s a blasted *mosaic.*”

“There’s no need to try to spread panic,” The Burgermeister continued, “when this village needs to remain calm and celebrate another successful harvest.”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Gideon’s tone was utterly dry. “Most inconsiderate of the victims to die like that. Such a distraction from the party.”

To his surprise, Ceely gestured to something over Gideon’s shoulder. “I say, look at that woman over there.” He said randomly,

apparently completely uninterested in how many people his quarry had killed so far.

Gideon didn't need to turn around to know who he was talking about. "I try not to." Gideon shook his head. "I find that it simply encourages her."

Ceely squinted at Verlaine. "Does she dress as a man in order to fight in the war?"

"If she does, she's not doing a very good job of it." Gideon shook his head. "She is many things, but 'mistakable for a man' is one thing she is not."

"Who is she?"

"That's the Captain's wife. The Mad Trapper's Daughter." The Burgermeister shared, looking as irritated with that status as Gideon was.

"She is *not* my wife." Gideon snarled. "She is simply the result of a fabricated bid at the wife auction."

"You cannot buy a wife at auction." Ceely looked horrified by the idea. "How ghastly."

"Yes!" Gideon pointed at the man in gratitude, drawing the crowd's attention to the truth he spoke. "*Exactly* as I have said, Ceely. Good man."

Ceely gaped at Verlaine again, and for some reason Gideon was becoming more and more irritated by it. "You allow your wife to dress as a man?"

"I dress as a man every day and have no objection to the practice, why would I care if she followed suit?"

Ceely made a sputtering sound. "It's not proper."

"I shall soon either become a Colonel again or be killed in action by a monster, and I fail to see how my wife's attire materially impacts either of those eventualities. As such, *she can dress as she bloody well likes.*" He paused, eyes narrowing as the other man continued to watch Verlaine. "Stop looking at my fake wife, Ceely." The words came out in a predatory sort of growl, and not even Gideon was certain why. "*Immediately.*"

The wolf hunter did not look pleased by Gideon's attitude, but stopped staring at Verlaine. "I thought your people were all supposed to be simple poets who loved the sea? What happened?"

"Poor impulse control." Gideon threatened darkly.

The Burgermeister cleared his throat, intervening before there was an altercation. "The only thing that matters is that the Captain understands that we are grateful for his assistance and that we will call upon him *if needed*."

Gideon tried not to roll his eyes again.

A hundred people dead, and this fool was really going to argue about who was in charge of whom.

Gideon shook his head, his voice dead serious. "I do not take my orders from you, Burgermeister. *My* orders come from my Segheyki commanders, who receive *their* orders from my Queen, who has commanded us to follow the orders of General Washington and serve as his auxiliary, who has assigned me to aid your town." He met the man's eyes. "I will assist you in any way I can, but I *do not* take your orders." He pointed around the scene and lowered his voice. "If you try to get in the way of my stopping this animal? Or try to command me to do anything other than that? I will have you arrested. Or *shot*." He stalked from the scene. "You may all leave now. I have heard enough from you."

"Captain!" The Magistrate gasped in shocked horror. "You can't just..."

Gideon continued walking, ignoring him entirely.

Dákkru frowned at him as Gideon stalked by. "Aren't you supposed to be working for their office and providing any assistance they require? Weren't those our orders?"

"Were they?" Gideon pretended to be uncertain. "Who can be sure, the orders weren't totally clear. We'll have to communicate with command for a clarification and double-check that. It will take a fortnight, but at least then we can be *certain*." He continued walking. "In the meantime, we will continue providing whatever assistance we feel is best, *without* interference from these rustics."

“Does that include involving your newfound wife, who the entire town thinks is crazy, sir?” The man inquired.

“She *is* crazy, Dákkru, but she is not involved in this investigation in any way. She is simply a distraction and an obstacle. Pay her no mind.” He assured the man confidently. “I will divest myself of her chaos and then I shall shoot this monster, and *then* we can return to the war.”

Dákkru didn't look convinced.

He had heard enough from his sergeant, and made his way back to the scene of the attack. One of the guardsmen was currently standing there, holding the flag of the Colonies.

It was a gaudy thing. And it still looked too much like the flag of the East India Company. Gideon disliked it intensely.

“You are the only star on *my* flag, *mon canard*.” Verlaine assured him, walking up to stand beside him. “The only one I shall salute, until death.”

He started to tell her to go home immediately, but was interrupted by Brophy. And, obviously, the realization that the inn was not in fact their home, it was simply temporary housing which he'd borrowed from its owners. “Sorry, Sir, I don't mean to interrupt while you're with your wife, sir, but...”

Gideon spun around to pin him with a deadly look, silently reminding him once again that she was NOT his wife.

Brophy swallowed nervously. “We... we've found a witness to the attacks, sir.” He announced, hurrying away, before Gideon could yell at him.

Verlaine started walking towards where Doctor Shaw and Dákkru were speaking with a dark-haired woman.

“*Stay put*.” Gideon ordered, pointing at where she was standing. “This matter does not concern you.”

“Of course.” She agreed immediately. “I am but your humble wife, eager to obey your every gruff command, my north star.”

But she kept on walking anyway, because she *insisted* upon being difficult.

“Do I need to bind your hands and feet, woman!?!”

“You do not ‘need to,’ my pet, but it may increase our enjoyment and satisfaction, yes.” She smirked at him suggestively. “You are a *wicked* man to have these thoughts at such a time, my devil.” She purred. “I like this discovery about you very much. Please, make my new rope bindings as tight as my body is for you...”

Gideon tried to get in front of her and prevent her from getting involved, but she dodged out of the way and continued her march.

Dákkru nodded at him as he arrived, then frowned slightly as Verlaine stood beside him. His eyebrows compressed in confusion, silently looking to Gideon for an explanation.

Gideon held up his hands to show helpless anger, then pointed at the witness, drawing the man’s attention back to her.

Shaw gestured at Gideon as he arrived. “Martha, this is Captain Wlkwos, he’s the one in charge of stopping this monster.”

The girl was young, probably a teenager. Her hair was done in a rough approximation of a fontange style, with curls around her face and pins in the back. Simple and outdated, but probably still the height of fashion in this isolated area.

Her dark eyes widened when she saw him, mouth gaping and letting out a soft “Oh” sound of surprise. She was obviously not expecting to see someone from his homeland here.

This was the second time he’d been greeted in such a way by the women of this county. He found that it was still preferable to the way his ‘wife’ behaved towards him though, so he was thankful for small mercies.

“The best thing about hiring Krewhian mercenaries?” Verlaine informed the girl calmly, keeping her voice friendly but serious. “You can be *certain* of the kind of justice they will inflict upon your foes.” Verlaine made a slashing motion across her throat. “When you hunt the meanest animals, you send in the meanest dogs, do you not?”

The woman considered that, then nodded. “I...I suppose you’re right.” She cleared her throat, gathering herself. “Apologies, Captain. I

was...”

“I don’t care.” He told her simply, cutting off the insincere apology. “I am only here to stop this creature. Feelings, both mine and yours, are immaterial to that goal.” He glared at Verlaine. “And I am not a ‘mercenary,’ I am part of an *auxiliary*.” He pointed at her angrily, keeping his voice slow and sharp. “You know this! *Cease your lies!*”

Verlaine pressed a hand to her chest in silent and overly dramatic apology.

“*You.*” He refocused on the girl and pointed at her, voice still sharp. “*Out with it.*”

Verlaine snorted in laughter at that, for some reason.

“Yes,” the witness blinked rapidly, trying to catch up with the conversation again. She seemed a bit slow. “Um... well, I was walking down the lane, as I wanted to see my grandmother, who lives across the field over there?” She pointed to the far side of the pasture. “And I heard this strange noise, it was...” She paused. “I don’t know what it was, Captain. But it caught my attention and I came over to investigate.” She looked down at the ground. “And that’s when I saw it. It was like every nightmare I’d...”

“Describe it.” He ordered, having no time for nonsense about dreams. Every second they delayed was another second the beast was loose. “In *useful* detail, not poetic generalities.”

Verlaine chuckled in amusement again. “You are as gentle as a flower, my love.” She praised, still laughing. “You care for everyone, like a saint. This is your way.”

The witness cleared her throat. “This beast, it was... it was the size of a calf or small horse. It was covered in grayish red fur, except for its belly which was a dirty white and dragged close to the ground. And its back and hind quarters, which were reddish color scales.”

“Scales?” Verlaine seemed taken aback by that, suddenly more interested in this conversation. “Truly?”

“And its tail,” the other woman continued, “which was long and black and flared out at the end in a puff of thick fur. The tail, when it hit me,

it knocked the wind right out of me. I nearly passed out. If I hadn't been able to crawl under those rocks, I think The Beast surely would have killed me as well."

He glanced at Verlaine, who shook her head. "My family has trapped every creature from alligators in Baton Rouge to the white bear of the far north. This animal... I do not recognize it."

"It was a simple *wolf attack*." The Burgermeister announced, arriving on the scene. He sounded irritated by the woman's story, waving his hand in dismissal. "We get them *all the time* here. We will hunt it down, I am seeing to it. I already have a specialist, and we will be done with it long before the All Hallow's Eve Harvest Festival." He assured the woman, patting her on the arm. "It is the highlight of our year, as you know. Pity that the Captain here will be gone before the night arrives."

"That is one ravenously hungry 'simple wolf.'" Gideon deadpanned. "It has eaten a hundred people, no wonder its stomach hits the ground."

Verlaine snorted. "I'm sure excessive hunger is a common trait for the 'Great Scaled Wolf,' my love. It is surely part of the species' normal behavior."

"The borders of our village take in a lot of wilderness." The Burgermeister retorted angrily, ignoring the witness now. "There are *dozens* of wolf and bear attacks within those huge boundaries every year. This one is no different." He started to storm from the scene, stopping next to Gideon again, voice angry. "I admire your command's commitment to protecting the people of this new country, but in this case it is *entirely* unnecessary. My office has everything under control. We will deal with this. So please, wrap up your investigation here, do whatever you need to do to reassure your superiors that there is no cause for alarm, and then return to the war, Captain." He started back towards his carriage. "The battlefield needs a 'Grave Digger' so much more than we do."

"A lovely man." Verlaine decided, sounding entertained as she watched him stalk away. "I weep that he was not at our wedding, my heart."

"I have seen many wolves in my life, Captain." The witness told him

after a moment, sounding terrified. Tears started running down her face.

“This creature... it looked like a wolf. But I assure you, it was not. The Beast was something else entirely.” She started to cry, her lower lip trembling at the memory of the monster and the attack. “I don’t know *what* it is. I can only tell you what it’s not.” She pointed at the bloody wagon, her voice breaking into a panicked sob. “*That was no wolf!*”

He nodded his head sharply at her in thanks. “Whatever this is? I will kill it.” He assured her seriously, meeting her eyes. “You have my word, Martha.”

The witness nodded back, still crying.

Gideon left her and motioned for his sergeant to follow, walking the short distance back to the scene of the attack. He gestured with his head towards the witness. “Pry that girl away from those fools and send her along to her people, Dákkru.” He ordered softly. “She’s had enough.”

The man nodded and left to see to it.

A moment later, Verlaine appeared beside Gideon.

“Our ‘wolf that’s not a wolf’ is attacking things which no wolf would attack, and leaving behind meat which no wolf would leave behind.” He told her softly, putting his hands behind his back in an at rest style. “I do not understand our enemy.” He paused, frowning slightly. “*My enemy.*” He corrected immediately, recognizing that he’d accidentally included his fake wife in the matter. “Obviously.”

“It is a beast.” She said simply. “He kills because he enjoys it. He is hungry and angered and he hates us as much as these people fear him. The Beast, he is drunk on that fear now. He has grown accustomed to the taste of their terror. And he will keep killing for no other reason than the pleasure it brings him. He is at war with this county now. And he is winning.”

“This is an animal we are talking about here.” He reminded her. “Animals don’t have complex thought. They act on instinct, not design.”

“I often believe the same of men.” She smiled at him flirtatiously. “But every now and then, one of them still surprises me.”

He silently stared at the blood staining the road for a moment,

considering the matter.

“You come from a family of hunters, yes?” He asked her, shifting on his feet. “The trade is in your blood? Truth?”

She nodded. “It is what I know.”

This was a bad idea. He could feel it already. But it wasn't like he had a lot of options, and if she was going to be underfoot, she might as well make herself useful.

“These fools,” he gestured to his men, “the closest they've ever come to hunting is searching camp for the mess tent.”

“They do look very young.” She agreed. “Were there not more?”

“As it turns out, when Brophy indicated that there were five soldiers left in town under my command, he included the fifers and drummers.”

She let out a sharp bark of laughter, apparently finding genuine humor in his plight.

“They are useless to me.” He cleared his throat. “But I am told that the longhunters and woodsmen of the colonies are the best hunters and trackers in the world.” He arched an eyebrow. “Did your family teach you this craft? Or did they merely keep you around for your level-headed sanity and genteel ladylike demeanor?”

“You earn a living shooting men.” She spat out, sounding contemptuous. “You sit on your horse, away from the blood, and you point out which men *other* men should kill. Weak men, far from their mothers. Boys.” She tapped her chest. “I make a living shooting creatures that could swallow your fellow murderers whole. Kicking and screaming, muskets and all.” She leaned forward, her voice taking on a frightening tone. “The things I have seen in these woods? You could not even imagine them, *Capitaine*.” She assured him in warning, a low gray mist gliding across the field behind her. “Creatures which only exist in the nightmares of you mercenaries from across the sea, with your soft hands and flamboyant outfits.” She dismissively flipped the gorget hanging around his neck, letting her words sink in for a moment. “But I am no fool. The Beast?” She gestured to the carnage around them. “It will turn and fight whoever pursues it. Fight like the Devil himself, yes. And I? I surely have no desire to be the Devil's next

meal.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Thus, this will cost you extra.”

“You expect me to *pay you* to save the town?” He asked in amazement. “To save innocent lives?”

“Do *you* work for free?” She challenged, arching an eyebrow. “I have no love for Nevermore County. I will not sacrifice my life to protect her troubled, helpless people. Not without the promise of coin. Two-hundred and forty pounds.” She held up a finger to make an important point. “I want *British pounds*. Your ‘dollars’ have no value out here.” She started chewing on something she pulled from her pocket. “For that, I’ll kill it, stuff it, and deliver it to you with a big ribbon on its furry head.”

“*That’s highway robbery!*” He gasped. “This is surely your most shocking bit of madness yet!”

“Uh-huh.” She held out a stick to him. “Licorice root?”

“Obviously no.” He shook his head, lip curling in distaste. “I do not eat twigs.”

She rolled her eyes, chewing the end of her stick. “I find the feel of a hard root in my mouth so pleasurable.” She confided, deliberately sliding her lips over the rough surface in a provocative way. “Sometimes, I just want to suck on the length of it for *hours...*”

He shook his head at her antics. “Are you not shamed to be so brazen, woman?”

“I am from *Quebec*, my treasure.” She winked at him, smiling with the root clenched between her teeth. “This is not ‘brazen,’ I am still being ‘*subtle.*’ If I showed you my ‘brazen’ in this conversation, I would be with child by now.”

He chose to ignore that, as he was sick of discussing such matters. “No matter the foulness you seek to use as a distraction, the fact remains that you believe that my government should pay you what would amount to at least the next *three or four years* of your existence?”

“More like ‘two.’” She corrected, the root clenched between her teeth. “I make a very good living in my trade, my love.” She took off her hat and smoothed a hand over her shaved head. “What *I* kill, it pays more than

what *you* kill.”

“We’re employing a huntress, not purchasing a farm!” He countered, trying not to think about the woman’s lips sucking on the root in her mouth. For some reason, he was stuck on the idea though. And with the thought of running his hands over the dark peach fuzz which covered her shaved head. “We are trying to save people’s lives and stop a monster.”

She rolled her eyes, replacing her hat back on her head. “Yes, I am sure you are donating *your* salary to the widows and orphans of this dismal town. You being so civic-minded and empathetic, obviously.”

“My wages were spent purchasing *you*, unhappily.” He made an irritated noise. “An unnecessary and *wasteful* expenditure, which I regret more and more with each passing moment.”

“I’m giving you a discount, seeing as how you’re my husband and the love of my life. Despite your little... problem.” She removed the licorice root from her mouth, displaying the fact that one side of the stick was now soggy and drooping.

His eyes narrowed in fury. “For the *final time*, I have no ‘problem.’”

“Given your bizarre resistance to taking our eternal devotion to its next inevitable stage, I can only assume that you are physically unable, my love. But do not trouble yourself. Your heart alone provides me with satisfaction, even if your beautiful body is not up to the challenge.” She grinned like some kind of succubus. “Besides, there are *other* parts of your body which can fulfil your husbandly duties to me...” She looked up at him with seductive eyes, reaching up to gently slide her fingers across his lips. “Such beautiful parts...”

He let out an aggravated sound through clenched teeth, cutting her off. He shooed her hand away from his face. “For the final time: I have no infirmity. I simply do not want to involve random insane women in my *private* affairs. If I do not know them, how could I possibly desire them? It defies logic. In the end, the only thing which makes...” He cleared his throat awkwardly.

“Clicket.” She supplied again, used to providing the word for him now. “This word sounds better than ‘fucking’ in casual conversation, surely.”

I am a lady and should not hear such obscene things. It warps my fragile fucking temperament and wee feminine mind.” She smiled a theatrically vapid smile. “You take such great care to protect my innocent morality, precious one. I am touched by this.” She paused for a beat. “Yet alas... I have not been physically touched by *you*. ...Yet.”

He lowered his voice so that his men didn't hear, still amazed he was even having this conversation with a mad woman, while standing at the scene of a gruesome mauling. “The only thing which makes ‘clicket’ truly enjoyable is the other person. How could you possibly find them attractive if you don't know them? If you have no kind of connection to them?” He held out his hand helplessly. “Like... I have never seen a buffalo, I know nothing about them, why would I salivate for its taste?”

“You have never seen a buffalo?” She asked in what seemed like genuine amazement. “Truly?”

“That is not the point.”

“I guess you use your imagination about what it probably tastes like, based on experience with similar meals.” She suggested simply. “It's what everyone else does.” She patted her hand against his chest, looking him up and down as if hungry. “Buffalo are *delicious*, my love, and their tender yearning flesh *aches* to be devoured...”

“Why would I not simply hunger for something I *know* I will like?” He slapped one of his hands into the other. “Something I am familiar with, and understand? How could you possibly want someone you know nothing about? They could be horrible! A monster! But you would be stuck with them, based on their appearance and a momentary impulse.” He pointed at her. “You take the time to know the *quality* of a thing, before you choose to depend upon it. I cannot stress that enough.”

“You are an odd man.” She finally decided, pursing her lips. “Most unusual. I have known many men and have never met one such as you before.”

“So I have been told.” This conversation was making him uncomfortable now. “I do not wish to discuss my private affairs...”

She winked at him. “Or lack thereof.”

“...with you.” He finished, then pointed at her with an accusatory finger. “On second thought, sometimes the more you get to know someone, the more they annoy you, because they are insane, and their price is *exorbitant* and an insult to the spirit of commerce and patriotic fellowship.”

“I think myself quite a bargain at three guineas, actually.” She sniffed in indignation. “If you knew the kinds of things I can do, you would have bid twice as much. I would be happy to prove the cost worth your while, but again, I am consistently *denied*.”

“I was speaking of your trade as a huntress, not the coin you cost me at auction.” He paused. “And you cost me three guineas *and a crown*.” He corrected. “Overlooked details are the same as a lie.”

She let out a soft sigh. “I adore you with a passion so bright that it shames the sun, but I have to make a living. From anyone else, I would demand *three-hundred* to hunt this beast, if at all.”

“Your asking price would buy me *eighty* of you at auction.” He reminded her. “I could pay, deploy, and supply an entire regiment of the line for that.”

“True.” She agreed. “And then this beast would consume them all in an afternoon and we would be right back where we began.” She removed the root from her mouth again and pointed at him with the chewed end. “*Two-hundred and forty pounds*. This is my price.” She turned the root around and started chewing on the opposite side. “And I want one case of apricot brandy. Nevermore County’s finest.”

He looked up at the sky, yet again praying for patience. “Have I done something which would indicate to you that I carry enough coin on me to pay you this exorbitant and entirely undeserved fee?”

“Honestly?” She let out a snort. “Just about everything you’ve said and done since I first met you, yes. The accent, your mannerisms, your attitude? When you move, I can practically hear the gold jingling in your pockets. You are obviously made from wealth and arrogance the way other men are made from flesh.”

“This fake marriage is a death by pressing, and every word out of your mouth is another stone added to the pile which is heaped upon my chest,

crushing me into the ground and *suffocating me.*” Gideon decided, not dignifying his wife’s words with an actual reply.

“Well, we are married. This is to be expected.” She shrugged, unconcernedly. “Once, I pulled a *Couteau de Chasse* on my second husband.” She shared, making a motion of unsheathing the knife-sword in question and stabbing it into something. “That? It made him *very* cross. Very cross, indeed.”

This news momentarily stopped Gideon’s rage, and he was left hating her second husband more than he hated her.

“Why?” Gideon asked, feeling the urge to track the man down and ask him directly, *in a much less gentlemanly manner.*

She was quiet for a beat, looking away. “Some... some men, they are never happy.” She nodded at him, squinting in consideration. “This is why you are such a breath of fresh air to me. You are perfectly contented in your unhappiness.” She smiled at him pleasantly. “Some men, misery makes them miserable to be around. But for you, misery is what makes you happiest, I think. And this makes *me* happy, and I would not change your misery for the world.”

“A beautiful sentiment.” He deadpanned. “I’m so happy that my unhappiness can bring you such joy.” He looked down at his bride, tone still dry as a desert. “Know that I could never be this miserable without having you in my life, Verlaine. I want you to know that.” He sarcastically patted her on the back. “You have made *all* of this crushing misery possible for me.”

Verlaine giggled pleasantly, a broad smile on her scarred face.

You could say a lot of things about the woman... but she was affable. In terms of skill and intellect, there were few her equal. Her mind was infested with madness, but her overall attitude and intelligence was of great quality.

And she had a *stunning* smile.

If only she could be made to see *reason*, she could perhaps...

“Captain?” Doctor Shaw suddenly reappeared, cutting off Gideon’s

thoughts. “Did you want to look at the second victim before I take away what’s left?”

“I suppose.” Gideon wasn’t looking forward to this. He was already sick of seeing the aftermath of this beast. Particularly since the gruesome scenes offered him few clues to go on.

Shaw led the way through the grain, which was trampled down into a path and marked with bloody streaks, where someone was dragged away. Every now and then there was a crimson handprint as the victim desperately tried to escape from whatever was attacking him.

But it hadn’t done any good.

“I’m assuming that the wagon was first, and then the Marcy girl happened by.” Shaw told him, picking his way over the carnage. “The fury of the attack on the wagon caused the horses to bolt and the whole wagon to flip on its side.”

“An animal attacking a fully loaded wagon? While it was in motion?” Gideon’s eyebrows soared. “Such a thing would be quite rare.”

“That’s what appears to have happened.” Shaw insisted as he stepped into a clearing, where all of the grain and underbrush had been completely trampled down, as the monster had its cruel feast. “But either way, it slaughtered them both.”

Gideon made his way into the clearing, which was similarly sprayed with blood and gore. It seemed like even less of this man had been left intact than had remained of the girl.

Whatever did this, it wasn’t just about food.

He studied the scene, playing out the events in his mind and trying to understand his foe...

Verlaine was right: this was a being of *rage* not mere instinct. It was angry and it enjoyed the killing. Most of the body was here, it had simply been... shredded.

This monster enjoyed tearing things apart and bathing itself in the blood.

“Any idea who this man was?” He asked the doctor, scanning the

pile and having difficulty spotting anything which even *resembled* a human being, let alone identified him. It was like standing outside a butcher's window and trying to identify a particular cow by name, using only the raw cuts of meat.

Shaw shook his head. "No, the face was torn away and consumed."

Verlaine wandered in behind him, eyes scanning the ground.

Shaw removed something from his pocket and held it up. "All we found were these." He opened the handkerchief, exposing false teeth, broken in several pieces.

Gideon frowned at them, feeling like he'd seen...

Damn it to hell!

He moved to quickly usher Verlaine from the scene, but she'd already seen the false teeth and recognized them.

She stared at them silently for several breaths and then she quickly retreated back towards the road, breath coming in gasps.

"Do they mean something, Captain?" Shaw asked, slipping the teeth back into his pocket.

"They belonged to her husband." Gideon hurried to catch up with her.

"Husband?" Shaw shouted after him, sounding confused. "I thought *you* were her husband!?!"

By the time he reached her, Verlaine was already at the road, pacing. She had her hat off, running her hand over her shaved head, breathing hard and obviously trying to hold herself together.

"I... I am so sorry." He told her, not knowing what else to say. "About your husband."

She inhaled loudly, producing a sniffing noise. "Has something happened to you, my love?" She turned around to face him, doing her best to make it seem like she didn't have a care in the world. She cleared her throat, which sounded tight. "Are you in some danger, my world?"

He just continued staring at her, unwilling to engage with her about

such nonsense. Even if it made her feel better to pretend.

“Charles... he’s not... he wasn’t my husband.” She finally defended, seeing that he wasn’t going to rise to the bait. “Since yesterday, *you* are.”

“I am declaring a pause to your madness, so that we can have a serious conversation.” He took a step closer to her. “I am sorry.” He repeated. “Truly.”

She nodded in acceptance of that, then cleared her throat again. “Did we seem close?” She leaned back against the shattered remains of the wagon. “I barely knew him. Charles, he was a merchant who kept a house here, but he spent most of his time in Charles Town.” She shook her head. “No relation.” She again ran a hand through the stubble she’d made of her hair, producing in him the bizarre desire to do it as well. He wasn’t sure why, but he was nearly overcome with the need to feel her shaved hair too. “He bid on the auction last year when he was drunk. He sobered up and couldn’t stand to look at me, so he left almost immediately and has only been back once or twice since. We shared a dozen words total, maybe? In a way, ours was thus the perfect marriage.” She let out a humorless laugh at the joke, then looked sad. “He had another family in Charles Town, I think.” She trailed off, staring at the ground now. “I... I don’t remember.”

He leaned next to her against the wagon, neither of them speaking for several moments.

“So... this instance wasn’t the first wife auction you’d been a part of?” He finally asked her.

“Oh, no.” She shook her head. “Many.”

“Many?”

“*Of course.*”

“You’ve been married ‘many’ times before?” He pressed, amazed by that. “Did you love any of them?”

“It is not for me to love, my love. I am but goods on the block, open for offers.” She made a helpless gesture, then took on a more serious tone. “You and I... we live in the real world, Gideon. I must marry whoever bids the highest, and you must fight for whichever flag pays your queen the most

coin. Both of us... our lives are for sale.” She summarized, voice sad but resigned. “We do what we must to survive and have no time for sorrows or pity, even for ourselves.”

“Even if your husband is selling you like cattle?”

“If happiness with him is impossible, why would you object to moving on and trying again with the highest bidder?” She shrugged. “Such a thing is certainly better than being stuck in a bad match for a lifetime. As you said: if someone is unworthy of you, the last thing you want is to be with them. So, you accept the sale and move on, rolling the dice and taking your chance. Better to be momentarily humiliated in the hopes of happiness, than to be assured of continued *unhappiness* where you are.” She considered that silently, lost in thought. “It is not a perfect system, true. But men? They are imperfect animals. They would not accept perfection, even if it were offered to them.” She didn’t say anything for another moment, and when she spoke again, her voice was sad. “I know this, firsthand.”

“What about the first marriage?” He crossed his arms over his chest. “That was the result of no auction, surely.”

Verlaine didn’t respond for a long period. “Love, it is a fairytale told to children to ease their fear, Gideon. And I soon grew up.” She cleared her throat again. “You?” She asked him, voice no longer as serious. “Has there truly never been a ‘Mrs. Gravedigger’ at home, lecturing your small ones on the vital need for discipline, and brutal violence towards all of those waving white flags?”

He shook his head, deciding that the simplest answer was the best one. “I... have never been married, no.”

“Until now, *mon beau*.” She patted his hand affectionately. “Until now.”

“We are *not* married.” He sternly reminded her, in case she’d somehow forgotten. “You’ve imagined all of this in your head, to entertain yourself and irritate me.”

“*Mon lapin...*” She began.

He cut her off immediately, frowning. “Did... did you just call me ‘My Rabbit?’”

She clapped her hands together and gestured at him, as if he'd just proven her point. "This is why I speak the French, things *sound* better in that tongue, my love. They are the words of my very soul, only for you." She tapped her hand over her heart. "Translating them, it is imprecise and lacks the poetry of my eternal thirst for you."

"I'm sure." He let out another sigh. "I was truly hopeful that this would be an easy assignment." He told her softly. "That I would come here and deal with whatever this problem was, and I could get back to the war."

"Nothing is easy in Nevermore County, my lamb. They confiscate all reason at the county border and burn it in front of you."

"I've noticed that, yes." He agreed, unconsciously shifting closer to her. "This place, it's..."

"Cursed." She finished for him.

"Yes," he nodded, "exactly."

"It is *literally* cursed." She repeated. "The people of this colony? They tell of a legend..."

"I have no time for local legends." He rolled his eyes, interrupting the story. "All I want to do is kill a monster, leave this horrid place, and get a promotion."

She ignored that, continuing right on as if he hadn't spoken. "... They say that this land, she is the way she is because deep under the soil here, there are monsters. Ugly beings, like fairy folk or trolls, who glow greenish-pink at night."

"That's the stupidest thing I have ever heard." He heaved a dismissive sigh. "We aren't talking about..."

"Hush!" She waved a hand at him for interrupting. "Many people in Nevermore County claim to have seen them. They live in the mines here and the deep forests and the water. Just out of sight, in the lonely, abandoned, dark places. They call them 'Subnaturals.' Ancient things, which should not be. Disgusting creatures, so old that they predate everything else, save the planets themselves. They are things which exist outside of God's plan for us, watching from the darkness as Creation took shape around them. Monstrous,

colossal, *unnatural*. They say that long ago, a great chief of one of the ancient peoples here, he offered his hand in marriage to Temesra, Queen of the Subnaturals, in exchange for her magical protection from his enemies. But then, once the bargain was made and his enemies destroyed, he spurned The Wretched Queen and married another. And since then, the Queen has used her hate-distorted sorceress powers to curse his kingdom, down through the ages. Poisoning all who dwell here. Raising beasts and demons, specters and unnamed horrors. As her revenge, she will strike out at everyone and everything in Nevermore County until the end of time.”

“Uh-huh.” Gideon made a face. “Or, more likely, this is a wild and dangerous region, which attracts wild and dangerous things.”

She smiled at him. “Wild and dangerous things like us, no?”

“Indeed.” He nodded, solemnly considering that for a long moment. “Beasts like us.”

“Whatever the reason,” Verlaine looked over at the blood staining the road again, “this place... this place, it is not right. Impossible things happen here, my love. Quite frequently.” She tapped her milky white eye, finger tracing the scar which bisected her eyelid and cheek. “You would have to be blind not to see that.”

“So, your theory is that our assailant is a subterranean goblin?” He summarized in a deadpan, arching a dubious eyebrow. “*This* is the expertise I am to pay you two-hundred and forty pounds to hear?”

“No,” she shook her head, “I am saying that people have called my family mad my entire life. They say that we are too mad to live here among them. But to me? The real madness?” She watched as the doctor and a stretcher-bearer began moving the bodies to a wagon for transport to the cemetery. “It is living in Nevermore County in the first place.”

They both silently watched the grim work for several moments, thinking about mortality and this horrible spot on the map.

“Very well.” He let out a tired breath, finally. “We have a bargain. But I will have my money’s worth.”

Her eyes widened suddenly, and she started to breathe faster, shifting away from him.

“This beast needs to be caught, and...” He trailed off, noticing her expression and the fact she wasn’t listening. “Gracious, woman, whatever is the matter *now*?”

“The... the three guineas and a crown from the auction?” She guessed, sounding upset. “Is... is this the money I am to pay off?”

“What?” He squinted at her in confusion. “No, the two-hundred and forty pounds you ask to hunt this monster.”

“Ah.” She cleared her throat, catching up with the conversation and calming down. “Just... excited over joining with you in business as well as life, my most prized miracle.”

“You should be aware though that Portefaix has offered a reward up to anyone who can kill the Beast.”

“If they are unable to kill it to save their own lives, does he really believe that they will kill it for coin?”

“Apparently.” Gideon shrugged. “And he seems to have been correct in that thinking.”

“Every charlatan from here to Sinner’s Grove, they will all appear in town now, empty skulls filled with lead and black powder. It shall be a bloodbath, yes?”

“Also my anticipation.” He wiped his face with his hands, feeling tired. “He’s hired a professional wolf hunter named ‘Jonah Ceely’ to take care of it. Apparently the man is...”

Verlaine said something in rapid French and spat on the ground, looking disgusted by the mere mention of the man’s name.

“You are acquainted, I take it?”

“Only by reputation.” She made a face. “My grandfather used to say: ‘Do not trust a hunter who is not French or one of the Native people of this land. For they do not speak the language of the woods.’”

“And you do not believe that this ‘Ceely’ fellow speaks this language?”

“I do not think him intelligent enough to speak *any* language, let

alone those.” She shook her head. “This man will get many killed.”

Gideon was willing to accept that assessment. For all of her faults in personality and sanity, Verlaine’s skill as a hunter was not doubted by anyone in town. Gideon had no personal knowledge in the field, but if she said this man was a sham, he knew he could rely on that assessment. “No matter. I will personally pay your fee, don’t worry.” He assured her.

“I do not worry, my waterfall of fulfillment. If you were not a man of your word, our love, it would have died on the vine long ago.”

“You were supposed to have stopped saying things like that.” He reminded her.

“Yes. But I am a liar, my king. You should know that about me by now, given the depth of our eternal bond.” She patted her hand against his chest, and then left it there for a beat too long. “Thank you for loving me despite the countless faults I struggle to conceal from your limitless gaze.”

Gideon’s mouth quirked at the corner, oddly enjoying the woman’s veiled sarcasm, for some damn reason.

They both looked down at her hand as it rested against his chest.

She quickly pulled her hand back and walked away, looking strangely eager to put more distance between them. She motioned for him to follow, and they walked through the sea of grain which hid most of the landscape on either side of the road, creating an otherworldly vista of movement and hidden shadows.

“Here is your ‘Beast.’” She squatted down and outlined a print in the road with her finger, where she had been searching earlier.

They both looked at it. The beast’s paw was huge, almost as big as Gideon’s outstretched fingers, with large claws that were so wide that they resembled sharply pointed hooves. The impression was very deep, implying a body of significant weight.

They both watched the print silently, imagining the kind of monster which could have created it. It looked like the print of a wolf.

Only not.

Whatever this thing was... it was something neither of them had ever

seen before. And between them, they had seen just about everything that walked or crawled.

His fake wife seemed to be thinking the same thing.

He stroked his chin in consideration, his mind turning the problem over and over, concocting a solution. “Have you ever hunted wolves?” He finally asked, his tone serious.

“Yes.” She nodded immediately. Her eyes sliding to anxiously survey their surroundings now, watching for an attack.

“Good.” He straightened, taking on a more commanding tone. “We shall start in the morning.”

Chapter Six

The next day, Verlaine was sitting in the village's tavern, when her husband finally reappeared. He'd been busy with his men all day, and although she wasn't a jealous woman by nature, she couldn't help but feel like he was avoiding her.

Honestly... she was conflicted about that. On one hand, she generally preferred being alone most of the time. In her experience, other people were more trouble than they were worth. *Especially* husbands. In the case of her new one though, the man was genuinely entertaining. She enjoyed being around him, despite the insanity of that.

He was dour and mean and probably wouldn't recognize "fun" if he had it locked in the stockade, screaming at it to identify itself at once, but she rather liked him.

Verlaine had never been accused of making good choices.

She smiled broadly at him as he prowled through the door in his usual determined way. "*Mon rêve!* You have returned to me at last! Take me in your strong arms *and make me your woman!*"

The man did not look as happy to see her as she was him, but then again, Gideon *never* looked happy. This afternoon was no different. In fact, if anything, he looked even more miserable and angry than he usually did.

And tired. The man looked tired and covered with dirt from the road.

She wasn't used to seeing him like that. He was typically too proud and untouchable to look so disheveled.

She didn't like it.

He'd been gone all day, and he didn't look happy. Which meant that he hadn't succeeded in catching The Beast yet.

Failure was apparently a foreign concept to the man. It wasn't agreeing with him.

For some reason, it deeply bothered her to see him beaten down by this world. She had the bizarre instinct to track down whatever it was which had vexed him and kill it. Not because of the coin or even because of so many innocent villagers being slaughtered by The Beast... simply because their deaths upset him too much.

Still, he did at least nod at her in greeting, which was more than he usually did. She took this as a good sign. He might play hard to get, but the longer the chase, the more delicious the meal.

She looked her husband up and down, admiringly.

She might not be in the market at the moment, but Gideon would make some woman a *fine* meal. Provided the woman in question had a strong stomach for the shouted commands and general negativity, anyway. And the fact he was a foreign murderer, who had bought her entire life for a few coins.

Verlaine looked away, feeling confused by this strange series of emotions.

Her goal, as always, was to drive the man off, so that she could continue on with her life. *Without* husbandly interference.

That was the purpose of the game, not... not to somehow use it to secure this man in her bed.

She... she didn't want that.

Obviously.

The tavern owner stepped in front of him as he walked into the establishment. "Captain, your wife has run up a bill of..."

"She is not my wife." Gideon tiredly insisted, stepping around the man. "Stop your nonsense on that matter *at once*."

"According to *the law*, sir, she is!" The tavern keeper shouted back. "And I'm not going to just..."

Gideon stopped dead in his tracks and very slowly turned to glare at the man, like a monster which had just become aware of the presence of a terrified sheep in its lair.

The tavern keeper stopped talking, recognizing that he had made a mistake. A mistake which would probably be fatal.

Verlaine was married to Gideon and even *she* felt a cold shiver run up her spine. She was genuinely sorry for the bartender now and was seriously considering rushing over there to intervene before there was bloodshed.

“Did you just raise your voice to me?” Gideon asked him, his tone astonished but also scarily calm.

“Of-of-of course not, Captain, I just...” The man stammered nervously, sensing that he was in a really bad situation now and frantically trying to escape it, like a small animal caught in a snare. “I was just...”

“No, no,” Gideon shook his head, unwilling to let the issue drop, “I believe you *did*, Wilkins.” He took a dangerous step towards the man, his back ramrod straight. “Let me make myself clear: you do not *ever* raise your voice to me.” He met the man’s eyes, daring him to say something else. “I don’t care if that woman intends to lure your children into a candy house and consume them raw. I don’t care if she runs up a tab equal to a literal mountain of solid gold and holy relics. I don’t care if she sets fire to your establishment, dancing in that street outside, hooting nonsense as you are burned alive! NONE OF THAT is my responsibility.” He gestured at the man, as if ushering the words out of him. “Say it with me now: ‘Captain Wlkwos is in no way responsible for the purchases of Verlaine Gévaudan, and I swear to the Lord above that I will NEVER raise my voice to him again.’” The bartender tried to protest, but Gideon held up a hand to stop him. “*Say it.*” He pressed, eyes blazing. “*Do not anger me.*”

It was a warning. The only one the man would receive.

“Captain Wlkwos is in no way responsible for the purchases of Verlaine Gévaudan.” The man finally got out in a frantic stutter, butchering the pronunciation of her surname. “And... and... and I swear to the Lord above to never raise my voice to him again.”

“Excellent.” Gideon continued walking to a table. “I am so glad we had this talk. Let us hope that we won’t have to revisit it again in the future, when the outcome would be much less pleasant.”

The bartender pointed at her. “Well, then can I tell the woman *claiming* to be your wife to get out? Because that mad woman hasn’t been allowed in here for years, and the only reason we even allowed her back in again was because we knew she was your...”

“*She is fine where she is.*” Gideon insisted angrily, apparently taking offense at that. “And if you use that tone around me or the lady again, I will throw you head first through that fucking window, Wilkins.” He pointed to the front of the tavern. “You *know* I’ll do it.” He let the threat sink in for a beat. “I am already an innkeeper in this village due to possession by capture, and I would be perfectly happy to acquire a tavern in the same way. *Spoils of war.*”

Wilkins backed away immediately, so afraid of Gideon that he didn’t even want to turn his back on him. “Aye, sir...” He choked out, scampering away. “Sorry, Captain, I’ll... I’ll just go...”

Gideon sank down into a chair like a king upon his throne. Her “husband” had chosen the seat next to her though, which she took as a good sign.

“I’d love another pint of ale, when you have the chance, barkeep.” She shouted at the retreating man, in her friendliest tone. She patted her husband’s hand affectionately. “Your ability to instantly win people over is truly amazing, *ma raison de vivre.*”

“You’re touching me.” He unemotionally observed, moving his hand away from her. “That is not necessary. Kindly refrain.”

She smiled at him, laughing at how horrible he was. She put her feet up on the chair next to him, finishing off the last of her ale. “Some men, they have no difficulties making friends wherever they go. You? You are one of these men. You have never met a stranger, *all* are your brothers.”

Gideon angrily gestured towards the bartender. “Can you believe the outright nerve of that man?”

“No discipline.” She agreed, trying not to laugh. Sometimes her husband was so terrible it was difficult to tell if he was playing a game of his own, or if he truly was as oblivious and foul tempered as he seemed. Either way, it was remarkably entertaining. “Will you kill him, my love?”

“That is not part of my immediate plans for the evening, no.” He paused, about to add a clarification. “Unless pushed.” He used a cloth to clean off the table in front of him, making a face at the dirt it removed. “How much did you drink?”

She shrugged disinterestedly.

“Well, keep track from now on.” He advised, tossing the rag away. “I will reimburse the man for the cost of your drinks, but this is the *final time*, understand? I want no one to get the wrong idea about our relationship.”

She made a noncommittal sound, trying not to smile.

“You are a woman in distress,” he explained, despite the fact she hadn’t said anything, “it is my responsibility as an officer.” He cleared his throat. “It... it doesn’t mean anything.”

“I am not distressed.” She assured him. “Inebriated? Perhaps.”

“You are a widow. Your husband was just killed and you are seeking to comfort your grief in ale.”

“Sure.” She shrugged disinterestedly again, accepting that utterly bizarre interpretation of reality. “If that is your assessment and it brings you pleasure to think it.”

“Being accosted by a simple barkeep may very well have been deeply distressing to you. Grief manifests in strange ways. It is my responsibility, as an officer, to shield you from that.”

“Of course, my love.” She agreed, still smiling. “I meekly place my care and upkeep into your strong and capable hands. Shield my gentle girlish bosom from these fiends, and their wicked ways.”

He made a non-committal sound, then looked out the front window and whistled loudly.

A moment later, a pony ambled into the room. No... no, it was in fact a dog. The single largest dog she’d ever seen in her life. It was so large and muscular that she was fairly certain that she could have ridden it through town, if she so chose.

The people in the tavern let out startled sounds and frantically moved away from the dog, apparently believing it to be The Beast.

The animal watched the movement in excited canine interest, intrigued with the high likelihood that these dozen strangers were hurrying to the corners of the room and crouching behind shelter because they were going to retrieve the dog some kind of treat.

Gideon snapped his fingers and the dog loped over to sit by his chair, the dog's head tall enough to easily rest its head on the edge of the table. It examined Verlaine in curiosity, its tail wagging across the floor at her.

It opened its huge jaws and a... chunk of *rock* the size of Verlaine's head fell to the floor. There was an image of a skull painted onto it, which appeared to have been chewed and scratched at by the dog, gouging the solid stone.

She glanced at her husband. "You have a dog?"

Gideon made a bored face. "It's the *regiment's* dog." He corrected, waving a dismissive hand.

Verlaine ignored the negativity and focused on the important part of that statement. Namely: the animal himself. "*We have a dog!*" She repeated excitedly, all but collapsing to the floor, holding out her arms towards her new reason for all joy in this dark world. "*Come to me, my beloved child!*"

The dog was overjoyed to receive such a welcome, instantly moving towards her and knocking her to the floor with wagging enthusiasm.

"It only speaks *Seǵheyki*." Gideon explained.

Verlaine scratched this absolute *mountain* of a dog behind the ears. "What is this perfect boy's name?"

"It's the regiment's dog," Gideon repeated, making another indifferent face, "how should I know?"

She made a judgmental sound, silently deciding that her husband was considerably less than she thought. Which was... disappointing. Verlaine had really...

"*Hrtósteyno*." Gideon supplied reluctantly, like he heard her internal criticism. "His name."

Her eyebrows rose, not sure she could even pronounce that.

“It won’t make much sense outside of my language and culture.” Gideon shifted in his chair. “But it means something like ‘Tombstone,’ but one used exclusively for the graves of traitors and cowards. It’s the stone put there to keep their souls in the ground.”

Verlaine excitedly scratched the dog’s head. “An appropriate name for the dog of ‘The Gravedigger.’”

“I thought so.”

She smiled at her husband, a smirk of knowing on her face as she confirmed that there was indeed a man behind the stiff façade he presented. “Lucky that you and ‘the regiment’ have the same sense of humor.”

“If they didn’t, I’d have them shot.” Gideon said dryly. “*All* could get a laugh from that.”

The two musicians in the corner of the room saw Gideon and struck up *The Rogue’s March*, on fife and drum, which immediately caused the other patrons in the bar to laugh and cheer.

Gideon looked around, confused, but then decided that he apparently didn’t care. She couldn’t help but smile wider at that.

He noticed her amusement. “Am I missing something?” He asked calmly. “Can you explain why they play that to me all the time?”

“That’s *The Rogue’s March*.”

“I have no idea what that is.” He assured her, sounding disinterested and disapproving. So, basically like he always sounded. “Is this an American creation which you thankfully have not shared with the rest of the world?”

“British, actually.” She leaned back in her chair. “This is the music played during a soldier’s flogging, when they are being drummed out of the service in disgrace, or during their execution. People, they use it to humiliate those they feel have wronged them and to show their contempt. When the patriots of this country tar and feather you or burn down your offices for supporting the King? This is the song they play while they do it.”

“Ah.” He nodded, looking unconcerned. “So this is indeed a cultural issue which is lost on a Segheyki. To me, it is simply a jaunty tune.”

He turned in his chair and raised a mug in salute to the musicians. “My compliments, gentlemen.” He called to them, his voice oddly terrifying despite his friendly words.

The men took note of the unspoken menace and started to play something else mid-song, guessing that he’d finally noticed their musical slight.

“No.” Gideon ordered in a firm tone, the single word so commanding that it was easily heard over the notes.

The music died off in a wheeze as the musicians recognized they were in terrible trouble...

“From this point on, that is the only song in your repertoire.” Gideon warned the men seriously, intense eyes burning into their very souls like hot coals tossed into a snowbank. “If I *ever* hear you playing something else or spot you on the street without that song as an accompaniment, I will shoot you both dead. On the spot. Understood?” He refocused on the table, still issuing his command to the men. “Now... *play.*”

The song immediately started up again.

“Is it my imagination or are the people of this village even more virulently hostile towards me than usual?” He asked her calmly.’

“And after you’ve done so much to win them over too.” She teased. “Although, perhaps it has something to do with the headline of the latest issue of the newspaper here.” She held up the headline in question, which read: ‘*Foreign Devil Fails to Catch Local Demon.*’

Gideon nodded, making an annoyed sound. “Patterson. Damn that man.”

“That Krewhian hanged my brother at Volstead.” Someone in the room loudly whispered to their companion, complaining about Gideon. “Bloody bastard...”

“I was not *at* the battle of Volstead.” Gideon informed the unseen man calmly, not even turning around to look. “How embarrassing for your family though. Was he a traitor to the crown? Or was he actually someone who *deserved* to live?”

“*You* are a traitor to the crown.” Verlaine reminded him, as he seemed to frequently forget which side of this war he was currently on.

“Don’t be preposterous. Not *my* country’s crown, only the British one. Occasionally. I am very loyal to *my* crown and leaders.”

“Your queen is a whore who has slept with half the men in the old world!” Someone else shouted from the shadows.

“Perhaps.” Gideon admitted, not bothering to look at the man. “But I fail to see how that negates her stellar leadership. Being a queen is a job like any other, at the end of the day, and what she does in her free time is none of my concern. We are *thriving* under her rule.” He waved a hand in complete dismissal. “She can fornicate with the whole of humanity for all I care, twice over, just so long as she continues to strengthen our lands and army by taking advantage of rich, incompetent cowards like you fine people.”

Verlaine snorted in amusement at how completely horrible her husband was, raising her mug in the air and swaying it back and forth to the mockingly childish, derisive tune. She started singing it, laughing in delight.

*“Fifty lashes I got for sellin’ me coat,
Fifty for sellin’ me blanket.
If ever I ‘list for a soldier again,
The Devil shall be me sergeant.
Poor old soldier! Poor old soldier!...”*

She leaned closer to her husband. “Wait until I get a couple more pints in me, that’s when I can *really* get into the song, my love.”

Gideon let out a tired sigh, now ignoring the taunting song completely. “I have spent the last nine hours riding a patrol, looking for our monster.” He removed his gloves and tossed them onto the table. “Didn’t catch so much as a glimpse. Not a footprint. No scat. No other witnesses who might have spotted it.” He shook his head. “Nothing.” He gestured behind him. “Finally, we had to return to allow the horses to rest.”

“If catching it were as simple as riding around looking for it, would we not have caught it long before now, *mon tigre?*”

“Did you have any better luck?”

She shook her head. “I have spent the day surveying the immediate area around the town, looking for signs of this beast.” She shrugged. “It has been here, but not for several days.”

“Brilliant.” He let out a sigh. “So it is stalking the town and then it disappears, as if into thin air.” He stared down at the table. “We can’t just sit here, we have to do *something*.” He pointed out the window. “It’s out there somewhere, about to attack again.” He removed his hat and ran a hand through his hair, which had come loose from its ponytail. It looked wild and untamed, in sharp contrast to the man’s normally rigid order. She found herself oddly captivated by the sight, but she wasn’t sure why... “If we only knew where all of this started, we might have an idea of where its den was.” He tiredly rubbed his palms over his eyes, leaving streaks in the dirt and sweat which marred his face.

“You look exhausted, Gideon.” She told him softly, genuinely feeling his pain in her own chest now. “Please go get some rest.”

“I can’t.” He shook his head. “I don’t have time. I *have* to understand what this monster is and why it’s doing this.”

“Was ‘The Darkness Below,’ what caused this.” An ancient-looking man in the corner assured them, his voice sounding haunted in the still room. The band took that as an opening to flee, leaving the tavern quiet and still. “*The Wretched Queen* has returned once more, to show her anger at the people of Nevermore...” He trailed off, letting the horror of that half-finished nursery rhyme linger in the air like wisps of smoke.

“I continue to blame the Subnaturals as well.” Verlaine agreed, nodding at the idea. “I blame *many* things on them. It is much easier than looking for other causes. I find that ‘Temesra’ confounds my every effort and keeps me from many glorious yet unspecified achievements. Bitch.”

“Wasn’t the bleedin’ Subnaturals.” An elderly woman corrected, sounding disgusted by Verlaine’s stupidity. Her face looked like a scarecrow’s; gaunt and with dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was thinning, the liver spots on her scalp clearly visible through the sparse strands. Her cloudy eyes rolled in their sockets, obviously feeling like her age granted her wisdom which was lost on the young. “It was that Westgate woman.”

“Pardon?” Gideon turned to look at her, just realizing she was even there.

“Patience Westgate.” The crone continued in her wavering cackle of a voice, pouring him ale from a pitcher. The slurring of her words indicated that she’d had *more* than one or two drops of the pure today herself. “Trader, out of Philadelphia. Come here once or twice a year, always butting her nose where it don’t belong.” The woman made a face, the wrinkles on her gaunt features stretching into a frightening mask for a moment. “Tampering with matters which no Christian woman should be meddling with.”

“I know this name.” Verlaine helped herself to her husband’s new tankard of ale. “Why do you feel this woman is involved?”

“Last year, she come through here with a wagon.” The woman put the pitcher down on the table, obviously excited to be sharing her theory about the monster with someone. “Wagon none of us ever seen before. A wagon holding nothing but an iron cage, covered with a tarp so no one could get a glimpse at what was movin’ about inside of it. Wouldn’t let no one go near, neither. Odd thing for a trader not wantin’ to show their wares, so’s I take notice. British patrol nabbed her on the old road outside of town, somewhere near the ruins of Kintner Bridge, said she was selling ‘illicit goods’ or some such. They was waitin’ for her though, like they knew she was comin’. Heard they hanged her in her cell in Philadelphia, before she could talk to another soul.” She paused meaningfully. “But that wagon? It ain’t been seen since *that night*.” She tapped her finger against the table top to accentuate the final two words. “You ask me, that Westgate woman found herself a monster to study in them woods.” She pointed out the window, obviously believing that she’d already convinced the room of her theory. “Something coughed up outta the ground by the Devil to stop us from going into his forest. And those damn redcoats, they released ‘im from that cage. *Released him to kill us all!*”

“Don’t make me laugh, Greta!” A chubby man in his 40s let out a sharp bark of laughter, his food still in his mouth. “That woman knew as much about animals as a whore knows about the Gospel.” He rolled his eyes, which were so dark chocolate brown that they were almost black. He swallowed his food. “And this is too organized to be an animal!” He pointed

out the window, his fat fingers all but disappearing in the wide cuff of his ill-fitting jacket. “This is some madman, wearing animal skins and cutting up our women!” He emphatically gestured towards the forest again, his face now flushed with sweaty anger. “We need to march into those woods and put a stop to ‘im! Finally discover who this mad fiend is!” He pointed at Verlaine with his eating utensil. “And this one... *her whole damn family is mad! They probably done this!*”

Gideon let out another tired sigh, obviously sick of dealing with the people of this town. “There is ‘mad’ and then there is ‘wears the pelt of a wolf and runs through the countryside eating little girls.’” He pointed towards the man’s table. “Return to your meal. *At once.* If you make yourself a nuisance, I will *deal with you.*” He let the threat stand for a moment before continuing. “Her family may have been out of the ordinary, but they would not do this.”

“This is true.” Verlaine nodded in agreement with her husband. “My cousin Jock, when *he* wore the skin of the wolf and ran through the forests at night, he consumed but rabbits.” She shook her head in denial. “This is a different thing entirely. And the hunting party, after his... mistake, they found and shot him, almost *instantly.*”

Gideon let out an annoyed groan and looked up at the ceiling, obviously praying for patience. It seemed to be the man’s only real hobby and the only time the Lord got to speak with him. “You know, I *try* to give you the benefit of the doubt, but then...”

“What?” She cut him off. “What have I said to anger you, my one heaven?”

“On second thought: no,” Gideon announced, “no I can *absolutely* see your family somehow being behind this. It would be the *perfect* way to be even more infuriating than you already are!”

“This whole argument is stupid.” A woman at the table to her right announced. “We all *know* what’s killing us!” She pounded her fist down on the table. “It’s a damn werewolf! I’ve lived in Nevermore my entire life, *I’ve seen this before!*”

“It’s not a werewolf.” Gideon sounded exasperated now, pinching

the bridge of his nose. “Show some sense.”

“This is true.” Verlaine agreed. “If it were, the monster, it would be killing people who angered it in its mortal form.” She glanced at Gideon. “You would *surely* be dead by now, my love, as you could arise fury in the saints themselves. Everyone in town hates you, truly.”

There was a murmur of reluctant agreement from the tavern goers, obviously liking the werewolf explanation but being unable to deny that they all detested Gideon.

“Killing people who angered it, like, say... *a husband who abandoned you!*” The other woman challenged, obviously believing she’d cracked the case and was angry that Verlaine would deny it now that she was caught.

“I was not cross with Charles, we parted on good terms, in a way.” Verlaine explained. “He was not a good man, but he wasn’t evil. We were not friends, no, but I have known many men I would viciously slaughter before him, were I to gain the powers of the wolf.”

The other woman frowned. “You... keep a list?”

“It has not been updated in some time,” Verlaine began seriously, “but...”

“That just proves that...” The woman trailed off as Gideon’s dog grabbed the edge of the woman’s heavy table in its large jaws and started to pull it away. The woman gasped in astonishment and confusion as her table slowly migrated east for the winter. “Wait!” She cried softly, grabbing for her ale before it was completely out of reach. “I-I-I need that!”

Hrtósteyno ignored her protests, dragging the stolen wooden table closer to Gideon and then flipping it over. He pounced on its underside like it was an injured deer...

Gideon moved onto massaging his temples, looking even more tired now. “It’s not a race of demonic fairy-folk under the ground, a science experiment gone awry, or a crazed man dressed as a predator. And it’s not a damn *werewolf*.” He got up from his chair, towering over the room. “It is an animal and it will be put down, just so long as everyone stays out of my way and stops acting crazy.”

“Stops acting crazy’!?!” The other woman protested, repeating his words in her shrill voice. “*You’re married to the damn Mad Trapper’s Daughter, Krewian!* Where do you get off lecturing us on sanity!?!”

Gideon paused and turned to pin the woman with a glare. “Do you *really* want to make an enemy of me, madam?” He asked, his voice frighteningly calm, tinged with a resigned exhaustion. “Knowing what you know about me-- the kinds of things I am entirely capable of doing and have achieved worldwide infamy for-- is that the best choice for you at this juncture? Is that the path God has set for you and now asks you to walk? Truly?”

The woman seemed to have second thoughts and shook her head. “No.” She stammered. “No, I...I...I’m just upset is all. No offense meant, Captain. I didn’t mean nothing by that, honest.”

“Good. I should have anticipated that. The first moment I saw you, I said to myself: ‘Now *there* is a woman who means *nothing*.’” Gideon started towards the door again. “I’ve heard enough from all of you. You may go. *Now.*”

The room immediately cleared out, but Gideon apparently decided that it wasn’t far enough, and left the tavern as well.

Chapter Seven

Verlaine followed him outside, where he'd found a spot on the tavern's back porch. It afforded a view of the pastures and farmland beyond, with the tree line of the forest visible in the distance.

"When I said that everyone should leave, I was including you in that, obviously." He complained, gesturing to her. "I disband the circus, yet the ringleader remains. Of course."

"I know, my love." She sat down across from him, the makeshift barrel table between them. "I have left the room, as you commanded. It was so kind of you to join me in my exile."

He simply looked up at the sky.

She took a gulp of her ale. "I still want you to rest." She reminded him, nervously running her fingertip along the edge of her tankard. Her demand was important and all she was concerned about at the moment, yet it still made her feel oddly... exposed. "Passing out from exhaustion helps no one."

He picked at the wooden squares of the checker board between them. "Have you ever..." He began, then trailed off. Then he started again. "Have you ever used all of your skills, done everything you can to find your quarry... but it still somehow manages to evade you?"

"No." She shook her head, then reached forward to touch his hand. "Of course not. But do not feel *too* emasculated, my love."

He was quiet for a second... then snorted in laughter.

It was the first time she'd ever so much as seen him really smile, and she enjoyed it immensely for some reason. She wasn't sure why, but there was something about it which just... touched her.

Which was either a very good sign or a very bad one.

Verlaine had no delusions about her marriage and she didn't want to

start having them now.

It would ruin the game.

“See?” She patted his hand in genuine friendliness and affection, happy to see his mood improve slightly. “Is it not better when you cease your struggles and stop behaving like a boar?”

He rearranged himself in his chair, pulling his hand away from her and picking up his own mug. “I’m very genial.” He corrected, sounding almost insulted. Like she didn’t understand her own husband.

“Your personality is so cutting, I could shave my head with it.” She corrected, smiling. “And when you are truly angry about your internal rules being broken, your eyes become inflamed with a wild, bewildering fanaticism.” She raised her mug to him in a toast. “I find it most appealing. Were I married to another, I would still plot to make you mine.”

“Maybe if you stopped acting insane?” He suggested, crossing his legs. “Perhaps that would ease my mind and sooth my supposed temper.”

“I am an excellent wife.” She took another sip of ale. “I have had much practice.”

“You are going out of your way to be as annoying as possible.”

She frowned at that hurtful accusation. “*When?*”

“Every second I have known you.” He slammed his mug down on the checkers. “It is your defining character trait.”

“Oh... yes.” She agreed reluctantly, feeling like he was being unreasonable again. “*That.*”

He squinted at her, like he was trying to see through her. “What is your long-term goal here?”

She obnoxiously beamed at him. “Only your happiness, my beloved little dolphin. Always.”

“I believe that your goal is to irritate me as much as possible,” he pointed at her, wagging his finger, “so that I will try to avoid you and quickly leave this town to escape you. My theory is that you want me gone, out of this sham marriage, and you believe the quickest way to achieve that goal is

to cling to me every moment, until I can stand no more.”

“Nonsense, if you left I would not be able to gaze upon your splendor, my gushing fulfillment. I would be a wilting flower without my glorious sun to bask in.”

“Your mistake, of course, is that I *can't* leave.” He continued, gesturing to their surroundings. “I am under orders to remain here until The Beast is killed. Orders are *not* optional. I will be *hanged* if I ignore them or attempt to flee this town without accomplishing my mission, no matter how irritating or clingy you become.” He met her eyes. “I am *stuck here*. So all you are accomplishing in this game of yours is our joint misery.”

She silently considered that, recognizing that it was indeed an element of the game she had not previously recognized.

She took a gulp of ale, mulling that over. “I have been enjoying our marriage thus far. It has been my most entertaining.” She admitted.

“Alas, I have not.”

“My poor sweet lamb.” She stuck out her bottom lip in sympathy and made a cooing sound. “Would it help if I gave you a relaxing massage, my love?” She took on a provocatively husky tone. “Clothing optional.”

He looked around the clearing and the people working in the fields in front of them. “I very much doubt the townsfolk would approve of this plan any more than I do.”

“I am still your wife.” She shrugged like it was obvious. “If the mood finally struck you, you could treat me like your personal whore, in the middle of that street, and there’s nothing the Magistrate or those people could do but compliment your carnal technique.” She absently swirled her ale in her mug, watching the movement of the liquid, feeling lost in the purposeless action. “My body is yours to do with as you wish, as decreed by God.”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “Are you trying to scare me? Or tempt me?”

“I am your wife.” She repeated, her voice serious. “Which means my entire life is in your hands. Everything I own. Everything I am. It... *I* am your property. Basically, you *own* me.” She looked down at her ale

again, voice softening in grim acceptance of a hard truth. “According to the law. You. Own. Me.”

“And pray tell: how does propositioning me help your position in this matter?”

“It varies by the husband, but I find that some men are much less likely to assault you if they think you are insane and would enjoy it, and that other men routinely do the same.”

“I see.” He took a swallow of ale, working that out in his mind. “Well, contrary to popular myth and several bawdy songs sung at taverns around the colonies about me... I am *not* sexually excited by human suffering.”

Her mouth quirked at the corner. “Or by anything else, I am told.”

His face darkened and he opened his mouth to respond...

She held up her hands to stave off his looming explosion. “I went too far, I apologize.” She admitted quickly, feeling guilty. “I am... teasing, please do not be angry.”

“I do not *like* being teased.” He decided.

“I am simply telling you that you have rights to me now.” She informed him, returning to the topic at hand. “Although... I have no idea *why* I am helping you understand that. Your apparent ignorance on this issue is a blessing rarely bestowed by a husband.”

“I am not ignorant of a man’s rights here.” He informed her flatly, letting the implied consequences of the words sink in for a beat. “I simply have never taken a woman without her express consent, and certainly could not without some sort of feeling for her on my part, even if given permission. I don’t intend to change either of these facts now, simply because I have a legal right to do so or because my ‘wife’ enjoys ‘teasing’ me about my virility.” He pointed towards the road which led to the inn. “And as for your ‘property,’ I don’t know how to say this without causing offense... but it is not the home I have always dreamed of owning. Particularly since we seized it at the end of a pistol and its actual owners will surely return to reclaim it shortly.”

“You dream of owning a home?” She asked in surprise. It was the first time he’d ever mentioned any kind of dream or desire outside of the army. And his intense desire for her to stop talking about sex, obviously.

“Land. I want *land*.” He said the words with a semi-religious reverence. “I want so much land that I could ride for days and not reach the end of it. Land enough to build whatever dreams I have, without interference from fools and the churning, roiling boredom they present.” He tapped the checkerboard with his finger. “I will have land *now*, before peace breaks out and the whole of the world’s armies are dragged into it.”

She opened her mouth to comment on that, but before she got the chance, a woman in the field in front of them started walking down a pathway out of sight. It led towards the woods in the distance, where a monster lurked.

Gideon’s voice cut through the calm fall evening like a cavalry sword through a surrendering infantryman. “*Stay away from the forest or I shall have you shot!*”

He was so loud and furious that the woman almost fell over in terror. She stumbled forward, then quickly righted herself. “You, sir, are not a gentleman!” She gasped, straightening her dirty brown clothes.

“My father died destitute and miserable trying to be a good man. Me? I’m going to die the richest asshole in the colonies.” He pointed back towards the barn to their left, where the woman had previously been working. “*Move.*”

“Is that true?” Verlaine asked, drinking more of her ale.

He nodded immediately. “Oh, I am a *horrible* person, there is no doubt.”

“No, I mean about your family?”

He made a thoughtful sound, then shook his head. “Aristocratic but penniless.” He clarified. “My family *used* to be wealthy. Low-level nobles, with no shot at the throne but still someone to bow and curtsy to. But then the country got taken over by... someone or other, I don’t even remember which time. People say I’ve never forgotten my ancestry though and the power we formerly held. That I think I’m better than everyone else.”

“Are they correct?”

“Well... I objectively *am* better, so...” He shrugged unconcernedly. “People are usually correct when they’re discussing me.” He gazed out at the horizon, calmly watching for any trouble. “My father, he was a difficult man. He spent our money on one of his many ‘causes’ and then forced us to live with the economic and societal consequences of being destitute but needing to convey the wealth that people assumed we held.” He paused for a long moment. “He drowned, trying to bring peace to those at war. They did not appreciate the interference, obviously. And we did not appreciate his absence while he attempted it.” He cleared his throat. “But you were right earlier, I suppose. I do come from wealth. Until my father lost it all by trying to make the world a better place.”

“Noble.”

“Fools often are.” He snorted in contemptuous dismissal. “He gave away everything we had, and when it was gone, no one gave us a damn thing.” He stared down at his drink. “They tell me he was an excellent man. Warm. Kind. Giving.” He was silent for a beat. “I shall take their word for it. I have found that it is just as easy to be cruel with kindness as it is with violence and hate. There is a point when trying to help one person injures another, but my father was too busy trying to save the world to ever consider us.” He cleared his throat. “In any case, it fell upon me to save our estate and rescue us from being put out on the street, seeing as how he couldn’t be trusted with the task.”

“You manage it?”

“As a matter of fact... no.” He shook his head, voice solemn. “No, I did not. I gave it everything in me. But... he had dug too deep a hole.” He looked down at the ground for a long moment, then refocused on guarding the people in the field. “His creditors took it all. The estate, our belongings, everything.”

“I’m sorry. That’s a shame.”

“I suppose.” He grabbed for his mug again. “Frankly, I would have preferred he spent our money gambling or on harlots. At least *that* would have been understandable. He would have gotten some joy out of it. But

trying to help people only ever made us all miserable. And it killed both of my parents in the end.”

“Is that when you swore to never, ever care about anyone and to treat everyone in the world like a colossal nuisance?” She teased, leaning back in her chair. “Have I figured out your painful secrets at last, my husband?”

“Something to that affect, I’m sure. I don’t remember, I was too busy trying to survive. After a week without food... you understand the kinds of things you are *truly* capable of. Unfortunately.” He raised his mug to her. “To noble fools. A pox on them all.”

From the field, the woman was now marching back towards the barn as she’d been ordered. Her black hair was in a tangle from her work, and she tried to run a hand through its hopeless mass. “Go to hell, Krewian!” She spat on the ground in his direction.

“Same to you, madam!” He responded, his perpetually formal tone both cordial and deeply uncaring over the insult. “Enjoy your day! In the barn!”

Verlaine laughed, almost choking on her ale.

“How about you?” He refocused on her, his fight with yet another random villager now forgotten.

“My papa said he found me in the hollow of a tree and raised me as his own.”

Gideon frowned slightly. “Truly?”

She flashed him an incredulous look, amazed that he’d even ask that.

“Well, strange things happen in Nevermore County, I am simply making certain.” He explained, smiling slightly. “I should have known, as you seem like you *obviously* come from some foreign aristocracy as well.”

She snorted at that. “Well, you have struck gold then. As *you* have all my worldly possessions now.” She reminded him, raising her mug in another toast. “To being one day short.”

He looked confused by that. “Pardon?”

“One day. I’ve been married to some man or other for... years

now.” She slouched down in her chair, staring at the wooden boards beneath her feet. “Longer than I care to remember. As a single woman or as a widow, I am given some autonomy. I can own my own land. Enter into contracts. Start a business.” She gulped another mouthful from her mug, angry that it was about to run dry. “But as a *married* woman... I cannot do any of these things. I am a possession. An object of pleasure and faithful, obedient toil. You have complete control over me.”

“This is certainly news to me.” He snorted. “I cannot even manage something as simple as getting you to temper your dreadful language and behavior, no matter the pleas or threats I make.” He took a swig of his ale. “Do you have instructions or an owner’s pamphlet on how to accomplish this feat? I should very much like to know.”

She gestured towards the market square, her hand visibly unsteady from drink now. “Charles, he sold me yesterday. Then died. Had he died yesterday morning-- *before* the auction-- rather than yesterday evening, I would be a widow now. I would have many more rights and options than I have now. I would be my own again. *Free.*”

“I’m... sorry.” Gideon did indeed sound sincere, considering that. “I recognize that it makes little difference, but I did not choose to bid.”

“If you hadn’t, I would have ended up somewhere far worse.” She absently kicked at the boards with the toe of her boot. “There’s no way to undo all of this, unfortunately. I am trapped.”

“Why didn’t you simply kill him?” He suggested in a matter-of-fact tone.

“What?” She asked in amazement, uncertain if she’d heard that right.

“If you poisoned him, you would have been free long ago.” He explained, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “I do not understand why you wouldn’t.”

She made a helpless face, unsure if he was teasing or if he was really confused why someone would hesitate to kill their spouse. “Because I am not a murderer?” She tried, the words coming out sounding like a question.

“I see little difference between the killing of a man and the killing of

a beast, if both mean to do me harm.” He defended, taking another swig from his mug. “Killing a monster is always justified if it saves the lives of the innocent.”

“To be clear,” she leaned on the table towards him, “you, my husband, are asking me why I did not murder my previous husband, in order to return to being single because I dislike marriage.” She asked, smiling at the absurdity of that. “This... this is really the kind of thinking you believe I should be having?” She snorted in amusement again, perhaps too loudly. It was not at all an attractive noise, and she instantly regretted it. “I am not sure this is the best policy for you to advocate, Gideon.”

“Men are monsters. Believe me, I shoot them for a living and understand their qualities. And if someone ‘bought’ a woman and believed that he somehow owned her body as a result, then such a man would no longer be fit to walk this world. He is a danger and should be put down in order to spare others.” He tapped his own chest. “Point men like these out to me from now on. I am only too happy for an opportunity to ply my trade, Verlaine.”

She pointed to the weapon resting against the leg of his chair. “You cannot simply bludgeon them with your fancy club for me.” She wasn’t sure if she was charmed or horrified by the offer.

“Why?” He hefted the foreign weapon up and admired its heavy mace head and sharp spiked spear point at the tip. “I find that this solves problems at a truly *remarkable* rate, Verlaine.” He promised.

Charmed.

She was *charmed* by the offer of wholesale murder.

Which was... worrisome.

“Of this, I have no doubt, my love. You are celebrated the world over for your indiscriminate ‘problem-solving.’”

Which should have bothered her more than it did, honestly. Instead, she found herself silently tracing the hard lines of the man’s face, trying to determine how a man who was not handsome, *per se*, could *possibly* be so incredibly attractive.

She wasn't certain how the man accomplished it. Especially since he put absolutely no effort into it. The very idea of this man even owning a mirror for anything other than ensuring that the medals pinned to his uniform were straight, was utterly unthinkable.

He was proud, not vain. Paying more attention to his utility rather than his appearance.

Whatever it was, Verlaine found it absolutely captivating.

Gideon silently considered the apparently new and entirely alien concept of human compassion, while he continued drinking. "I will make you a bargain."

"I need none killed at the moment." She quickly interjected, heading off his looming crime spree. "...So far." She added, not wanting to close the door on that option completely. "I will keep you updated and..."

"No, something else." He placed his club back in its spot by his chair, in case it was needed. "If you stay out of my way, I shall stay out of yours. I have no interest in remaining in this colony, watching from a distance as inferior men achieve glory on battlefields far from here." He pointed towards the horizon, where his battlefield promotions anxiously awaited his arrival, like a nervous bride on her wedding day. "I too want out of our situation. Which means, I need to *kill this beast* as swiftly as possible, a task made more difficult by your theatrics. Thus, my proposal." He set his mug down, tone one of business. He folded his hands on the checkerboard between them. "I will acknowledge this farce of a 'marriage,' giving you the legal protection of my name. I have no desire for any of your imagined property or for..."

"Clicket?"

"Indeed. As we have discussed, I am not interested in a casual affair with a strange, difficult woman." He gestured to her with his hand, just in case she'd somehow forgotten of whom he was speaking. "None of that gets me to my goal. In return, you will do everything in your power to aid me in my efforts of killing this monster, as quickly as possible."

"Why do I not simply kill *you*?" She challenged teasingly. "I'm told that's the obvious solution in cases such as this." She straightened in her

chair, trying to keep her voice clear. “I’d be a widow. Free.”

As she should have expected, her husband missed the joke. “Because the more glory and acclaim I win in this war, the greater the freedoms which will be granted to you upon my death.” He explained, his tone its usual serious monotone. Truly, her sister had died in a blizzard not half as icy and cold as this man’s expression and voice typically were. “I intend to gain reward enough to make me one of the wealthiest men in the colonies by the time I’m done. All of that would pass to my ‘wife’ upon my death. Were I to be killed by The Beast now, you would have to make do with substantially less.” He paused. “Plus, more pressing: you are an outcast in this town. I can help with that. I can make your life here easier.”

“You are an outcast too, my pet.”

“No,” he shook his head, “I’m not. They’re disgusted and terrified of me. That’s different. I’m not an outcast, because I clearly don’t belong here at all. As such, I can get them to do whatever you want, and they won’t say a damn word to you about it. And if anyone tries, I have no objections to exerting considerable, brutally violent pressure on them to ensure that it is a mistake they only make once.” He held up his palms, his proposal on the table. “I am offering you your freedom, in exchange for my glory.”

“What... what if you find someone else?” She asked softly, strangely upset by that idea. She wasn’t sure why. She should have leapt for joy over the possibility of such a thing happening, but that wasn’t the case.

The idea made her chest hurt again.

He arched an imperious eyebrow. “Do I strike you as a man governed by emotions or blinded by lust?”

“The heart wants what the heart wants.” She cleared her throat. “If... if you were to find another woman, someone who cured your.... um... *little problem....*”

“I am *not* impotent,” he snapped, keeping his voice low, “I am simply not sexually attracted to maniacs I have just met, and...”

“Whatever.” She cut him off, not needing to hear his strange excuses again. “I want assurances that you would *at least* be discrete about it.”

He heaved a dramatic sigh, obviously thinking himself the most mistreated man in the world. “In the unlikely event that I am somehow rendered a self-indulgent Lothario in the coming months and years, and decide to work my way through the teeming anonymous masses of the female gender in this new country, one by nameless and irritating one, I give you my word that I will do nothing with these hypothetical mistresses which would cause you embarrassment.” His voice took on a more serious tone, his face darkening. “So long as that assurance is *reciprocated*.”

She rolled her eyes at that idea. “I’ve spent years of my life trying to get *out* of relationships, you believe I would voluntarily jump back into one?”

“‘The heart wants what the heart wants,’ as I’m told.”

“I will agree to that.” She nodded. “I remain your wife but have complete autonomy in my dealings going forward, and in return I shall aid you in killing this monster and will stop deliberately trying to annoy you.” She paused. “...Unless I forget to stop. Or if I think it’d be funny. But I will at least *try* to stop.”

“The longer I live, the more security my estate gives you.” He continued, finishing off the details. “And we both affirm that if we *must* find physical comfort, we will do so in discrete ways.” He held out his hand to her across the checkerboard. “Agreed?”

“Agreed.” She clapped her palm into his and shook it. “Now, I have *no* interest in a real marriage.” She playfully warned. “So don’t fall in love with me, yes?”

“Such a fate would be too cruel for any just God to bestow upon me.” He assured her, getting to his feet.

She chuckled in delight at the casual insult, finding it utterly amusing.

“I believe that we...” He trailed off, then held up a finger to pause their conversation. “Would you excuse me for a moment? I must go save more fools from the deaths they are heedlessly pursuing and desperately deserve.” He hefted up his club and marched from the porch, out into the field. “Attention! You three!?!” He pointed at a group of young villagers. “*JUST WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU’RE GOING!?!*”

Verlaine watched her husband scream at the village children, who were trying to sneak off into the deeper fields to escape their chores.

For some reason, she found it rather amusing how much effort and attention the man gave his work. Yes, he might be impossibly rude and violent about it, but there wasn't a thing happening in town right now that he wasn't aware of. He watched every single person here like a hawk, ensuring that none of them wandered too close to the forest or put themselves into dangerous situations.

It was... almost sweet, really.

She reached over and took his mug, helping herself to the rest of his ale.

Her husband truly was...

"They don't call him 'The Grave Digger' because of how many people he's put into the ground." Dákkru announced from her left, appearing so suddenly that she jumped and almost spilled Gideon's ale. "It's the exact opposite." He sat down in her husband's newly vacated seat, stretching out his legs in front of him. "One time?" We were marching through the Carolinas. And the Rebels... *Colonials*, they had killed a family of loyalists who had been helping us with information and supplies. Their little girls too, which was... nightmarish, even for a war as brutal as this one."

Verlaine watched as her husband continued to scream at the village children, threatening to have them *and* their parents flogged if they disobeyed and went near the forest again.

"And we had never been able to figure out anything about the American sympathizers in the area, they were dug in deep." Dákkru continued, voice eerily calm. "So the Captain, he pulls in a man we knew was doing very much the same kind of thing for them as the family did for us, giving them our movements and passing information and such. He'd been seen by one of our scouts at the scene where the loyalists were slaughtered. But he wouldn't talk. No matter what our spies did to him."

Verlaine put down the mug in her hand, her attention now fully on her husband's sergeant.

"So the Captain, he drags the man into the man's own dining room,

to show him the mutilated bodies of the loyalist family sitting around his table, along with the man's beloved dead wife. The Captain, he dug her out of the cemetery himself, after a year in the ground, and propped her corpse up in a chair at the table, right across from the man. He tied the fellow into the chair, then the Captain calmly ate his entire supper, not asking the man a single question, with the rotting corpses all staring at them for an hour."

Verlaine recoiled, a chill running up her spine.

"But the man finally cracked. Damn near lost his mind he was so eager to tell us everything we wanted to know about the Colonial forces after that, just so long as we let him out of that room and away from the Captain. Captain took down the names of the perpetrators, the others who had helped the man murder the family, then locked the door and burned the house down with the man and the corpses still inside." He cleared his throat, then pointed at Gideon. "*That's* why they call him 'The Grave Digger.'"

She silently considered that, staring wide-eyed down at the wooden planks again.

"I talked to the cook after?" Dákkru continued, voice deathly calm and haunted. "He said Wilkwos ate a whole fucking roast chicken and half a pecan pie in that room, surrounded by the blood-drenched, decomposing bodies. Apparently he didn't give one toss about it. Didn't even put him off his meal." He rearranged the musket in his hand, eyes absently scanning the horizon for threats. "Half of the rumors about him are fabrications and propaganda, told to defame him. But the other half? About a quarter are entirely true." He tapped his finger to his chest. "I was there. *I know*. And the remaining quarter? Oh, those remaining horror stories people tell... are *understatements*." His voice took on a tone which was a mixture of astonishment, admiration, and sheer terror. "I grew up poor, fighting for scraps. And I've spent my life since engaged in constant, brutal warfare across the globe." He pointed at Gideon. "That man is the most vicious thing I've ever seen on this earth. The only thing that *truly* scares me. There are currently two 'beasts' in Nevermore County, and take my word for it: *he's* the more dangerous one."

She turned to look up at him, not knowing what to even say.

"He's a good commander. A man of singular vision when it comes

to warfare.” Dákkru finished. “I consider him a friend. Truly. I’d gladly follow him straight into hell if he ordered the charge, and there isn’t a man under his command who wouldn’t do the same.” He leaned closer to her, lowering his voice. “I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing here with him, and I’m sure you’ve had a good laugh at his expense, because he’s strange and you think you have him over a barrel.” He shook his head, eyes locked with hers, his tone now one of urgent warning. “But lady? You won’t like the kind of game *he*’s capable of playing with you if you give him a reason.” He let that sink in for a moment. “I am not telling you this to protect him. I’m telling you this to protect *you*. He is a *very* dangerous enemy to have.” With that, he simply walked from the porch and out into the field again. “*Watch your step.*”

Verlaine sat alone, breathing hard.

She wasn’t afraid of her fake husband. She’d given him more than enough reasons to hurt her if he wanted, but he hadn’t so much as raised a hand.

Still, Dákkru was correct: Gideon was *obviously* an incredibly dangerous man. Possibly the most dangerous one she had ever encountered, and given the kinds of people she had a tendency to meet in trapper camps and taverns, that was saying quite a bit.

But for some reason... she still wasn’t afraid. Not that Verlaine was scared of a lot of things, but usually when danger was so close, she was at least wary.

Just thinking about him *did* seem to cause her heart to beat faster now, but she wasn’t certain if that was because she was secretly afraid around him or secretly excited about her game with him.

Violent maniac or not... Gideon was an absolute *delight* to play with.

Yes, she had promised to stop such conversation, but she found it so entertaining that she was pretty sure she wouldn’t be able to keep up her side of that bargain.

And more than that, she genuinely enjoyed talking to the man. Since her family had all died, one by one in various incidents over the years, Verlaine had been pretty alone. She was married to multiple men in that

time, true, but that didn't count. Husbands were *not* a group she could talk to. About anything. Other than while playing the game itself or reminding them that her body was not on offer, obviously.

Even in just his short time here though, Gideon had already become the best friend she'd ever had. Which-- considering the man—was rather sad. And she was fairly certain that if she told him that, the news of the place he now occupied in her life would be greeted with a snide and cutting remark.

Which might be rather amusing to hear, actually. She enjoyed her husband's dry and cruel sense of humor.

As if on cue, Gideon appeared again, stalking back towards the porch. The sun was setting behind him, highlighting his impressive physique. His shirt was unbuttoned, despite the chill in the air, his breath sending up little puffs of vapor as he breathed.

For some reason, she found the rise and fall of the man's broad chest rather hypnotic and her eyes lingered there.

The man, he was terrifying... but he was genuinely impressive to look at.

Not a handsome man, yet strangely appealing. His presence seemed to command her body to take notice of him, which given their recent bargain and the nightmarish conversation she'd *just had* with the man's sergeant, was a deeply troubling sign.

But Verlaine had never been accused of making good choices.

At the moment, if Gideon suddenly recovered from whatever trick of mind and body prevented him from finding anyone sexually exciting... she would take him.

Verlaine was not an especially sexual being, despite what her game implied to the world. She had not enjoyed love-making on the scant few instances it had happened. She found it... painful, awkward, and terrifying. It felt wrong.

She'd been hurt. And she went out of her way to make certain that it wouldn't happen again.

When she looked at this horrible, allegedly murderous man though,

this seemed like a silly concern now.

“I need to kill this thing as quickly as possible.” He announced, sinking back into his seat. “I want out of this place and back into the war.”

Verlaine had no reply to that, as she was too preoccupied being both attracted and scared of that very attraction.

Mostly the former, sadly. As always, her life would be so much easier if she made better choices. Or married less dangerous men.

She raised the tankard she’d stolen from him. “To becoming a rich widow, beholden to no one.”

He looked for his own drink, then recognized it in her hand. Instead, he took her now empty mug and clinked it against the one she’d stolen from him. “To warfare: where I am able to *shoot* the aggravating crazy people who pester me, rather than ‘marry’ them.”

She finished off the ale, smiling at him over the rim.

This was a bad idea. And she knew it.

But no one in her family had ever met a bad idea they didn’t immediately toss themselves into, sadly.

Chapter Eight

The next morning, Verlaine arrived at the tavern looking for her husband. He kept soldier's hours, which meant he got up at the crack of dawn. She respected this. She was also a morning person, and these hours were among the best to hunt wolves.

Gideon was lounging on the front porch of the tavern, eating his breakfast at one of the tables set up there.

The few residents brave enough to leave their homes and risk an attack from the beast, were not quite brave enough to go near her husband. They gave him a wide berth or immediately reversed direction upon seeing him.

He did not seem at all bothered by the solitude, and calmly surveyed the street with a hunter's eyes, watching for anything which required his immediate fury.

She flopped down into the chair across from him. "Good morning, perfect one."

He made a small "Humph" of acknowledgement. "Doctor Shaw went out on call to the Tsavo farm late last night and hasn't been seen in town since. There were some tracks found near there." He took another bite of food. "It might be our 'Beast.' We need to inspect the area."

She helped herself to a piece of his meal. "I slept wonderfully, thank you for asking." She chewed on the toast thoughtfully. "Lonely without my beloved in bed beside me, but..."

"You are not being paid a king's ransom to sleep."

"With you, my Captain, I would sleep for free." She promised in mock sincerity.

He made another sound, like she'd just brought up an interesting point which required his comment. "Since we are now 'married,' I think it's

important that we agree on your behavior in public, since it now reflects upon me.”

She tried to refrain from rolling her eyes. “I am but clay, awaiting her master’s firm and gifted hands, to mold her into the woman she was born to be.”

“Sarcasm does *not* befit the station you...” He made a face, looking down at his plate as he slowly chewed his food in apparent surprise and distaste. “What is this I am eating?”

She helped herself to more of his food, using her fingers to pluck the toast from his plate. “Welsh rabbit.”

He swallowed, shaking his head. “Doesn’t taste like rabbit. Tastes like beer and cheese. And bread.”

“That’s what it is.” She wiped her hand on her pant leg. “It’s just what they call it.”

Gideon let out a dramatic sigh, dropping his utensils to the tabletop in disgust. “Fucking Colonials.”

“Food grows scarce, *my* rabbit, as there are no shipments of supplies coming in and the local tradesmen are too afraid to practice their craft.” She pulled his abandoned meal away from him and started to consume the rest of it. “Aside from the occasional bird, nothing else stirs in the woods here now. Like they’ve been picked clean. This is one of the reasons why...”

There were suddenly three loud musket reports, as men rounded the corner and immediately opened fire. The first shot hit Gideon’s hat, causing it to fly from his head and tumble away. The second two shots hit near her, shattering the unlit lantern nailed to the post over her head, showering her in glass. She swore, trying to keep the shards away from her face. She frantically covered her one good eye, shying away.

Gideon didn’t bother to move, he simply continued to coolly drink his tea. “Have you been injured, Verlaine?” He asked in the calmest voice she’d ever heard him use. There was something... unsettling about it.

She removed her hand, relieved that she could still see, then did a quick survey to check herself for any injuries. She pressed her palm over a

small cut at the base of her throat. “A scratch, nothing more.” She started to get up from the table and find cover.

Gideon shook his head, holding out a hand to keep her in the seat. “There’s no need.” He assured her. “See to your injuries.”

“*Krewhian bastard!*” One of the men shouted. “*Go home!*”

“And take your one-eyed whore!” The other added, pointing at her. “We don’t want her stealin’ our bounty!”

The tattered jackets the men wore identified them as deserters. They weren’t villagers, they were here for the reward money being offered on The Beast.

Gideon simply sipped his tea, then calmly removed one of his pistols from the holster at the small of his back. “All of the men under my command can fire one volley every fifteen seconds.” He informed them, his tone completely unemotional. He placed his pistol down on the table, within his easy reach. “I will give you *thirty*. And then I’m going to kill you.”

Verlaine’s eyebrows rose, not expecting that. The wound to her neck was forgotten.

The men started laughing.

Gideon, however, was not joking. “Twenty-Five.” He announced, leaning across the table to inspect her wound.

The men stopped laughing.

It took them several more valuable seconds to fumble in their boxes for another cartridge.

“I think you will survive.” Gideon assured her, reaching into his breast pocket for a handkerchief. He gently pressed the fabric to her neck, his fingers surprisingly gentle. “We need to keep it clean though, yes? If you allow this to become infected, I will be *very* angry, Verlaine.” His voice was definite and stern, but somehow comforting. He met her eyes. “Can I trust you to be responsible about your own care?”

She found herself nodding like an obedient child, simply because he sounded so confident and in control. She’d been cut hundreds of times in her life, but for some reason, this time it felt like it was somehow her personal

obligation to heal quickly, simply to not disappoint her husband.

A very odd feeling.

And it made her heart beat faster to feel his fingers against the sensitive skin of her neck.

She swallowed, looking away as her skin felt hot...

“*Twenty* seconds.” Gideon announced, reaching over to take her chin in his hand and redirect her gaze back at him. “Are you okay? Truly?”

The men were scrambling now. One of them bit off the end of his cartridge and poured some of the black powder in the paper tube into the priming pan.

Gideon wasn't even watching, but still let out another sigh, irritated by the fact that the man had poured most of the powder onto the ground instead of into his weapon.

“I'm...I'm...” She stammered, swallowing again. Her husband's dark gaze was having an impact on her today and she wasn't sure why. It was hitting her far harder than the fact people were trying to kill them both right now. “I'm fine, Gideon.” She assured him, trying to laugh easily. “This is not the first time I have been shot at.”

He made an unconvinced sound, but accepted that without further comment. “*Fifteen* seconds.” He updated, taking another sip of his tea. “The men under my command would be fully ready to fire another volley at *my unarmed wife* by now, gentlemen.” He shook his head in condemnation. “This is a most disappointing performance.”

The first man was now frantically trying to pour the rest of his powder and the ball down the barrel of his weapon, while the second one had just finished and was now fumbling with the ramrod. The third man did the same, but his hands were shaking too badly and ended up dumping the contents of his cartridge onto his boots. He immediately tried to pull another from his cartridge box, then abandoned the endeavor. He threw aside his weapon and ran.

“*Ten* seconds.” Gideon finished off the remainder of his tea and patted his lips with his napkin, then stood up. He casually picked up his

pistol and club, like it was a tremendous bother.

“Gideon! You can’t just...” Verlaine grabbed for him, trying to pull him to cover but feeling like her own legs were made of stone. So she simply sat there, watching.

“See to your wounds.” He urged again, more concerned about her cut than the three men trying to shoot them.

The first man had finished loading and then frowned down at his weapon, finding that he’d forgotten to prime the pan, and hurried to finish. The second had remembered to prime, and was now fumbling with his ramrod, trying to ram the cartridge home and prepare his weapon to kill Gideon.

Gideon stepped from the porch. “*Five seconds.*”

The second man desperately cocked his weapon and began to move it towards his shoulder to fire.

“*Time.*” The heavy end of Gideon’s club smashed into the side of the man’s face with the sound of cracking bone, obliterating his skull. Gideon grabbed the barrel and turned it to the side as the now deceased man’s finger fired the weapon by reflex. He had forgotten to remove his ramrod from the barrel and it shot out like a harpoon, spearing his companion in the neck. The man staggered back, making a choking, gasping sound, the metal ramrod sticking straight through his neck and out the other side, a cascade of blood spraying out onto the cobblestones.

Verlaine threw her Cree tomahawk from the porch a second later, catching the man in the chest. He stumbled backwards and fell dead to the ground.

The ramrod had already killed him, but while the man was on his feet, he was still a threat to her husband. So... why take the chance?

Gideon didn’t bother to watch the man die for the second time, he simply spun to his left, and aimed his pistol.

The remaining man turned a corner a hundred and twenty yards away, racing down a side street to escape the slaughter.

Gideon tracked his movement, leading his target and then fired. The

musket ball went down the next alleyway on the block, catching up with the man as he raced by. It caught him in the side and knocked him down. He hit the cobblestones and did not stir again.

It was... a hell of a shot, for a smooth bore.

Gideon did not seem impressed with his own skill, and instead casually cleaned and reloaded his weapon.

A small crowd quickly formed to see who her husband had killed *this* time.

“And so idiocy claims yet more victims in this village.” Gideon slid his weapon back into its holster. “Anyone else?” He called to the crowd, prying his bloodied club from the corpse at his feet. “Would anyone else like to take a shot at *my wife* today? Surely there must be more here eager to be added to the pile of dead fools?”

The crowd immediately dissipated, wanting absolutely no fight with him.

“Brilliant.” He accepted that as his answer, bending to pry her tomahawk from the other man’s body, then walked back to the tavern’s porch. “Then my wife and I can return to the duty of saving your meager lives.”

By this time, the tavern keeper’s wife was huddled in the doorway, looking terrified.

Gideon nodded to her in gentlemanly greeting. “My apologies for the damage to your establishment, madam.” He pointed to the holes the musketballs had put into the wood of the building. He bent down and retrieved his hat, frowning as he inspected the tear in it. “Kindly add the repairs to my bill.”

The woman blinked rapidly, face still pale. “That’s... that’s not necessary, it wasn’t you that...”

“No.” Gideon cut her off, voice so definite that it made both Verlaine and the other woman jolt. “You should not bear the cost simply because those poor men wanted so desperately to die today.” He placed Verlaine’s weapon down next to her plate, the dead man’s blood still dripping

from it and soaking into the table's surface. "A fine weapon." He praised to Verlaine, sounding impressed. "Excellent balance."

The tavern keeper's wife offered no further protest and meekly nodded at him about the payment, then retreated inside in terror.

Dákkru appeared from somewhere, leaning against the side of the building like it was another in a long list of lazy mornings he'd had in the army. Either the noise had attracted him or he'd simply been there the whole time, knowing that Gideon could handle it.

Gideon returned to the table, glancing at his sergeant and then gesturing to the street. "Deal with the bodies, we don't want to attract scavengers."

Verlaine continued gaping at him in amazement.

He straightened his coat. "Well... shall we get on with the hunt then?"

The walk from the village was done in complete silence for the first hours. It wasn't that Verlaine was ignoring her husband, she simply wasn't sure what to even say to him.

There was an awkwardness. He knew more about her than any man had in decades. And, obviously, he'd already almost been killed this morning.

None of her husbands had ever been shot at before. Well, at least not by anyone but her.

Gideon did not seem at all worried about his attempted assassination or the three people he had been forced to kill today-- well... *two and a half*-- and instead simply focused on his mission.

Now, five hours into their hunt, Doctor Shaw was still nowhere to be found.

They seemed no closer to their goal now than when they'd started this march, and the strain of needing to pay constant attention to their

surroundings—paradoxically-- had caused them to slip into casual conversation more and more.

It wasn't that they were ignoring their mission or not respecting The Beast's abilities, it was simply that they needed to take a break to recharge. So, for the last hour, they had been talking while there was clearly no danger to them.

Honestly, it was much more pleasant than the silence. As odd as it sounded, Verlaine very much enjoyed chatting with her husband.

Ahead of them, Hrtósteyno was happily bounding through the grain, periodically pausing to stare at Gideon as he commanded that the dog actually concentrate on tracking The Beast, rather than frolicking and tossing its toy rock high into the air.

The animal simply tilted its giant head in confusion, apparently only understanding its own name. It gave Gideon a slightly hesitant and confused wag. Like, "...My name is Hrtósteyno. Do... do you mean me? *Hello!*"

The boulder the dog played with crashed back down to earth from its latest toss into the sky, missing the animal's distracted skull by mere inches.

Hrtósteyno looked down at the rock and then up into the air, wagging hopefully for more toys to soon fall...

Gideon let out another annoyed sound, pointing down the road and urging the dog onward.

Satisfied that it had fulfilled his master's every command, the dog grew even more excited with its own excellence, and pranced through the grain which crowded the edge of the field they were walking beside.

Gideon cleared his throat, looking strangely uncomfortable. Like the animal's attitude somehow shamed him in front of her.

"Segheyki Hounds, they... they are not the cleverest animals and they're terrible trackers, but they follow orders and they can humble *anything*." He promised. "There is fight in them which cannot be extinguished."

Verlaine nodded, watching as the dog caught the scent of something and immediately focused on its work. It stopped dead in its tracks and turned

to its left, now all business as it moved to cut through a small wooded area and take the left fork in the road.

Verlaine kept her eyes on the soil, following the faded tracks of their quarry. They were faint and were frequently obscured, but The Beast was so large and heavy that they seldom disappeared entirely.

And they headed down the *right* fork.

She glanced from the tracks, up at Gideon.

He understood the situation, cursing softly in his own language. He whistled for the dog because it was happily headed the wrong way.

The animal reappeared a moment later, toy boulder in its mouth, again looking confused and lost and vibrating in exuberance.

Gideon extended his right arm, and the animal bounded off again in that new direction.

The trail led from the site of the last attack, through the valley and to parts unknown. The animal seemed to stray from the road into the fields and back again, in a loose path. Eventually, it arrived at the edge of a large field filled with high grain.

Verlaine paused at the side of the road, looking down at the tracks.

The dog paid no attention to the dangers the site presented and happily trotted after its prey.

Gideon stopped beside her, giving the animal a sharp whistle to pause its journey.

The dog was unhappy about being stopped and turned around to its owner, giving Gideon a confused sort of "...But it's *this way*, see!?!?" sort of wag.

Verlaine continued looking into the shadowy close-quarters of the grain and shook her head. "We go around." She decided, turning to her left and continuing down the road. "If it's in there and we go in after it, it'll be a massacre."

Gideon nodded, finding no fault with that reasoning. He whistled for the dog, and the animal looked exasperated by human stupidity, but then

quickly forgot the entire event and decided to chase imaginary squirrels instead.

The trip around the field took them an extra half an hour, but Verlaine was able to pick up the trail again on the other side. The animal's tracks led past a small farmhouse and Gideon strolled up to the door and pounded on it. An elderly man peered out at him, and after a brief conversation, Gideon returned.

“He hasn't seen Shaw, but he says he's seen The Beast. This morning. He cautions that this beast has supernatural abilities.” Gideon unslung his weapon again, watching their surroundings. “Despite his considerable inebriation, I was able to decipher that his wife has supposedly seen The Beast walking on its hind legs, like a man. Says that he tried to chase it off two weeks ago and the animal shot fire at him from its eyes and then leapt over his barn in a single jump.” He turned to look at the structure in question, which was at least twenty feet high, the sides painted with colorful hex signs designed to keep the Subnaturals away. “Says he shot it but the musket ball simply bounced off its hide.”

Verlaine's eyebrows rose. “Do you believe this?”

“War has taught me to believe everything and nothing about an enemy. Take it into account but not to entirely rely on a single word.” He pointed to a rough gully which led from the road down through the man's property and into a wooded area behind the barn. “He reports that when last seen, The Beast was headed that way. With its *pup*.”

“There are *two* of them now?” Verlaine gasped.

Gideon shrugged, not believing or disbelieving the report. “And as a final caution, he warns us that these woods are haunted. The ghost, it seems, is unrelated to The Beast though, do not worry.”

She considered that for a moment. “I killed a ghost with a tomahawk once.” She shared conversationally.

His eyebrows rose at the news. “An actual ghost or someone simply named ‘Ghost’?”

“Why would anyone be named ‘Ghost’?”

“It is a fairly common name in the Segheyki state of Kréwh-Hner, where I am from.” He shrugged. “‘Aniathrum.’ I have known several.”

“Your country is bizarre.” She rolled her eyes. “Do you spend much time there?”

“No. I have been deployed most of my life.”

“That sounds very lonely.” She knew well how hard it was to have no home. “Do you not miss it?”

“No, I have nothing calling me back there. And I enjoy war a great deal. It is a most *excellent* vocation. There is no other opportunity for a man to take such an active participation in the creation of the world which he wishes to see.”

“You aren’t taking a moral stand, Gideon. You’re a mercenary.” She scoffed. “Your life is for sale to the highest bidder, and you shoot whoever you are told to shoot.”

“And yet, am I not a major player in this glorious cause in which we are all engaged?” He nodded in satisfaction. “As long as I am paid well, I positively *ooze* with patriotic zeal. As I’ve told you before, *at least* two of my sons will be named ‘Benjamin Franklin.’”

“That sounds... confusing and unnecessary.”

“Do you not support the creation of this new country?” Gideon followed along, keeping his eyes moving around them as Verlaine watched for tracks and the dog watched for tiny edible birds. “I did not take you for a loyalist.”

“I believe in freedom and I support whichever flag offers it.” She paused, debating how much she wanted to tell him. “My... my younger brother, *he* was an ardent patriot. He *believed* that this land had the chance to be a new and grand country, free of the toil and prejudice which plagues others. He was a passionate and brave man. But... he had the great misfortune of running into you at the battle of Saunders Mill.” She cleared the lump in her throat. “And the specifics of his end are now known only to the angels. And you, I suppose.”

“I see.” Gideon’s face remained unreadable, his gaze momentarily

pausing its constant survey of the area around them. “I am sorry for your loss.” He paused again. “If... if it matters, I was not at Saunders Mill. I had a meeting with my superiors that week and did not arrive in the field until the fighting had already been completed.”

“Fear not, my love.” She assured him, taking on a care-free attitude. “I bear no ill will towards you or your savage, godless kinsmen for murdering the last family I had left. My girlish mind is too...”

“Verlaine, I was not there.” He assured her softly, meeting her gaze as he interrupted her. “You have my word.”

Oddly... it did make her feel better.

It wasn't that she blamed him for her brother's death, but... Well, it still made her feel better to know that it wasn't a possibility.

It was a rare showing of empathy on her husband's part. Or really, *any* of her husbands' parts, when she thought about it. None of them had ever gone out of their way to sooth her feelings, so she wasn't entirely sure how to react to this.

Not knowing what else to do and feeling rather uncomfortable about it, Verlaine simply nodded at him. She was afraid that if she tried to speak, she'd end up crying. Which, given the current circumstances, would be pointless and foolhardy.

The display of emotion would annoy her husband, accomplish nothing, and create an opening for a monster to attack them.

Gideon seemed to understand the motion and what it meant, returning it with a sharp, gentlemanly nod of his head. Then he resumed his quiet inspection of the woods they were making their way through, lowering his voice. “We are going to be around each other for a considerable amount of time, unless and until I am cut down in this war. We can have genuine conversations, you know. We are married... of a sort.”

Verlaine couldn't help but smile at that. “Do you have closely held secrets and dreams which you yearn to share with your soulmate, my love? Is that why you are now the champion of openness and communication?”

Gideon's lips quirked at that and he opened his mouth to reply, but

was immediately distracted when the dog stopped moving. Gideon's grip tightened on his weapon and he brought it to his shoulder, ready to fire.

Verlaine followed suit, squinting into the shadows, trying to see what had spooked the dog...

A moment later, whatever movement or ghost had caught the animal's attention was forgotten, and the dog was once more bounding through the close, dead trees and underbrush, like it didn't have a care in the world. The animal was *huge*, and heavily muscled, and seemed to have the emotional maturity of a hyperactive toddler.

Still, despite the dog's obvious... silliness? Her husband trusted it implicitly, and Gideon did not seem to trust anyone or anything. Whatever strange magic this breed supposedly possessed, he was willing to wager his own life on it. Which was good enough for Verlaine.

They both started to breathe again now that the dog was moving, the sudden tension broken.

Verlaine took off her hat and dabbed at the sweat which had beaded there, despite the chill in the air. She had been on many hunts in her life, in places far worse than this one. But there was something about this beast which seemed to invite an anxious sort of fear.

Whatever they were chasing... it was not normal. And it was very hungry.

To be honest, ordinarily there was no amount of gold in the world which would have had her in these woods. But she knew that no matter what, her husband would hunt The Beast. Gideon could kill men better than anyone in the colonies... but this creature was not a man. This was something else.

She told herself that she was here simply to secure her own standing. That by helping him to kill this terrifying monster, he would get promoted and leave town, thus securing her own wealth and freedom.

At the moment though... she doubted that was the reason.

"Why do you shave your head?" Gideon asked randomly, looking down at her scalp as she knelt beside him to examine a track.

The question cut through the silence like a knife, his near whisper sounding like a yell so loud that it made her jump. "Lice." She quickly explained, busying herself by examining the tracks in the cold mud. They were hours old, which was strangely a relief. She'd never before been on a hunt where she did not want to catch up with her prey. Whether that was due to fear of The Beast or because she knew that catching the monster would cause her husband to leave this village, she could not say. "Many of the places I stay in the wood, they are not the best for such things. Shaving my head eases this issue."

Her husband started off down the path again. "Interesting." He sounded doubtful.

"You do not believe this?"

"Not for a moment, no." He stepped over a log in their trail, following along behind the dog. "I am accustomed by now though, having long since discovered that my new bride operates on several contradictory levels of reality, all fighting to be the first to ruin my day."

Verlaine once again found herself silently debating how honest she wanted to be with this man. He was dangerous. And he made her feel off-balance. Vulnerable. But... she found herself telling him the truth anyway.

"Some... some husbands are attracted to a woman's hair. It reminds them she is a feminine creature and inspires them to... take their marital right. This leads to conflict, if she does not want that. Which... she never does."

"I do not know if you are aware of this or not, but some men?" He paused, looking back at her. The barren limbs overhead cast long shadows over the exquisitely sharp angles of his hard face. It made for a truly captivating image and Verlaine felt her body lurch. "Some men are more attracted to a beautiful face. And shaving your head like this? It just more advantageously displays yours, producing an impact quite the opposite of your intent."

Verlaine gaped at him, feeling like she must have misheard that. "Did... did you just call me beautiful?"

"Don't be daft." He quickly scoffed, hurrying away again. "I

pointed out your foolishness by stating an easily observable fact. There is a difference.”

Verlaine couldn't help but grin now, feeling oddly excited by this admission. “If you think me pretty, does this mean that you have finally recovered your vigor and are able to take our relationship to a physical level?”

“My ‘vigor’ never abandoned me.” He corrected. “It simply lies dormant and waiting, until called upon.” He saw that her smile did not fade in the slightest, and he rolled his eyes. “Yes, obviously commenting on something every single man in town realizes is certainly a testament to the spiritual connection we share.” He let out a long breath, then took on a sarcastic tone. “I recognize that you are attractive, and thus, apparently ours is the greatest romance of all time.”

“I care little about sharing a spiritual connection, my love, I care about sharing a bed. Our bodies. Our lives!”

“You are mocking me again.”

“Teasing.”

“I have told you that I do not like that.” His eyes narrowed. “I do *not* take it well.”

“Apologies, my lamb.” She patted his hand and made her way past him on the trail. “It has been so long since I have had a woman's release, the frustration, the anger and yearning desire, they begin to take hold in me.” She held up her hand, assuring him that she was no danger to him. “But I can wait. I will wait for you and aid you in preserving your purity, until it is the perfect moment you have always dreamed of and anxiously waited for.” She placed her hand over her heart, her voice one of religious reverence. “When the Lord tells you to give yourself to me? I will be ready and will *try* to be gentle, despite my urgent, pounding need for you.”

He let out another elaborate sigh. It was amazing how many different emotions the man could convey with a sigh. Some men were poets or singers, able to express themselves with elegant words and angelic song. But Gideon's forte was the scowl and the sigh. They were his life's work and the man was a true master in the craft. “I am not a virgin, I am....” He

began, then stopped as he realized what he was saying. “Why is this so frequently the topic of conversation? I don’t know why I told you in the first place.”

“We are married, my prince. We have no secrets between us.”

“No. This is an incredibly personal thing. A central aspect of my being, which for some reason I shared with you, and which you choose to mock me for.” He summarized. “In return, I know absolutely nothing about you, aside from your insane family. My life is always up for discussion, and yet you share *nothing* of yourself. Thus far, that is the basis of our ‘marriage.’”

That was... probably true. But it was also deliberate and one of the central purposes of the game.

Verlaine did not like to share of herself with anyone, least of all one of her husbands.

It was dangerous.

“If it makes you feel any better, I spend most of my time trying to find ways to make myself less appealing to my husbands and the opposite sex. But this time I have managed to find myself a man who is attracted to personality more than appearance.” She made a helpless gesture with her hands. “This... this is either ironic or a troubling sign.”

“I did not say that,” he corrected, “I said that I need to spend time with the woman before I can judge. I am perfectly willing to acknowledge that you are attractive, but there is a difference between ‘attractive’ and ‘I wish to have sex with this person.’”

“I guess... I guess I am just uncertain how to go about pushing you away now.”

“Just keep being yourself, Verlaine.” He held a branch aside for her. “I assure you, that will accomplish the job, most admirably.”

She frowned as she considered that for a beat, then snorted in laughter when she caught the insult. “The bad news?” She started laughing harder and gave him a playful shove. “I may become *smitten* with you, Gideon. Your cruelty is such a delight.”

“You are the only one who think...” He trailed off as he heard a thumping sound. Whatever that noise was, he seemed to recognize it and it immediately made him pay more attention to their hunt. His musket was to his shoulder in a heartbeat, his rapid movement forward one of practiced stealth.

They came to the end of the gully and arrived at the edge of the wood. On the other side was the road and beyond it the deeper forest. Directly in front of them was some sort of barricade, stretching from one side of the road to another. Gideon’s eye’s narrowed in sudden awareness, his musket once more tight in his grip.

The dog was now in the middle of the road, standing absolutely still, its toy rock at its feet. The noise which had drawn Gideon’s attention was apparently the dog dropping its toy boulder to the road, as it caught wind of a scent. The huge animal let out a low, terrifying growl...

Gideon seemed to take that seriously, quickly checking over his weapons for a battle he now viewed as imminent.

Verlaine immediately moved to her left, seeking a position to flank where the dog was looking.

Gideon crept towards the barricade, somehow moving silently on the loose stones. He whispered something to the dog in Segheyki, and the dog took up a position at his hip.

It was a silly animal, but it was very well trained.

Verlaine moved to keep up with them, the tall weeds and grain on either side of the road blocking almost her entire peripheral vision.

The road had gone silent now. Not the sound of birds or insects or even the wind. The only thing Verlaine could hear was the sound of her own rapid breathing and the dog’s occasional small noises of unhappiness at being commanded to stay with Gideon, rather than racing headlong into whatever danger it smelled.

A moment later, Verlaine smelled it too. Like... a skunk, mixed with freshly turned earth and the stench of death.

She’d never smelled anything like it before, despite a lifetime in the

woods. And she hoped to never smell it again. It seemed to hang in the air, like a reeking cloud, so thick it made her gag.

The checkpoint in front of them looked deserted, the pike no longer across the road.

“There were four men here.” Gideon whispered to her. “I encountered them on my way into town. I ordered them back to their homes yesterday, but they apparently did not listen...”

Gideon moved beyond the checkpoint, eyes locked on the field in front of them.

Verlaine knelt down, examining the markings in the cold soil. Footprints. A struggle. Running...

And the blood.

She immediately looked up to the field which had drawn Gideon’s attention. The blood trail was headed that way as well.

She cocked her rifle...

The grain in the field reached up to her chest, stretching out in a near unbroken sea until it reached the village, barely visible on the horizon. From this distance, it might as well be in England. There was no one to help them way out here. Other than those distant buildings... there was nothing except this empty, silent ocean of grain.

And a monster.

Despite the lack of wind, the tops of the grain rolled, producing a wave-like motion which hid any movement taking place beneath them. If the monster was out there, the stalks would hide it from their view until it was right on top of them.

Great.

It seemed that this was a monster which was no fool, and it chose its battlegrounds carefully.

As they made their way through the field, the bloody trail they were following was periodically punctuated by bits of flesh and torn body parts. Like the floor of a butcher’s shop, The Beast had left little more than shreds

of the men who had been guarding the road.

Verlaine tried to ignore the gore even as her feet sank into it, keeping her attention on her surroundings.

Ahead of them, two hundred yards away, stood a farmhouse which had previously been hidden from view by a cluster of trees. There were no signs of life; the building looked as deathly still and silent as everything else.

Outside, a body was sprawled against the gate at the front of the property.

It was difficult to tell, but her guess was that this was the missing doctor.

Gideon paused in his tracks, sharp eyes judging the situation. “It’s *in* there...” He whispered to her, not taking his eyes off the farm. She didn’t bother to ask him how he knew that, as the man seemed to have a sixth sense about battle. “I am through waffling about. This ends *here*.” There was a determination in his tone which bordered upon religious zeal; his eyes alight with brutal madness.

She’d been warned in a hundred handbills and pamphlets that her husband was a monster when he was on the battlefield. And now here she was, seeing it in the flesh.

The Gravedigger intended to have it out with The Beast of Nevermore, once and for all. One monster was about to consume the other.

She nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. “Time to earn my pay.”

He gestured to their left. “I’ll flush it out. It will run towards the wood, hit it before it gets there.”

“How do you intend to flush it out?”

He looked down at Hrtósteyno, and the dog wagged at him happily, *thrilled* to be involved in whatever conversation his master was having. The animal immediately looked for his favorite toy rock, remembered that he’d dropped it in the road, then turned to briefly consider racing back for it so that he could carry it with him into the looming battle like his glorious colors...

“Will the dog be enough?” She asked, worried both for Gideon’s

safety and the dog's. "The Beast has killed all of the other dogs in town."

"It's never fought a Segheyki Hound." He assured her with an almost amused confidence, like she simply didn't understand what was about to happen.

"I have never had a dog before." She warned. "Please don't kill ours."

Gideon ignored that. "I'll go through the front, the dog will go through the window." He took his eyes off the farmhouse to drive home an important point. "*Do not* approach that building. Fire from here, in cover."

"It is a wolf, not an enemy sniper." She reminded him softly. "There is no 'cover' from it, Gideon."

"If I am incapacitated, the dog's commands are 'Wēgghséuos', which is ordering him to focus and go to war. Tell him that when you want his immediate assistance. And 'Noktsupo,' when you require his rage and need something killed."

She frowned at the foreign words, trying to sound the second command out. "What does that mean?"

"Loosely translated?" He started forward. "'*Dinner time.*'"

Verlaine let out a long breath, a cold sweat running down her neck. She braced her leg on the split-rail fence which ran along the edge of the building's lands, carefully aiming at the back door.

Her hand was trembling for some reason, which it had never done before.

She swore to herself, trying to steady her aim and keep her nerves in check.

This was just another hunt. Like a million others she had been on in her life, nothing more.

Her mind immediately flashed to the gruesome remains of Charles, dripping from the dying weeds of the field. In her imagination, Gideon's blood would soon be coating the ground here, all because she knew she was going to miss this shot...

She winced at the thought and cursed at herself again.

This was simply a wolf. She'd shot wolves her entire life and this one would be no different.

Ahead of her, Gideon and Hrtósteyno arrived at the house. He looked down at the dog and communicated with it through arm motions, which the dog seemed to somehow understand. Gideon crouched on the porch, while the dog crept to the side of the house. It took one last remorseful look towards the road, no doubt once again regretting the decision to leave its toy rock behind unprotected, then turned to the farmhouse's open window. Hrtósteyno tensed, waiting for his owner's order to attack...

Curtains blew in the dark interior, despite the fact that Verlaine felt no breeze.

This was going to be bad. She could feel it...

Her grip tightened on her weapon, bracing her elbow against her raised knee, preparing to fire the second the animal appeared from the back of the house...

A heartbeat later, there was a loud noise on the road to their left. So loud and unexpected that it caused Gideon, Verlaine, *and* the dog to all turn to see what it was.

She redirected her weapon to meet this new attack...

It was a damned drumming corps!

They all gaped at this intrusion in amazement. Verlaine was so shocked by its arrival that she literally stumbled away a step.

There was another noise, followed by the barking of a dog.

Gideon swore, shouting the command for the dog to attack.

Hrtósteyno paused for half a second, clearly debating whether he was supposed to charge into the house or attack the drummers on the road... then dove through the open window. Gideon followed a heartbeat later, barreling through the front door.

Verlaine cursed, refocusing her weapon on the farmhouse. Something charged out the back of the building, but instead of running across

her line of fire, the shadowy creature took an immediate right to hug the wall, sprinting away from her and away from the musicians who had suddenly appeared.

At this point, it would have been easier for her to simply keep up a steady stream of curses, rather than swearing about each incident of horrible luck individually as they happened. Save her some time.

She vaulted the fence and raced towards the house, trying to get a shot.

A moment later, Hrtósteyno crashed through the side door of the building, taking it right off the hinges. The thick wood of the door exploded in a shower of splinters, as the huge dog took after whatever had been in the building, diving through the material like it was made of water.

Gideon followed behind, pistols at the ready.

Verlaine scrambled up onto some hay bales, still trying to get a shot before The Beast reached the cover of the woods...

But it was already gone.

She'd never even gotten a look at it.

Hrtósteyno hit the edge of the forest and kept right on going at full sprint, intent on chasing down the monster as he had been commanded.

"Call him back!" Verlaine desperately shouted at Gideon, pointing to where the dog had just disappeared. "*Don't let him go into the deep woods!*"

Gideon remained still for a moment, silently weighing the dog's chances of success on its own in the forest against a monster... then whistled for it to return.

Nothing happened. No movement, no noise. Nothing.

Verlaine's stomach dropped, anxiously watching the tree line for any signs of life, her weapon at the ready.

Gideon whistled for the dog again. The sound was already taking on a sad, pointless quality to Verlaine.

She lowered her rifle, trying not to cry.

Suddenly, a large animal burst from the trees and then stopped.

The dog stared at Gideon expectantly, wagging furiously in a “Well!?! Come on!!! It’s getting away!” kind of manner.

Gideon was too preoccupied to humor the dog, already stalking towards the people on the road.

Hrtósteyno looked back towards the forest, obviously confused by Gideon’s refusal to run headlong into the shadowy forest after a literal monster which called the maze of trees and rocks home. Then the dog must have remembered that its toy boulder was on the road Gideon was walking towards, and its mood improved. It happily trotted after Gideon, its long legs quickly bringing it once more to its usual spot at his hip.

Verlaine watched the forest for another moment, then followed her husband and dog.

“*Explain yourselves!*” Gideon demanded, stalking up to the men. He had not reholstered his pistols. “*Immediately!*”

Several of the men on the road saw the massive dog and instantly scrambled to shoot, believing it to be The Beast.

Hrtósteyno gave them a cursory wag, too preoccupied with searching for his missing rock toy to care about their muskets and knives.

Gideon pointed his pistol at the lead man. “If you shoot at my dog, *I will return fire.*” He warned flatly, drawing his other pistol to threaten the second man. Gideon liked to pretend that he didn’t care about the dog any more than he cared about anything else, but there was a deep, personal anger in his voice. He clearly loved that animal and would gun down these men to protect him. “This road is already strewn with dead men, *two more won’t raise any eyebrows.*”

Verlaine’s rifle was already pointed at the third man. “Make it three.”

The men held up their hands in surrender, as Hrtósteyno made his way through their ranks, searching for his rock with the same intensity that mythic heroes sought the Holy Grail of Christ.

As it turned out, there were a dozen men and three drummers on the

road. More than she could contend with, but her husband's expression told her he considered the looming battle little more than an annoyance.

At the back of the assembly, a man shouldered his way through the others.

She leaned closer to her husband, gesturing to the new arrival. "In the unlikely event that our quarry *is* a werewolf... I will put a pound on it being this man."

"It's not a werewolf." Gideon corrected, lowering his pistols but keeping them in hand. "Everyone insists upon assigning a supernatural element to what is an entirely natural, if highly abnormal, occurrence. The whole thing is preposterous and irritating. The people of this county are superstitious children."

"Does that mean you will take my bet?"

He paused for a beat, looking at the man in question and weighing the chances of him being a werewolf. "...No."

She smiled, enjoying that.

This could only be the "wolf hunter," Jonah Ceely. She tilted her head to the side, watching this large jack-a-dandy prowl forward. He was... eyecatching. She had little respect for men who did all of their hunting from an armchair in a richly appointed parlor somewhere.

Gideon pointed over his shoulder towards the woods, not bothering with a greeting. "Your damn drummers chased it off that way, as I was about to kill it."

"Apologies, Captain. We were simply headed up the mountain and happened upon you here." Ceely shouted orders to his men and they ran towards the forest. He watched them go, looking pleased. He glanced at Gideon. "Do you see that? See how they obey? Wolves, like men, have a hierarchy." He assured him confidently. "They can sense that I am the leader and they instantly submit. I have the same impact on men and on wolves."

"Fascinating." Gideon's expression and tone were completely flat. "I had not thought that wolves could feel intense revulsion." He gestured to

where Ceely's men were headed. "I would advise against going into those woods, especially now. The trees are too close in there to have a manageable field of fire, and the beast is waiting for you."

Verlaine knew this man's name. He was the kind of man whose name was bandied about without ever being connected with a deed worth remarking upon. The kind of man you invited to your party in Philadelphia or Eiji Bay, to thrill your guests with his pioneer tales of high adventure in the frontier.

The closest this man had ever come to a life and death struggle in the wild was getting a papercut while reading *Robinson Crusoe*.

"I recognize that you are more at home on the sea, Captain, like the rest of your simple kin," Ceely unslung his weapon, surveying the area, "and if we were dealing with a marine animal, I would, naturally, bow to your experience, but we are here on dry land. And I was hired by Burgermeister Portefaix to kill this beast and I have never failed to deliver my prey."

"Brilliant." Gideon gestured to the forest, looking annoyed. "Happy hunting then."

Ceely did not respond to that, instead his eyes simply cut over to the building. "What did you find in the farmhouse?" His tone was serious now, but questioning. This man was no fool, he was simply... not a frontiersman.

"The *last* men that the Burgermeister hired to kill this beast." Gideon finally holstered his pistols. "Or what was left of them, at least." Gideon whistled for the dog and started to walk away. "but what would I, a simple boatman, know of such things?"

Hrtósteyno trotted after his owner, toy boulder in his mouth. He gave Ceely an enthusiastic wag on the way by, his long tail beating the man to such an extent that Ceely had to stumble away, trying desperately to ward off further blows with his outstretched hand.

The dog considered this new game the absolute *height* of canine amusement and wagged his tail more enthusiastically.

Verlaine dashed after her husband. "Well, that went well."

Gideon made a "Humph" sound. "A man of the most distressing

uselessness.” He made an irritated sound. “One fool with his arse in his skull writes a silly play in which the lead character has a boat, and suddenly it’s all anyone knows about my culture. We’re uncivilized yet noble, and we treat the sea as a lover.” His voice rose in indignant fury. “*We are a landlocked fucking kingdom, for Lord’s sake! We have no navy; we are soldiers, not sailors!*”

“You take this very personally, my love.”

“Fucking Colonials.” He muttered to himself, trying to calm down.

She patted him on the arm reassuringly while he sulked. “I will never forgive them for hurting you so, my rabbit. You are *fully* justified in your every massacre of them, have no fear.” She looked back towards Ceely, then smiled up at her husband. “Will you kill this man, my ferocious love?”

“This is a big world. There is more than enough space to allow for those with peculiarities of mind, no matter how deficient.”

Her smile grew wider. “That is not a denial.”

“I have no *definite* plans to murder him.” Gideon finally got out. “At this time, they are purely hypothetical and do not yet represent any kind of fixed intent on my part.”

“I believe you are mellowing, my angel.” She observed sarcastically. “It has been almost six hours since you have shot anyone who annoyed you.”

“Supplies are low.” He informed her dryly. “I seek to preserve powder and ball by only killing in bulk, by arranging my irritants in a single file line which may be dispatched with one volley.”

She refocused on the farmhouse, where a heap of mangled men were decaying. “Seems as if our Beast has the same idea...”

Overhead, a flock of passenger pigeon started to fly by. Millions and millions of birds, moving like a cloud and sounding like thunder.

Gideon stopped to watch them, still a stranger to this continent and its animals.

The sky quickly became even more filled with the birds, a moving, flapping, endless maw of them. None of them coming anywhere near the

ground of this place, heading over it as quickly as possible.

Verlaine looked up at the birds and winced, recognizing what this meant.

“Well, I don’t think we will be able to wait for The Beast to emerge from the woods.” She warned him.

“Why?” He looked confused.

As if on cue, an early twilight started to spread around them, created by the enormous mass of birds blocking out the sun. Everything below was cast into shadow by the great, undulating spiral of birds, a thousand feet in the air and several miles wide.

Gideon frowned. “Surely this will end soon, correct? How long can it really last?”

“Not long.” She shook her head, then started walking again. “Fourteen hours or so.”

“Fourteen hours!?!” He repeated, apparently believing he’d misheard that. “You mean to tell me that for the next *fourteen hours* there will be that many birds in the sky?”

“No. This is the start of the flock, there will be a lot more soon.” She looked back at him. “Do you wish to wait?”

Hrtósteyno started barking at the sky, frantically jumping, trying to get high enough to eat all *two billion* birds in the flock, one by one.

Gideon heaved a long sigh. “We are finished in the field for the day anyway. We need more *guns*.” He decided. “With more men, we have a better shot at surrounding this monster. The soldiers are green, but tomorrow I will take more opportunity to train them.”

“Do you think you can teach them proper musketry in the space of an afternoon?” She asked in amazement. “In this avian induced twilight?”

He glanced down at her, the beginnings of a smile on his face. “Either they will hit their target or they will *become one*.”

Verlaine wasn’t certain if that was a joke or not, but she grinned at him anyway.

Chapter Nine

Abram Worthington had no particular love for Tarasque Creek, or indeed for Nevermore County as a whole. It was, in his opinion, one of the previously unmentioned but most horrifyingly abyssal rings of hell.

“You have to ease up on Henrietta, Abram.” His wife Cordelia chastised again, motioning to the old mule pulling their wagon. “You know she’s not as young as she used to be...”

The mule continued moving through the growing twilight, stumbling along the uneven road.

“Well, if she wants to get any older, she’ll pull like the hounds of hell nip at her heels.” He urged the old girl onward, praying that she lasted until they made it to Sparkle County, at the very least.

The Sparkle County residents were bastards—down to the man--always quick to point out how much better literally *everything* was there than in Nevermore, but it wasn’t like Abram had a lot of options at the moment.

Behind them in the wagon, their daughter Esther popped her head up between them. “Henrietta can pull so much better now that she has her new hat.” The girl enthused excitedly, gesturing to the dirty straw hat which was balanced on the animal’s gray head. A single yellow flower was stuck into it at an angle, like a young maid going out on the town.

Abram didn’t bother to tell the girl how ridiculous that was, as he was too preoccupied with the road at the moment.

“Sit back down, honey.” Cordelia reached back to help the girl sit amid the crates again. Then she refocused on the road. “This was folly, Abram.” She said softly, voice tinged with fear. She quickly glanced back to ensure that Esther wasn’t listening. “We never should have done this.”

“We are perfectly fine.” He assured her with confidence he no longer felt. “Burgermeister Portefaix says that...”

“Everyone knows he’s just a bloated old turtle!” His wife interrupted in a rare display of temper. “We shouldn’t have listened!”

“And what would you have us do?” He snapped back. “Wait in that town to be feasted upon by a monster? Or watch our daughter be lorded over by some foreign devil?” He shook his head in defiant certainty, even though he recognized that his wife was correct, as usual. “This was the best option we had.”

Packing up and fleeing town had been a terrible choice, but it wasn’t like there were many better. As it was, they had just enough time to finish packing their meager belongings, board up their house, and try to make a break for it before that damn Krewhian Captain sealed the borders of town and sold them all to the British as prisoners of war.

Death had invaded the village and stalked it at all hours. Supplies were running short because no one would dare risk the journey to obtain them, there was no game left to hunt, and only a madman would make a delivery to Tarasque Creek at this point.

The town was cutoff, like castaways on a deserted island.

No. While they still had the ability, escape was the most sensible option. Even if it presented its own difficulties.

He had not counted on the passenger pigeon flock overhead, which robbed them of several more hours of daylight. The beating of millions of bird wings was audible, even from this distance, the unnerving sound an additional element of terror added to an already stressful flight from the village.

Millions of them screaming "kee-kee-kee-kee!" in undulating waves, their wings beating like the heart of a colossal demon.

There was just something about that damned, rolling, beating, inhuman sound which drove him mad! It never stopped!

He had wanted to leave while the soldiers in town were occupied with their lunch, but Cordelia had positively *insisted* upon the vital importance of Henrietta the Mule’s missing bonnet, which had blown off a quarter hour into their journey. He had patiently explained to both his wife and daughter that their lives were on the line, and the fashion choices of their

ancient plow animal was really the least of their concerns.

This had resulted in tears and recrimination.

Thus, Abram had spent close to ten minutes chasing the mule's missing hat through a field, as it blew away on the wind.

Henrietta looked as excited to be wearing the bonnet again as Abram was to waste time fastening it onto her.

"This was folly." Cordelia repeated to herself, like a prayer.

His wife was a steadfast and intelligent woman. He'd never seen her truly afraid before, and the mood was infectious. His own hands were beginning to tremble, although he assured himself that it was only the chill in the air.

Now that the sun had started going down, a sense of gloom and terror had come with it. Every shadowed tree and hollow they sped past seemed to hide the unseen Beast or a line of Krewhian marksmen, there to do the Devil's work...

Henrietta unexpectedly stumbled on the road, the wagon fishtailing behind her, jostling them as the animal suddenly slowed her pace.

The forest around them was black as pitch, offering no hint of what it concealed, the only dim light coming from overhead. The rolling fog of moving, noisy birds in the sky momentarily allowing a single ray to shine here and there amid the deafening gloom.

Abram urged the mule on again, making the clicking sound with his tongue which had gotten her moving on many a frozen morn and through endless muddy fields for more years than he cared to count.

This time, however, when her compliance was *most* needed, the animal decided to engage in that most characteristic of mule stubbornness.

The mule was looking around and backing away from something...

"C-c-come on, old girl..." Cordelia whispered in the darkened gloom, her voice breaking in fear. "Just a bit further and..."

"Dammit!" Abram jumped to his feet, his own fear giving way to anger. He raised the whip in his hand, preparing to give the beast a good

wallop. “*Move, damn you! Or...*”

Henrietta the mule let out a shrill, baying cry of terror and pain. An instant later, the entire wagon jolted violently to the side, knocking Abram from the buckboard and onto the rocky ground. He smashed his head against something hard, and the last thing he heard as the darkness took him were the agonized screams of his wife and daughter.

And the roar of a monster...

The noise continued gnawing at his skull like the jaws of a predator, cracking the bone and piercing his brain.

This was *agony*.

Across from them, the white-haired girl continued playing her fiddle. Gideon was obviously not the best judge of such things, but even he was willing to admit that the girl was abnormally pretty. Her simple black dress set off her unique hair color and the flawless shape God had given her body.

He was not interested in her-- at all-- but rationally he recognized that this girl truly was a beauty.

Verlaine seemed to take notice of it, which was why Gideon gave the girl a second look in the first place.

“She’s very pretty, isn’t she?” His wife asked again, drawing his attention back to the girl and the wailing instrument. Were it not for the noise, he would have forgotten the girl entirely. “Does this fair maiden get a pass in your insane ‘no sexual attraction to strangers’ rule?” Verlaine leaned closer to him. “Would you like to have that girl in your bed, my love?”

He didn’t bother to remind her that it wasn’t a rule, it was simply the way his body worked. “No.” He replied truthfully, then arched an eyebrow at her. “You?”

“At the moment?” She made a show of looking the girl up and down, then shrugged. “A shade, yes.”

He snorted in laughter.

“You withhold your body from me, my love, I am forced to look at other options, it is only natural.” She defended.

“Be discreet.” He whispered teasingly. “We have a bargain and I need to maintain my reputation here.”

“I love *everyone*, and you? You love *no one*.” She patted him on his arm. “This is the reason why we make such a marvelous pair, I think.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever loved anyone in your whole life, Verlaine.” He observed, his tone serious. “Not like that. Not really.”

“And you have, right?”

“No. I have no more idea what love is than you do.” He told her softly, looking down into the woman’s intoxicating eyes. “*That* is the reason why we make such a ‘marvelous pair.’”

Verlaine swallowed, the simple motion hitting Gideon like a physical blow. He admired the length of her neck, watching the gentle movement of...

The girl’s fiddle let out a *particularly* discordant sound, which seemed intent on making Gideon’s eyes explode. Honestly, he’d rather listen to the two billion birds flapping loudly overhead than this instrument. He whirled to face the girl, glaring at her while she rested on the front porch across from his makeshift musketry range. He pointed over his shoulder, towards where the inn was located. “Madam, I will dig a hole in my new yard over there and put you into it, alive and *shrieking!*” He snarled loudly, irritated by the noise and by the interruption. “*Do you understand?*”

Verlaine looked equally irritated. “Why does that girl play the fiddle? No one asked her to do this.”

“I have drafted the army’s fife and drummers into the front line, and shot the town’s band. I believe this woman’s wailing discordance is my punishment.”

Verlaine frowned at this bit of news. “You shot the band?”

Gideon waved a dismissive hand, rolling his eyes. “Oh, they are grown men; they will survive it and learn as a result.” He glared at the girl

again. “Go away!”

The white-haired girl finally stopped playing, shifting on her feet nervously. “My mama says that music soothes the savage beast, sir.” She explained weakly. “I thought... I thought it would be worth a try?”

“Your mother is an idiot.” He broke the news to her, although it was not exactly a state secret. He did not personally know either woman, but he was willing to stake his life on the truth of his words. “I’d bury her alive with you, but I fear it would somehow make the soil itself stupider.”

The girl let out a small cry and quickly fled the scene, sobbing.

Gideon simply raised his teacup to her as she left, approving of her choice. “Yes. You may go now.” He nodded, pleased with the way that had worked out. “Capital idea.”

Verlaine chuckled softly, saying something in French.

He returned his attention to his men, who continued their target practice. He walked behind them, observing their preparations and making adjustments to their stances. “There aren’t always straight lines out there in war, so keep track of the men next to you. Clear their fire.” He tapped a soldier’s elbow, reminding him to hold it properly while aiming. “Lord knows I understand the weight of the temptation, but don’t shoot any townsfolk. And fair warning: if you shoot at me, I *will* shoot back. And I *am* trained better than I *can* train.” He reached the end of the line, raised his arm and lowered it rapidly. “*FIRE!*”

The men let loose a volley. And hit nothing.

Sadly, the performance of his soldiers quickly caused him to lose the good mood the girl’s exit had brought.

“It’s not *entirely* their fault. Or due to your horrible instruction alone.” Gideon’s beautiful and opinionated wife helpfully informed him. Again. “Your army *does* use terrible weapons, which might explain the pathetic struggles of these poor, bedraggled boys. Those muskets couldn’t hit a barn at three paces. Might as well spit at your target.”

Gideon endeavored to rise above the woman’s bait, remaining focused on his men. He’d set up a series of wooden targets for them to

practice with, painted with a rough approximation of their beastly quarry. His plan was to drill them until they could shoot an individual firefly out of the air, using as little of the supplies as he could.

Thus far, they'd been at it for three hours. In that time, they had come considerably closer to shooting each other than the wooden targets.

This was unacceptable. It would be noted in his report.

Gideon glared at his wife, and grabbed for one of the faulty weapons in question, ripping it from the hands of the inept man who had just finished reloading it. In the same motion, he leveled the musket and fired at the target, without taking his eyes off of Verlaine.

The musket ball hit its mark, dead on. The painted effigy of The Beast shattered from the impact, tumbling end over end across the grass.

Verlaine made a vague sound, indicating that she still wasn't entirely convinced.

Gideon shoved the weapon back into the arms of his soldier, hard enough to cause the lad to stumble backwards.

Verlaine was lounged on the top of a barrel, observing this marksmanship training like it was free theater, periodically shouting out encouragement or ridicule, and singing the obscene and bawdy songs favored by the trappers in the area.

She watched as Gideon's soldiers once more missed the targets by the width of a schooner, absently chewing on her licorice root. Her eyes slid over to him, looking for him to acknowledge their newest failure in some way, but Gideon didn't want to hear it.

They were... they were embarrassing him. It was *his* responsibility to train these men and they weren't getting any better. He wasn't sure why he should care, but he didn't like it when this woman was witness to one of his failures.

"They'll... they'll improve." He told her softly, sounding awkward, even to his own ears. He cleared his throat, trying to sound more confident. "I simply need to be harder on them..."

A small gasp of fear came from the men under his command. He

ignored their cowardice.

Verlaine let out a sigh and tossed him her weapon, which he caught in one hand.

“Pennsylvania long rifle, manufactured by the Welles Gun Works.” She gestured to the rifle in his hand, then to the weapons his soldiers were armed with. “Much more accurate and can shoot five times farther than your damn smooth bores.”

“Yes, well, I’ll just go put in an order for a dozen of them.” He tested the weight, looking down the barrel. Damn. It *was* very impressive. And she kept it so *wonderfully* clean and ready for action. Gideon was *unreasonably* impressed by that. “I’m sure they’ll arrive in eight months or so. By then, there might be *one or two* survivors left in this colony. They can take a short break from hiding in darkened corners and eating the dead, to train with arms which are *marginally* better than muskets over long distances, especially when the monster they are fighting can only attack *at close quarters*.”

“Works just fine up close too.”

“No bayonet.” He pointed to the end of her weapon. “And it takes longer to load.”

“Personally, if something is trying to kill me, I prefer to shoot it at a distance anyway.” She gave an elaborate shrug, still not moving off of her barrel. “But that’s me.” She reached for her weapon.

Her hand touched his in the process.

Gideon didn’t release his hold on the rifle. And he didn’t move his hand. Instead, he felt compelled to look down at his wife’s fingers as they pressed against his...

Verlaine snatched her hand away like he’d somehow burnt it. The movement was so sudden and forceful that she almost toppled off of her barrel.

Gideon recognized the awkwardness, but not previously being so frivolous as to devote any kind of time to trying to better understand the female mind, he had absolutely no idea as to its cause.

He silently debated with himself for a beat if an apology was needed over... something. Then he remembered that this wasn't a real marriage and if he began this arrangement by displaying any kind of sappy sentimentality towards her bizarre behavior, it would only lead to more trouble down the road.

Better to begin as you intended to end, and "empathy" had never been Gideon's watchword.

Instead, he immediately reached out one of his boots to steady the wooden barrel for her, ensuring that it didn't fall over, taking her with it.

"I don't have time for this, Verlaine." He stepped away, running his free hand through his hair. "I have to teach the fife and drummers to shoot, so I can kill a man-eating demon, so I can win a war and go home and get restored to my rank. That's all I care about." He advanced on her again, feeling more in control of whatever the hell emotion that had even been. "*Nowhere* in that have I set aside an evening to debate munitions and materiel with my supposed 'wife,' an uncouth Colonial huntswoman."

The soldiers had stopped firing and were now simply watching this marital disagreement taking place next to them.

"You only get crabby when you know I'm right." She rolled her eyes and pointed at him with the chewed stick of licorice root. "And you are always crabby, which means, logically, that I must *always* be right."

"Fine." He gestured to his soldiers. "Are you willing to share this amazing weapon of yours with my men?"

She let out a scoffing sound, muttering an oath in French to herself at the very idea. "Hell no." She finally snorted.

"So your point is entirely moot." He rested his boot on the fence next to her, leaning over her. "As my hired expert: do you have any ideas on this hunt which could in any way be actually feasible?"

"Burn the forest." She decided, after a pause of no more than three seconds. "Shoot it as it flees the inferno."

"People here are already terrified of The Beast; I doubt engulfing it in fire and turning it loose would help matters."

“Why?” She sounded genuinely confused. “I am from *Quebec*, I am not afraid of anything that’s flammable.”

“That is a terrible plan.” He let out another annoyed sound, wondering why he was seemingly the only reasonable man on this entire continent. “That forest stretches from here to Sparkle County.”

“Terrible or not, it would work.” She defended, shifting her weight so that her back was now supported by his calf as he braced it against the fence. “Which is better than anything *you’ve* come up with, my lamb of war.”

“Yes, my overwhelming force of a half dozen poorly trained men,” he motioned to the idiots in question, who seemed mere seconds away from tasting their own black powder like curious children seeking sweets, “will circle those several hundred miles of burning woodlands and ensure that absolutely no living creature escapes our cordon.” He theatrically echoed her scoffing sound. “Show some sense, woman.”

She looked up at him, the back of her head resting against his knee. “I shall miss your kindness when this beast eats you.” She decided.

He chuckled at that, for some damn reason. “At least I shall have the memory of our love to carry with me into the next world.” He intoned with fake sincerity.

She gazed up at him, eyes running over his uniform and the mud which uncharacteristically splattered it at the moment. “Just so we are clear: I will *not* be doing your laundry.”

He made a show of examining her attire for a beat. “I cannot express to you how relieved I am to hear that. Frankly, if I thought that a risk, I would either refuse this marital arrangement outright or have you shot the second you advanced upon my wardrobe with ill intent.”

“With *this* lot, my love?” She gestured to his men. “I should be the safest woman in the world.”

“Good point.” He agreed in a deadpan. “If I ordered a firing squad, it would take them five volleys just to hit the ground.”

She chuckled, enjoying the joke. She shifted on her barrel again,

leaning back against his knee.

This position gave him a rather... *complete* sight of the woman's décolletage. She never wore stays, and at the moment, the top buttons on her loose-fitting hunting shirt were not fastened, and her jacket was opened despite the chill. This allowed him a rather commanding view straight down through the neckline of the thin chemise she had on under it.

The gentle valley between her bosoms beckoned him, sparking his pioneer spirit. He found his gaze straying to the immodest skin she exposed. Her breasts were indeed very small, the nipples currently hidden from view by wrinkles in the fabric. The tiniest dark edge of one was visible though, and its unseen presence was felt more forcefully than if it had been fully exposed and announcing its arrival with a volley of cannons.

Logically, Gideon should have been horrified by the mere idea of looking down the dress of a woman while she was unaware. It was improper and unseemly. In this instance though, Gideon couldn't marshal much of a care for that. He'd never pretended to be a good man, and suddenly becoming a "husband" didn't automatically make him one.

As was his habit in all things, when his opponent presented an opening, Gideon pressed the advantage.

"Your bodice is crooked." He helpfully informed his new bride, keeping his voice level and unemotional. "Please straighten it. Its off-kilter angle offends me."

She blinked at him in confusion, but for once in her difficult little life, she thankfully followed an order and kept him from engaging in more direct methods of rectifying the situation. An instant later, her nimble little hunter's hands were straightening her top, then she looked up at him for a ruling. She raised her eyebrows, silently asking of that had fixed the matter to his satisfaction, clearly finding his objection *utterly* bizarre.

Her innocent ministrations to her garment had helpfully cleared his view of obstruction, exposing the full shape of her left nipple to his view.

It was darker than he would have expected; capping a small yet *exquisite* peak. *Daring* him to explore it. Its mere presence a challenge to him to claim it.

Gideon was not a man ruled by the physical and he was not one to be attracted to people he did not know. In this case though, he enjoyed the sight of Verlaine's breast a great deal. And he felt no impulse to remove his eyes from her body. He motioned with his hand. "No, to the right a bit, it's still crooked."

She helpfully adjusted the neckline for him again, still looking confused as to why he'd care about her garment.

Both of her nipples were now clearly visible from this one particular angle.

"Success." He bobbed his head, expressing gratitude and praise. "Brilliant work. *Much* better, madam, thank you."

She was a frustrating and utterly *maddening* woman, who was clearly suffering from a cascade of mental and social abnormalities. He was by no means planning any kind of long-term connection to her, or struggling to hold back his marital instincts.

Gideon simply enjoyed looking at Verlaine's breasts. He wanted to look at them right now. So he did, because life offered Gideon precious few opportunities to do things he actually *wanted* to do.

She returned her gaze to his men, completely oblivious to Gideon's strategy and her own immodesty. For the first time since they'd met, she wasn't doing anything to attract his attention, and this was undoubtedly the most attracted to her he'd been.

"I am very impressed with the fine condition of your weapon." He complimented, mouth feeling dry for some reason, eyes still locked on the modest little tips of her breasts, tightened in the cold. The raised line of a scar traced its way over one of them, cutting across her skin and missing the delicate bud of her nipple by less than a hair. It was hypnotizing... Gideon wanted it. Wanted her to give it to him, and sigh in pleasure as his hands took ownership. "Appropriate upkeep is so *vital*ly important for proper weapon functionality."

"I know!" She enthused, clearly pleased that he'd noticed. The girl was practically glowing with enthusiasm now, eager to talk of such important matters. She seldom made sense, but this was at least *some* degree of

rationality on her part, and possibly the one thing about her life he understood. Her more rapid breathing caused her breasts to move in a *most* welcome way. They were little more than a handful a flesh—less-- but they commanded attention in a way Gideon had never experienced before. They were very... *her*. And after spending several moments analytically surveying them and weighing their visual appeal and utility, Gideon decided that he very much liked them. Easily besting any he'd seen before. Quality, in all things, bested quantity, particularly when the quantity in question was so... *fun*. They looked like a *tremendous* amount of fun. "I feel the same!" She eagerly agreed. "Yet the people, they treat their weapons like their farm tools."

"Fools." He nodded, eyes remaining locked on the fixed points of her breasts, despite the movement of his head. "Short-sighted fools. If you mistreat something you depend upon, it will not be there when you need it."

She nodded in complete agreement, her amiable little nipples rubbing against the fabric and growing tighter.

Gideon made a mental note to say more things the woman would agree with, so that she would continue nodding.

She paid no attention to the silent drama of her breasts and their valiant struggles against the fabric of her chemise. "I said to myself when you first got to town and handed me your weapon, I said: 'Verlaine? If there is *any* trace of rust on this musket...there can be no chance of love with this man. Ever.'" She made a face. "'For it would mean that he is little more than a beast.'" She nodded.

Gideon was delighted to have once again made his wife nod. This was a good start, and his imagination was filled with images of her delightful breasts responding to the innocent movement.

"Thankfully, your musket is *beautifully* maintained." She continued, pleased with him and sure of herself now. "Have no fear and trust in our desire, my dearest man." She assured him, her charming little breasts still rising and falling as she spoke the words. "It will teach us to live, despite the fact that you cannot teach anyone to shoot."

Honestly, Gideon had never really had the opportunity to watch a

woman's breasts as she breathed before, and he found the sight very interesting. It was like watching his first sunrise; so beautiful and gentle, that he was *genuinely* moved.

Gideon was *not* a man who gave two shits and an iron nail about sunrises, obviously, but the theoretical poetic *impact* of such an event was the point. Her breasts made him *think* about such sentimental tosh as a damned *sunrise*, of all codswallop, which was quite an achievement on her part.

Female-kind should award her nipples some kind of achievement medal, for conduct above and beyond.

She looked up and smiled in a wide and utterly genuine way, no trace of her typical overwrought seductiveness. His wife made a lovely portrait of feminine intelligence, skill, and affability. An innocent girl, enjoying her gibe at his expense, in a delightful way. Even better, the image she presented was framed with her breasts visible at the margin of the imaginary canvas, meticulously rendered by their Creator in a way seemingly designed to specifically appeal to Gideon.

He stared at her in something close to shocked horror. Like an enemy had suddenly materialized at his flank and was now routing him-- despite his meticulous defenses-- intent on driving him into the sea.

No.

He had *not* been expecting this woman. At all.

Of all the nightmares Nevermore County was said to hide, *this* was certainly not the one he expected to confront.

This was a complication he did not need.

Despite that realization, Gideon's body stirred as he looked at his new bride's striking face and pert little breasts, as she laughed at her own disrespectful joke towards him. She trusted him. She was willing to mock him to his face, something *no one else in the entire world* would attempt.

He liked that. He liked... *her*, as odd as that realization was.

His imagination sparked to life, adding unnecessary fuel to the growing fire inside him as he considered the kinds of things she'd offered him over the course of their acquaintance, and which of them he should now

accept first...

“Though the winds of misfortune may blow, our passion will remain steadfast.” She absently put her arms behind her head to lean back further, cutting off the pleasant and immodest view she offered.

Gideon was a stoic and sturdy man, so there was no trace of his crushing disappointment at her denying his further survey of her flesh, or which would give hint of the dozen conflicting emotions racing through his body at the moment. “Verlaine?” His gaze met hers again. “I think I can guarantee that there is literally nothing on this earth which could ever change the way I feel about you.” He added a serious nod to his statement of incontrovertible fact. “*Believe that.*”

She was quiet for a beat, then howled in laughter as she caught what she believed was a veiled insult, apparently delighted by it.

Unbidden, his imagination immediately started to dwell on how that movement was no doubt impacting her nipples in a similar and equally impactful way as her nodding had. He would *very* much like to witness her laughter while unclothed.

It was an odd thought to dwell on, and certainly not nearly as obscene as many of the things she’d offered, but Gideon preferred his new bride when she was herself, rather than the harlot she frequently pretended to be.

She did not want him. She’d said as much. Marriage was a curse she’d been saddled with, again, so despite her many, *many* offers of companionship, she didn’t mean a damn one of them.

Gideon was merely a stop on the road for her. Just the latest in a long string of “husbands” she’d endured over the years.

That was their agreement. An unemotional transaction, by which both benefitted.

Gideon was fine with that, obviously. The *last* thing his life needed was more entanglements. And, yes, even if he had discovered a sincere appreciation for the woman’s body, that didn’t mean that he was now intent on securing any kind of genuine “husband” status in her mind.

He was a mean's to an end for her, and he was *fine* with that.

...He found that he *very much* enjoyed the thought of her laughing and naked, however. With him.

Herself.

Nude, obviously, but herself.

If he *was* to have a wife... that flash of the smiling, friendly, capable woman Verlaine had just showed him... she would make a *fine* one. Best he'd seen in a lifetime of mundanity.

Gideon was not husband material, anyway. But he liked that woman. A lot.

She continued staring up at him, then jolted.

He frowned at her. "Are you alright?"

She nodded, looking flushed. "Forgive me, I am merely drunk on your overwhelming masculinity, my love. My gentle womanhood yields to it, like the tides, and your greatness engulfs my small mind in your intoxicating manly enormity."

He arched an eyebrow at her, believing that she'd gone a bit far this time with her theatrical promises of love.

She recognized his reaction and smiled. "Too much?"

He smiled back. "I have 'oceans of greatness,' do I?"

"Well, perhaps it is due to the play you hate, but I know every time *I* look at you, all I think of is sea men." She teased, shrugging helplessly. "I do not know why, but the phrase, it simply pops into my mind and it's all I can think about."

The constant sound of the birds overhead was immediately drowned out by the roar of Gideon's blood as it thundered through his veins. He watched her with heated eyes, jaw clenched.

Verlaine felt the shift in his mood and awkwardly rearranged herself on her barrel. "See," she said in a weaker voice, "... see, because it's... it's..."

"Yes, I understand." He nodded darkly, every muscle in his body

now tense. “‘Semen’.”

“Was that...? I didn’t mean to... offend?” Verlaine swallowed nervously, getting up from her barrel. “I’m... I’m going to go look for,” she made several terrible attempts to pronounce Hrtósteyno’s name, then gave up and simply used the incomplete translation instead, “‘*Tombstone*’...”, and she hurried off. She retreated from the scene and hurried to the other side of the barn, where the dog was still concocting various intricate schemes to somehow reach and consume the two billion passenger pigeons overhead, as Hannibal plotted to cross the Alps.

Gideon caught her before she got free of him, moving an arm to halt her flight, his body now pressing her up against the wooden exterior.

She swallowed again, not looking at him, only at a spot on his chest.

He leaned closer. “Despite our arrangement to the contrary, I have heard everything from you from antiquated terms of endearment to illicit things which would make a sailor blush, Verlaine.” He said in a hoarse whisper, trying to maintain control of himself. “I will tell you this and I expect you to remember that I am a man of my word, and am not known for my commitment to morality and fair-play.” He leaned closer, his lips an inch from her ear, whispering the promise to her. “The next time I hear a harlot’s proposition from you? I shall *accept*, and expect payment of that promise. *On the nail.*”

Verlaine regained some of her senses and tried to shove him back, but found him rooted in place. “*Oh, like you even could.*” She retorted, her voice not nearly as certain as it typically was. “We’ve talked about this and your problem with...”

“*Try me.*” He challenged, moving his body so that she could feel a hint of his hard desire, as it prodded against her stomach and hip. “Do you understand?”

Verlaine was surprised by that... but did not move away or attempt to flee via the side his arm was not blocking. She still seemed far more interested in the goings on overhead though, gaze moving to scan the sky... “They’re... they’re nomadic, you know,” she whispered, voice sounding strange, “always on the move and in search of a mate...”

“No, do not look at the birds. Look at me.” He reached down to gently redirect her gaze up at him. “The next time you tell me that I may have your body—even in jest—you shall endure the consequences.”

She swallowed again, her face noticeably flushed now. “You are not the first of my husbands to threaten me with this.” She whispered breathily, eyes on his mouth.

“Your previous husbands were weak and eaten. *I* am your husband now.”

“Then maybe, before you threaten me, you should take their fates as a *cautionary tale*...” The warning was accompanied by the slight shift of her hips against him, her body now pressing against his shaft, accepting him and seemingly asking him to pursue...

“I do not threaten.” He reminded her softly.

“We... we are not married...” She breathed, still making no effort to extricate herself from the situation. “I am simply waiting—anxiously—for you to leave town with your army so that I can move on with my life, and you...”

“I am well aware of what I want, Verlaine...” He moved again, leaning his face towards hers.

Verlaine simply looked up at him with large eyes, seemingly frozen...

Gideon took her face in his hand, gently running his thumb over her scarred cheek...

“Gideon?” She breathed softly, her body trembling against him in the cold wind. “What... What are we...” She began, then stopped as he continued to lean his face towards hers. “...Oh, this will not end well...” She predicted in a resigned murmur, her chin rising, lips moving to meet his.

Gideon’s mouth covered hers, eager for the taste of her.

Her lips were soft and sweet from the licorice root she’d been eating, and they parted for him immediately. He reached up to the back of her head, his fingers running over the odd stubble she’d made of her hair, and he found himself caressing it.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue moving into her mouth, causing her

to let out a low hum, leaning against him. Her tongue surrendered to his following a valiant yet doomed last-stand, leaving Gideon the sole possessor of his wife's delightful little mouth. He moved his hand downward, planning a similar campaign of conquest with the rest of her body...

Her gentle hum stopped unexpectedly and she roughly pushed him away, breathing hard. She said something in rapid French, which he didn't catch, then opened her mouth to reply in earnest...

There was a sudden noise behind the barn to their right, coming from the direction of the forest.

It was an animal, running.

Verlaine heard it too, letting out a soft sound of alarm.

In the next split-second, Gideon stepped in front of her and since her weapon was still in his hand, he brought it to bear in the same quick, practiced motion. He braced his feet, leveling the sight at the sound, cocking the rifle and preparing to kill...

To his surprise though, it was *not* a hellish beast bent on slaughter which greeted him as it rounded the corner of the building.

It was only a mule. In... a woman's straw hat?

He squinted at the odd sight for a moment, wondering if that was some kind of American custom he was unfamiliar with. His silent debate on the matter was cut off, as he caught sight of the animal's flank.

It was streaked with blood. And it *didn't* belong to the mule.

Its frantic braying and whimpering in terror blended with the sound of the birds overhead, like screams amid thunder.

He automatically tracked the movement of the animal with the weapon, then snapped the barrel back towards the fields and the forest beyond, in case anything else came down that road.

"Verlaine?" He asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"I saw it." She was already moving towards her horse, their looming argument or torrid affair forgotten. "Grab your shit, we're moving." She turned to him and extended her hand. "Time again to earn my coin!"

“Someone secure that animal!” He pointed at the mule. He tossed Verlaine the rifle, which she caught in one hand, immediately turning her mount towards the forest, sharp eyes scanning the shadows. He raised his voice to issue a command to his men. “Anything you can’t have in your pack within thirty seconds is going to get left behind!” He marched towards his own horse. “*We’re going hunting, gentlemen!*” He moved past Dákkru, who was absently leaning against the side of the barn.

“Well, ‘tally-ho,’ I guess.” His sergeant supplied, sounding equal parts bored and anxious. He pushed away from the wall and stalked towards the men, urging them to move faster. “Packed and stacked, boys! *Double-time!*”

Gideon urged his horse on, racing after his wife. Towards their foe.

Chapter Ten

Verlaine had kissed him.

Well, *technically* the other way around, she supposed, but the end result was the same.

They'd kissed and she'd made no effort to stab him with the nearest sharp object. Which... was a first, really.

It was a confusing encounter and she wasn't entirely sure how she felt about it. And whenever she felt unsure about something, she typically reacted to it with anger and sarcasm.

Because that was who Verlaine was.

He'd made her feel... afraid.

Not of violence or for her own safety-- Verlaine was well used to those feelings in her life and didn't feel them around him —no, something *far* worse.

He saw through the game.

He saw *her*.

And that was terrifying.

As such, she decided to focus on less frightening things than love, like the giant beast which was slaughtering people in this village.

As far as Verlaine had been able to ascertain from the townspeople and soldiers, the mule belonged to a local man named 'Abram Worthington.' He had not been seen all day, nor had anyone in his family.

She'd followed the mule's tracks straight back up the road, searching for any sign of trouble. Verlaine had already accepted that whosever blood that was, they were dead, of course. And that was *before* she discovered the body parts scattered on the road.

She hopped from her horse and immediately crouched down to

examine the scene, pausing every few breaths to watch the forest.

This was a bad idea.

Generally speaking, there was nowhere more dangerous to be in the wilderness than at the site of a recent kill. Not only because it was certain that the animal which had done the killing was still in the area, but also because the smell of blood tended to attract other predators.

And this was one of the absolute *worst* times to be doing this. It was just before dark, a favorite hunting time for most wolves.

No, this was all wrong. Ordinarily, she would never be here, doing this.

In this case though, she didn't have much of a choice. She was hunting a very dangerous animal and it presented few opportunities to get close.

Besides, she'd grown quite accustomed to being in the presence of dangerous beasts.

Like he was summoned from the darkness by that mere thought, her husband arrived, expertly dismounting and arming himself in one smooth motion, before the horse he was riding had even stopped moving.

Gideon was a man who announced his presence with authority.

She respected that.

The man's eyes immediately surveyed the area around them, taking stock of the environment like he was preparing for battle.

"What is the butcher's bill this time?" He asked, keeping his voice low. He held out a torch in the dwindling light and shifting shadows, his pistol held at the ready and slowly moving across the tree line behind her.

"Two bodies. A man and a woman." She pointed to the mangled remains in the underbrush, trying not to think about the horrible scene they painted. She swallowed, moving her finger over a track in the loose stones of the road. "There... there was a child." She reluctantly whispered, wincing at the realization.

Gideon cursed viciously, his icy exterior cracking for a moment.

She shook her head, swallowing the lump which formed in her throat at the thought of that poor little girl. “The tracks lead into the woods. The girl’s... and The Beast’s.”

Gideon considered that, his face a tense mask in the shifting orange light of the torch. An island of stern dependability in this sea of blood before her.

She watched her husband silently for a breath longer, as his boots sank into the road surface which was wet with blood. And she had the odd realization that... Gideon was simply a man. He seemed so unstoppable and steady, but his blood was just as capable of being spilled all over the forest as this couple’s was.

As her family’s had been...

She didn’t like the thought.

They needed to get out of here. Verlaine knew that. There was nothing more they could do. Even if the child had somehow survived the initial attack, she couldn’t have outrun the monster for long. It was too dark for them to pursue, and remaining here was simply presenting another meal for The Beast. Delaying in this vulnerable and foolhardy position was only begging another tragedy. Better to retreat until the morning and then return with supplies and additional arms.

Until then, they needed to leave. Immediately.

She stood up, feeling exposed here and wanting to get her husband back to the safety of the town. “Every moment we are near this blood—every moment we are in this area at all-- we are in extreme danger.” She warned him, trying to keep her voice steady so as not to frighten him. “This beast, it is watching us. Probably as we speak. Looking for weaknesses to exploit. Watching to see which of us are the weakest...”

Gideon did not seem surprised or frightened by this. He was either thinking the same, or simply wasn’t bothered at all by it.

“Yes. Welcome to warfare.” He nodded. “And I don’t give a damn what this beast intends to do to me, I care only what I intend to do to *it*.” He declared, sharp eyes still watching the shadows. “How long ago was...”

“Captain!” Brophy cried from behind him. “We found...”

Gideon spun around and made a frantic shushing sound. “Quieter, damn you!” He whispered urgently. “*Take heed of where we stand!*”

It was an unnecessary warning. If the monster was anywhere in the area, it already knew they were here.

“There is a third skull though.” Brophy pointed to a spot in the middle of the road, twenty yards further along.

Gideon frowned at the skull, then looked to her. “I thought you said there was no sign of the girl?”

She moved to examine the body, then shook her head. “This is not the child. And it is several days old.”

“I think...” Brophy began, looking sick. “I think the remains... belong to the Marcy girl. I recognize those earrings.”

Sure enough, there was indeed a bent earring still attached to the ragged and putrefying flesh of the skull.

Verlaine had seen a lot of death in her life. But this made her want to be sick. She turned away from it, refocusing on the forest.

Her husband stared at the skull with a stony face for another moment, apparently unbothered by the horror of it. “It is mocking us.” He finally announced, as if coming to a hard realization.

“It’s an animal.” She corrected. “You said so yourself the other day. It has no sense of humor.”

“Can you think of some other reason why it would leave this skull here?” He gestured to the remains. “In the middle of the road? Miles away from the site of the last attack?” He shook his head again, sounding more certain. “It *mocks* us.”

She moved to stand next to him, bringing her rifle to her shoulder in preparation for the attack she suspected was imminent. “Wolves, they run a circuit.” She explained tensely. “They patrol their territory in the same basic path, as if retracing their steps.” She trained her weapon on a moving shadow, then relaxed when it was simply the cold wind. “I have examined the maps of the attacks. This animal, it has never killed here before. Its

attacks have all been further outside of town.” She spared him a quick glance, then returned her gaze to the icy shadows. “I do not understand this creature, Gideon. We need. To. *Leave.*” She carefully spaced and accentuated each word, so that he would understand the urgency of the situation. “*Now.*”

He caught the warning in her voice, his body stiffening.

“What are your orders?” Dákkru asked, taking up a kneeling firing position in the back of the wagon he’d appropriated and brought to the scene.

It carried no supplies. He’d taken it to transport corpses. Her husband’s sergeant was not an optimist, it seemed.

“The child is missing.” Gideon announced, voice tense. He pointed into the trees. “The tracks lead that way. I will go to look for the child.”

Verlaine was so astonished by that that she literally gasped.

Gideon did not seem to notice, remaining focused on his soldiers. “You and the men are to accompany Verlaine back to town.” He pointed at Dákkru, voice becoming firmer. “Take her back to town, I cannot stress that enough. She is *your* responsibility while I am away, Dákkru.”

“Joy.” The man deadpanned, rolling his eyes.

“*Remember yourself, Sergeant.*” Gideon snarled in warning, sounding more dangerous and angry than any monster.

He was going to shoot him. And everyone on the road knew it.

The other man immediately saluted, backing down and accepting the order. “Sir!”

Satisfied, Gideon occupied himself with removing his club from its holster on his saddle.

“You’re going *alone?*” She asked him in amazement, completely at a loss for words about how stupid this plan was.

“It’s *my* plan. And it’s clearly an exceptionally bad one.” He admitted, knowing what she was thinking. “So *I* will be the one who bears the weight of it.”

She simply stared at him helplessly, still in shock by this. “You

would *really* go into that forest?” She pointed into the blood-soaked night. “Now?”

“I carry a musket and am sent where there are things which need to be killed. My enemy is reportedly in these woods, so that is where I shall fight.” He did a check of his supplies, hands quickly moving over the various pockets and pouches of his uniform and belt, confirming that he was prepared. “Believe me, I would be much happier if this beast were somehow lurking within the Palace of Versailles. Alas, it does not.”

She gestured to the woods again. “What *exactly* do you expect to find in there?” She pressed.

“Likely nothing. Hopefully the girl. Perhaps our monster.” He shrugged. “Definitely more information than we currently possess.”

“This monster? It does not take captives.” She moved in front of him to stop him from killing himself. “If the child is in there, she is likely to be in several pieces by now. And then you will be as well.” She swept her hand in a sharp motion, indicating that it would be the end of the story for him. “*Ça vient de s’éteindre!*”

“That is my anticipation, yes.”

“And yet you will go anyway.”

“I have my orders.”

“You will needlessly sacrifice your life simply because someone hundreds of miles away tells you to do it?” She pushed him back. “Why? For the sake of a child’s lifeless body? Why would you do this thing?”

“I have my orders and I shall follow them.” He repeated, the world’s most stubbornly stupid man clinging to his own suicidal idiocy like a safety blanket. “At the moment, my duty calls me into those woods.”

“I do not believe in ‘duty.’ It is a word used by tyrants to convince the stupid to kill the weak.” She paused for a beat. “No offense.”

“None taken, obviously.”

“Men, they are born with no other ‘duty’ than to try to secure their own lives and happiness. Anything else is tyranny. That is the basis of this revolution.” She shook her head. “I am yoked to *no one*’s plow.”

He stood straighter. “I serve my Queen, my people, and my flag. I do not seek to escape my duty any more than I would seek to escape the air that I breathe.”

“What... what about your wife?” She asked softly, stumbling over the words. “What about your duty to her?”

He seemed taken aback by that for a moment. “Would you honestly even care if I died? Truly?” He sounded vaguely irritated with her for some reason. “No.” He shook his head, answering the question for her. “I am merely a stop on the road for you. You’ll play your little game, laughing at me, until you find someone more interesting. And then you’ll move on anyway. The only impact my death will have on you will all relate to the amount of coin you are set to inherit.”

“Are you seriously jealous?” Her eyebrows rose in astonishment. “Feeling underappreciated?”

“No.” He cleared his throat, sounding affronted by the suggestion. “Don’t be absurd. I... I need to get moving, Verlaine.” Gideon told her softly. “I cannot...”

“I believe this is a matter of pride for you.” She interrupted sharply. “You are not accustomed to being defeated.”

“You have *not* defeated me. The kiss was a momentary confusion on my part, it means nothing.”

She blinked at him for a beat, trying to understand that. “I... I meant The Beast.” She said, swallowing.

“Yes. Of... of course.” He cleared his throat, looking awkward. “Me too.”

“I believe that you do not like defeat, especially not by something as simple as an animal. You can’t let that go. You will toss your own life away, simply to prove yourself the better killer.”

“You are entitled to your opinion about me.” He stepped around her. “Goodbye, Verlaine. Enjoy my estate.”

“Animals have no pride, Gideon.” She moved to block him again. “They can bide their time forever, waiting for the perfect opportunity.” She

jabbed a finger into the firm muscles of his chest. “*That* is why you are going to die in there.”

He moved around her again. “We shall see.”

“You are a *fool*.” She stalked after him. “I have married a fool who cares more about pride than he does his own life.” She shoved him again. “Asshead! Why do you do this thing? When you know *damn well* how it will turn out?”

He didn’t reply, the shadows of the trees all but concealing him from view now. “There is a missing little girl, Verlaine.” He reminded her softly, like she somehow didn’t understand what was happening. “As an officer—as a *man*-- I have the duty and obligation to look for her. Dead or alive, she needs my help. I don’t care if the Devil himself is in those woods.” He disappeared, only the shifting light of the torch visible above the foliage as the gnarled limbs and evergreens quickly engulfed him. “I’m going.”

She blinked several times, processing that unexpected answer.

Verlaine muttered something halfway between an oath and a prayer, looking up at the crowded sky in frightened frustration, watching an endless stream of dark birds glide through it twice as fast as any horse could gallop. She glanced at Dákkru, for some reason hoping that he could magically get her husband to see sense, for once. “It will be a bloodbath.” She warned, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Aye.” The man nodded, calmly watching as the soldiers collected the shattered bodies and piled them in the wagon. “We shall have to pray for The Beast, as the Captain looks angered tonight, boys! *God have mercy on it!*”

The men were too terrified of the situation to shout any kind of encouragement at that. Dákkru looked disappointed in their spirit and his opinion of them visibly slipped another notch.

Verlaine let out another frustrated sound, irritated with the world and with men in particular.

Reverend Patterson moved past her on the road, musket in hand. “I will find little Esther Worthington.” The man announced, heading towards the trees.

Verlaine blinked at him in amazement, truly shocked that he'd...

"There's no telling what that damned *Krewhian* would do to her, if left alone with the girl..." The Reverend turned newspaper man finished.

Still... honestly, that was better than she'd been expecting of the man. Still a stupid choice spurred on by his hatred of Gideon rather than a love for the child... but it was at least something.

Then she stalked into the woods, following the world's most stupid man, and the Reverend, into certain death.

She caught up with Gideon several yards into the trees.

He did not look happy to see her there, but he also did not seem at all surprised.

"I believe I told you to go back to the village." He chastised in a low voice.

"No, you ordered Dákkru to take me back there." She corrected. "I was not consulted on the matter."

He made a non-committal sound, brow tense and furrowed beneath his hat, dark eyes moving over the shadows around them.

Patterson simply trudged along with them, looking more crazed with anger than scared. There was an... unevenness to the man, and it had always unnerved her. Still, despite his obvious flaws, he *was* willing to risk his own life for a member of his flock, so perhaps there was secretly more to him than she'd given him credit.

The forest was thick and everything seemed to be moving due to the wind and the shifting light of the torch.

They could be within steps of the monster and they likely wouldn't even see it until it was already upon them.

If her husband realized this, he gave no outward sign. He simply stalked through the cold underbrush, following the trail of footprints.

She moved to walk in front, since she was better at tracking and didn't want the light of the torch in her eyes, ruining her vision in the night. "When we are both killed, I shall be so cross with you." She complained

softly. “When we stand before the Devil, he will say, ‘Calm yourself, Verlaine, your rage at this man frightens even *me*.’”

She spared him a quick glance, and there was a slight smile curving along the edges of the typically severe line of his mouth.

“Be careful.” She advised. “I like you. I would be sad if you were to die.”

“That’s it? No grand proclamations of true and everlasting love? No promises of loyalty and of a lifetime spent in piteous grief were I to die?”

“No.” She took on a serious tone. “I like you. You are a good sort of man, Gideon. Deep down, beneath the horror of you. I have enjoyed our time together, though it has been... very strange. Try not to die.”

“Aye, that’s good advice, Verlaine.” He continued walking, doing a truly admirable job of moving fairly silently despite the situation. “Let’s *both* take it.”

Ahead, the trees began to clear slightly.

Which was not good.

There was a noise behind them and all three of them instantly spun to fire. Instead of a man-eater though, they saw Dákkru, following along behind them. He ignored the weapons now trained upon him, silently taking up a position several yards to their left, along their flank.

“I am positive I ordered *you* back to the village.” Gideon whispered, obviously feeling like no one listened to his commands anymore.

The man remained focused on the forest. “You told me that your wife was my responsibility and then she wandered into the forest.” Dákkru corrected. “I had no choice.”

Gideon made a non-committal sound, clearly debating if that counted as insubordination or not. Instead, they all simply crept forward as silently as possible. The birds overhead helped mask a lot of the noise, but the tradeoff was that they were also making it more difficult to hear The Beast if it was approaching.

Generally speaking, if this was a clearing, there was no better place to find a wolf though. Yet, it was also the best place to *shoot* said animal,

since it allowed for a better line of sight.

Sure enough, she caught wind of that same horrible stench again, the one she'd smelled the last time they'd come near the monster.

It was here.

The edge of the clearing was lined with low evergreens which mostly shielded them from view, and they were downwind at the moment, if they extinguished their torch, this was about the best opportunity they would have for even the *minuscule* possibility of taking the animal by any sort of surprise. Personally, Verlaine was not counting on that. She believed that it knew exactly where they were and what they were planning. But she didn't want to think about that right now, as it made this entire enterprise even more foolhardy.

The clearing in front of them was a grassy area stretching for maybe fifty yards, and then reached the bottom of some rocky crags which extended up the mountain. The rocks were little more than vague shadows in the darkness at this distance, and could have hidden an entire division of men, to say nothing of a wild animal which knew the terrain well.

At the far end of the clearing was the girl, sitting on the ground, leaning against the base of one of the rocks.

Gideon started to move, but Verlaine clamped a hand down on his arm. "No." She mouthed, pointing at the rocks to indicate that they couldn't see what was over there.

Her husband was a direct kind of man, who tended to think in straight lines. He could find tactical workarounds for problems, but there was really no question that he always preferred to keep moving forward towards his goal.

Patterson shouldered by her, but Gideon grabbed his arm and pulled him back to their hiding spot.

Patterson glared at them, opening his mouth to yell at them for their cowardice, when the girl was *right there*. Before he could get the chance though, Gideon clamped his hand over the man's mouth.

"*Watch.*" Gideon mouthed to the man silently.

They could not see what was on the other side of the clearing. As such, her husband solved that problem a second later, by simply throwing the torch across the clearing in a high arc.

She was so amazed by that move that she could do little more than let out a small sound of astonishment.

It solved their immediate problem, but it told anything in the clearing that they were there. And it also robbed them of their only light source for making their way back to the road.

Gideon wasn't the kind of man who thought about the trip home though. Not if the job wasn't done yet.

The fiery light glided through the chilly air like a slow-moving rocket, before slamming into one of the rocks and falling down to the steep ground which led up the mountain.

The fire illuminated something in the shadows. Something *large*. The huge shape pulled away from the torch which Gideon had practically just hit it with, moving to its left.

In the same instant, Dákkru fired his musket. The shadow moved behind a rock, which exploded in a shower of sparks and stone.

"*The girl!*" Gideon pointed at the child, telling Verlaine to check on her. He strode out into the clearing like a man who'd never felt fear in his life, bringing his pistol to bear on the shape as it scampered away. He fired, but the creature unexpectedly changed directions at the last second, and it received a face-full of stone shards as the ball impacted the rocks instead.

Gideon followed up with a blast from his other pistol, but if he hit the creature, it had little impact other than causing it to stumble.

The passenger pigeons at the bottom of the flock, nearest to the shots, reacted, squawking a warning to their companions. The flock immediately stopped being a smooth effortless dance and was now like white water rapids in a river, millions of birds madly veering through the sky, forming a tornado of movement overhead to avoid the gunfire. The noise of them increased greatly, making it difficult to even hear the people around her.

Verlaine skidded to a stop next to the girl, immediately reaching

down to check on her condition.

Patterson arrived a breath later, muttering a prayer, the words lost in the dim of bird sounds and the noise of Verlaine's heart pounding in her ears...

Gideon threw his pistols to the ground, and Dákkru tossed him his musket. The sergeant grabbed the now empty pistols and quickly started reloading them, while Gideon took aim with his sergeant's weapon. "Status?" Gideon demanded over the birds, eyes locked on the rocks, looking for any movement. Sadly, the wind ensured that every shadow seemed to be the monster springing out at them. "Can the child be moved?"

Verlaine let out a long, shaking breath. "She's dead." She said softly, trying to keep her voice steady.

"*Can she be moved, Verlaine!?!?*" Gideon asked again, louder this time, not hearing her the first time over the birds.

"*She's dead!*" She yelled back, the words coming out as a sob. Tears in her eyes. "Her whole throat's gone." She stared down at the girl. "...Body is already cold."

Gideon swore, switching his aim to their right and firing off into the shadows. He tossed the weapon to Dákkru and it was immediately replaced with Gideon's now reloaded pistols.

Verlaine caught sight of their large quarry again, little more than a formless shape in the darkness. It raced away from where Gideon had just fired, once more running towards a break in the line of boulders which led up to a low rise at the base of the mountain.

It was fleeing.

Dákkru moved to give chase, taking several steps into the clearing...

Gideon grabbed him as he went by, halting his advance. "No." He shook his head, looking around at the rocks ahead of them and their rapidly moving opponent. "Never chase the light cavalry when it seems to retreat..." He squinted at the scene, looking and sounding amazed. "That's bait..." He breathed, face pale as he considered the ramifications of that. "That's fucking *bait*..."

Verlaine moved to stand next to him, rifle in hand. She swallowed, recognizing that he was right. As astonishing as it was to think about an animal planning something out tactically like this...

“DEMON!” Patterson charged ahead anyway, avoiding Gideon’s attempt to stop him. “*GO BACK TO HELL!*” He was too angry and tired from living under this monster’s thumb for so long, and watching his people die. He went up the rise after it, disappearing into the deeper shadows of the rocks...

A moment later, there was the muffled sound of a scream and the firing of a musket...

And then only the low familiar yet still somehow unnerving sound of birds.

This monster had set a trap for them here. And when they’d sprung it early with the torch, it had tried to get them to foolishly chase after it into an ambush it had planned on that path.

“We’re leaving.” Gideon started walking backwards, keeping his eyes on the rise in front of them. “Dákkru, grab the girl. Back to the road. *Quick as we can.*”

Dákkru hurriedly wrapped the child’s shattered body in the blanket he’d had around his shoulders, then started to run.

Verlaine stayed next to Gideon, waiting for him to move.

“Go.” He repeated, now brandishing both pistols at once. “I’ll be right behind.”

Verlaine ran to the edge of the clearing and then turned back, providing him cover as he moved to join her.

When they were both back on the rough trail they’d used to find the clearing, all semblance of an orderly withdraw was abandoned.

They *ran*.

Their position was tactically unsound, and they didn’t even have a light source any longer. They had seconds—at most—until this beast discovered that they all weren’t foolish enough to follow it into its trap, and then it would come looking for them, now that it had finished with Patterson.

When that happened... they were as good as dead. And they both knew it.

She looked over her shoulder in the darkness to assure herself that Gideon was still with her. He pointed ahead of her, telling her to pay attention to where she was running.

It took them several minutes, but they all tumbled out of the woods and back onto the road.

Verlaine gasped for air, panting in the chilly wind.

Gideon was instantly issuing orders to his men. “Fix bayonets!” He stalked to the edge of their line, holding up his pistols. “*Make ready!*” He called to the men, eye sliding over to her, apparently to check on her safety. She braced herself in the wagon, rifle trained on the forest in front of them. Satisfied that she was prepared, he refocused on his men. “No matter what comes out of those woods, you will accord yourself with discipline and honor! You will STAND, or *I will cut you down myself.*” He threatened coldly, his deep voice somehow booming over the near deafening cacophony of birds and the howl of the icy wind. His tone was one of calm discipline and stern control. Verlaine knew her husband well enough to recognize that he’d only use that tone if he was worried that the men would break in panic as soon as they caught sight of The Beast. And if they fled, the monster would kill them all. “You’ve all heard about me, you *know* I’ll do it.” He threatened again, refocusing on the forest. “Present!”

His line of soldiers all brought their weapons to bear, pointing at the darkened woods. They were visibly frightened, but he’d drilled them well.

They’d hold.

She began saying a silent prayer, praying that they’d hold...

Even the trees around them seemed filled with the sounds of the birds now, still frightened by the gunfire and anxious to escape it. Squawking and flapping and moving, giving a sense that the entire world around Verlaine was alive and violent, closing in on them. A suffocating, maddening din of harsh and unmusical sounds, cutting through her head and making her heart pound in her chest...

Gideon’s voice cut through it like a knife. “Steady...” He ordered,

sharp eyes watching for any movement. “Hold...”

Verlaine focused on her own breathing, trying to keep herself calm.

They waited for the Beast to burst from the forest and attack, to end this intolerable suspense, one way or the other...

The attack did not come, but she could smell The Beast again, watching them from the shadows, its movements concealed by the angry clamor of the birds and the howling wind.

Gideon moved his head suspiciously, like he recognized an enemy's tactic. He gave a low whistle to Dákkru and the man immediately pivoted to his left, watching their flank. Gideon did the same for the right, squinting in the rapidly shifting icy mist which moved through the forest around them. He suspected that it must have gone around their line, attacking them from some new direction, rather than head on.

“*FORM SQUARE!*” Gideon shouted, repositioning his meager forces so that their weapons now pointed in all directions, preparing for a last stand.

The moment of horrified anticipation for the end stretched into two. Then ten... Yet the attack did not come.

“It has gone.” Verlaine announced, lowering her weapon with shaking hands.

Gideon accepted her professional judgment on the matter without debate, motioning for his men. “*Acceptable* work, gentlemen. You have held your line and the field.” He motioned again. “We will fall back to the village and return with the sun. *Move.*” The men scrambled to fall in line and prepare to flee the scene. Gideon ignored them, hoisting himself up onto his horse, he glanced over at her, looking tired.

He had *not* been as composed or confident in that matter as he outwardly projected.

He didn't need to say anything. She knew what he was thinking.

“I don't know what that was, Gideon,” she shook her head, a chill running up her spine, “but it surely was *no* wolf.”

“No.” He agreed, voice icy calm. “It was not.”

“What are you going to do?”

“My job.”

Chapter Eleven

Gideon was standing over the new grave of the little girl, shovel still in hand. He'd started off digging it with the help of several other men, but by the end he was all that remained. His jacket was off and his face was now covered in dirt.

All told, the man looked tired.

He was taking his inability to kill this beast harder than most, it seemed. Verlaine was accustomed to going on lengthy hunts which did not produce immediate results, but her husband was not. This was a man used to success. Shouldering his way through whatever obstacle life presented and emerging victorious.

Yet this little girl had not been rescued from the jaws of the beast by the gallant hero.

She had died. And the monster had escaped.

Nevermore County was teaching The Gravedigger humility. And had now given him yet another opportunity to practice the literal trade his colorful moniker implied.

Verlaine watched him work, trying to ignore the impulse to embrace him. It was a silly idea and the man would not appreciate it, but he looked so... broken and lonely.

The world around them seemed so quiet now. The flock of passenger pigeons had finally completely flown over, and she'd gotten accustomed to the dull roar of their flapping and calls.

Now it seemed like something was missing. And the isolation of this place and this man, was hitting her harder.

She was not positive what she should do. None of her other husbands had ever inspired such an emotion in her. They were all cold men who wore their emotions on their sleeves. Gideon was a man who kept his

deepest thoughts to himself. All she knew of his mind was what he yelled out as orders.

Finally, she leaned against the wall of the graveyard and cleared her throat. “Are you going to cry, my love?” The question was only half-teasing. She had no idea what else to even say.

“No.” His expression didn’t change, he simply continued staring at the fresh grave. “Stop asking silly questions.”

“I cry sometimes.” She admitted softly.

“I don’t.” His voice was devoid of emotion, like he was simply thinking out loud. “Half of the people I’ve known in my life have been killed.”

She nodded, feeling a lump in her throat. “I once had a large family... but they are no more.”

He shifted closer to her. “After the first dozen... you start to feel nothing. Cutting off your emotions, because it simply hurts too much.”

She moved to rest her head on his shoulder, both of them now watching the girl’s grave. “Life makes beasts of us all.”

“It is a consequence of the work we do.” He decided. “You have to accept mortality and death. If you don’t you’d never be able to focus on anything else. Yet we must face these losses on our feet, and never let them keep us from fulfilling our duty. Death and sacrifice are the price we pay to purchase victory. And a better world.”

“You believe that this little girl’s death has somehow paid towards the cost of the future?”

“If each death does not have some meaning... then neither does life.” He ran a hand over his forehead, leaving a streak of dirt. “It is a hard bargain, to trade in blood. Countless people have died in this war already, all trying to secure something better. A land free of the horrors we bring here to achieve it. Horrors like what happened to this girl.” He went back to staring at the grave. “I will settle this account, child. You have my word.” He vowed to the wooden cross. He looked back at Verlaine, gesturing to the line of houses visible in the village center. “I spoke with some of this girl’s

friends?” It came out sounding like a question, as if he too were amazed that he would be reduced to questioning little children about military matters. “They said that this girl had told them about a large and strange looking ‘dog’ she befriended last week.”

Verlaine’s eyebrows rose, astonished by this bit of news. “What?”

“She told them it was reddish and had the stripes of a tiger. Supposedly, it wagged its tail at her and ate from her hand.” He paused, brow furrowing. “Which is... madness.”

Verlaine was equally confused, articulating his unspoken thought. “What kind of monster wags its tail at you one day and rips your throat out the next?”

“I do not know.” His voice sounded far away now. “Something this world has never seen before.”

“It is a monster which changes allegiance without warning.” She returned to his side, smiling up at him teasingly. “Are you *absolutely* certain that you and it are not related, my prince? You share so many traits.”

She had meant it as a good-natured jest at his expense, but her husband seemed to take it seriously.

He continued his silent brooding, not even protesting the fact that her head was now resting against his shoulder again. “We have been thinking of this creature as an animal.” He finally said. “Perhaps it’s time to consider it as a being of intelligence. You are correct, sadly. The Beast and I *do* share similar traits. And it is hunting us, not the other way around.”

She retrieved his jacket and handed it to him.

“I have now spoken with each person in town who has claimed to see this monster.” He informed her. “Some say that it looks like a bear, others that it is a very large wolf which resembles a horse. And others still gave me descriptions which fit only a panther or a hyena, animals which the witnesses themselves are unfamiliar with.” He shook his head. “I have been all over the world, however, and I recognize the descriptions of these animals, even if *the witnesses* do not.” He looked out at the forest. “Something very strange is happening in this village. *Whatever* is out there in those woods... it is making these people its prey.”

“What do you want to do about it?”

“I shall solve this problem as I have solved all other obstacles in my military career: *shoot it until it dies.*” He looked back towards the village as he got redressed. “We have an assassin in our midst.” He decided. “A saboteur. Using the hit-and-run tactics of the Colonial militia. Able to get in and out of our community on a whim, and do as he likes while he’s here.” His eyes narrowed in suspicion and anger. “It pretends to be something it is not, to earn our trust. And we must *root it out.*”

“You are describing a werewolf.” She blinked at him in amazement. “Have you come to believe in them?”

“No.” He shook his head. “This is no werewolf. I am describing something far *worse*. I am describing a monster untainted by the base alloy of humanity at its core. This is a beast with human intelligence but none of the associated weaknesses.” His jaw firmed. “By this point, I’d *rejoice* if we discovered it was a mere werewolf. Hell, I’d settle for a vampire.”

She dusted off his lapels and straightened his coat for him, buttoning it up. He once more looked like himself. A sullen, angry, by-the-book military man, who would hold the line as others fell around him.

She was relieved to see her husband, once again.

He stood straighter, a plan forming in his mind. “We will secure our fortification.” He announced in a definite tone. “Cut off his supply of easy meals and the ability to gather intelligence on us. Make ourselves a harder target for his rage, then strike.”

She nodded, pleased to see his utter confidence in himself returning. “We are going to kill this beast.” She assured him softly.

“Well, *of course* we will.” He looked almost insulted by the implication that they might not. “Otherwise, why am I paying you?”

“My body?” She guessed, teasingly.

“I won that at auction.” He reminded her. “And I paid a premium.”

“I will make certain to...” She stopped herself from making an illicit come-on, remembering her earlier promise. She was one mock innuendo from... something she wasn’t positive she wanted.

Well... not *entirely* positive, anyway.

The realization that she was not all-together averse to having sex with him was not a welcome one.

It immediately made her feel less confident about their relationship, strangely. Like she no longer knew how to behave around him. How was she supposed to deal with a man if she was actually attracted to him? How could she make indecent advances to him *then!?!?*

She was in trouble. And she knew it.

If she wanted this man, even a tiny bit, her fake marriage might very well be fake. Things in this world were not always what they appeared to be, so perhaps like some kind of double-agent, her marriage was only *pretending* to be fake in order to draw Verlaine out and get her to reveal her position. Because a fake “fake marriage” was actually a *real* marriage, in cunning disguise.

And Verlaine didn't want to have a real marriage. Especially not to a man she felt so much for. And, obviously, not to one who was almost certainly a war criminal.

Her life would be a lot simpler if she were married to a man she hated instead. She had a lot of practice at that. The thought of actually being attracted to a husband was... terrifying.

Her only hope at this point was that her husband would do something which allowed her to confirm to herself that her fake “fake marriage,” was actually a *fake* “fake fake marriage,” and had in fact genuinely been fake all along, and was only *pretending* to be fake-fake in order to affirm the genuine nature of its fraudulence.

She frowned slightly, trying to decipher her own strange mind.

She... she had already enjoyed too much apricot brandy today, surely.

In any event, whether a real marriage or a fraudulent one, she needed to focus on killing The Beast and getting her husband out of town as quickly as possible, so her life could finally resume.

Gideon did not seem at all distracted by similar thoughts, and was

already marching from the graveyard and back down the street.

At the edge of town, they found Dákkru leaning against a fence and speaking with Ceely, while the “wolf hunter” enjoyed a tray of small, artfully arranged food. The sergeant did not look thrilled by whatever was being discussed.

“The problem with the British is that they allow their females too much freedom, do you not think?” Ceely asked him, casually nibbling on his meal. “It confuses them. Women are simple beasts: they require a stern hand and rigid guidance in order to find contentment.”

Magistrate Duhamel nodded in agreement. “As I have said myself, *many* times.”

Ceely slid the plate across the table to the other man, shifting in his seat so that he was more under the shade of the awning he’d constructed. “That is the righteous burden destiny has charged us with. We must retain the natural order of the old world, while seeking to alleviate many of its weaknesses in regards to the less advantageous members of our new society here, don’t you agree? The lesser orders of people should know their place and allow their betters to guide this ship of destiny.”

“‘Lesser orders’?” Dákkru inquired in curious suspicion, cutting off a slice of unidentifiable meat from a cube of it he was holding.

“Oh, you *know* who I’m talking about.” Ceely rolled his eyes, like the other man was a fool for not immediately recognizing the group or groups in question. Especially since Dákkru was almost certainly a part of one or more of them. “It’s perfectly obvious to anyone possessing any sense.”

Duhamel made a scoffing sound. “Water naturally settles at its own level, and *some* regions of Nevermore County seem to be the stagnant runoff of the rest of the world.” He let out a scoffing sound. “And *Sparkle* County, well, they seem to get the cream of...”

“Dákkru, a word.” Gideon announced, motioning to his sergeant.

The sergeant practically ran from his post, eager to be away from the other men. “Sir?”

“Rally the men.” Gideon motioned to the fields. “We are going to

redouble our efforts to secure this town against all assault.”

As they were talking, Burgermeister Portefaix scurried up. He did not look happy.

“What’s that?” The Burgermeister snapped. “What madness have you planned now, *mercenary*?”

“They’re an *auxiliary*.” Verlaine corrected before her husband had the chance.

“We are going to lock this village down.” Gideon told him flatly. “Too many die needlessly, because they can’t remain in...”

“That is your fault!” The Burgermeister interrupted. “You can’t expect the good people of this village to sit idly by while a foreign devil orders them to their deaths!” He pointed to the forest. “What about Abram Worthington and his family!?! Why should anyone in this town listen to you when you couldn’t...”

“If you do not remain silent while I am speaking, I will have you shot and your remains set alight.” Gideon warned him flatly.

He was perfectly serious. And everyone there knew it.

Her hand surreptitiously slid to the tomahawk at her hip, just in case...

On the front porch of the building across from them, the white-haired woman began to play *Nevermore Hornpipe* on her fiddle: an irritating Celtic tune which seemed designed to be the only funeral dirge you could dance a jig to.

The assembly all turned to look at the girl in irritation, the confrontation delayed by the noise.

The girl’s song slowly stopped as she noticed everyone staring at her. “...What?” She looked confused and frightened by the glares. “Why do you stare at me so? H-h-have I done something?” She let out a squeak, like a frightened mouse, and quickly fled the scene.

Ceely used the girl’s interruption as an opportunity to restore peace. “I think what the Captain *means*, is that...”

“The ‘Captain’ has no command here!” The Burgermeister snapped. “Not anymore! I was taken in by him, as were we all! Opened our arms to him! But he has done nothing to save us! He was sent here by fools, hundreds of miles away, because they wanted him somewhere out of the way! Rather than delivering us from this monster, he runs around town with the longhunter’s girl, a woman of highly *dubious* character and...”

Gideon pulled his pistol and leveled it at him.

The Burgermeister let out a startled sound and stumbled away, falling to the ground.

“I say!” Duhamel moved to push Gideon’s pistol away from Portefaix. “There’s no call for...”

The rest of his words were cut off by the tomahawk blade Verlaine pressed against his throat, grabbing the back of the magistrate’s head to hold him still. “Shhhh...” She whispered in his ear threateningly. “*My husband* is speaking...”

Dákkru continued calmly eating his dried meat, like he was long used to this type of thing with his commanding officer.

Burgermeister Portefaix jumped to his feet and dashed away several steps. “You’re a madman!”

Gideon appeared to barely notice the man’s desperate flight away from him. “Now then,” he holstered his weapon and refocused on Duhamel, “where were we?”

“We were...” The Magistrate began, then cringed as the blade of Verlaine’s tomahawk poked at his skin as he spoke.

Gideon made a motion with his hand, telling her to put it away. “Thank you, my dear, but I think the Magistrate here already understands the situation.”

She shoved the man away and moved to stand next to her husband and his sergeant.

Dákkru held out a slice of his dried meat to her, which she accepted with a nod.

“This is *most* unacceptable, Captain.” Ceely condemned, looking

disappointed. “Not how a gentleman should carry himself.”

“Did I somehow leave you with the mistaken impression that I am a good person?” Gideon sounded almost amazed by that. “My apologies. Most people know better.”

“I do.” Verlaine winked at her husband. “Legally questionable, morally reprehensible, spiritually depraved... personally alluring.” She beamed at him. “As always, my love, you so deeply understand the road to my heart and loins.”

Dákkru snorted. “You would have *loved* his campaign in Freedonia.” The man gave a low whistle of horrified amazement, either from the memory of Gideon’s bloody carnage there or because he knew that Verlaine would be excited by it.

Gideon ignored that, glaring at the wolf hunter. “You do *not* want to test my resolve in what I am willing to do to accomplish my goals, Ceely. I *will* complete this mission. If it kills me and everyone in the village, this mission *will* be completed.”

The Magistrate gasped for breath, relieved to be alive. “I was saying that there is *already* a curfew...” He protested. “We have had it in place for...”

“Condense the town.” Gideon ordered, pointing to the homes which were away from the village center, amid the sprawling fields and wooded areas. “Everyone in the outlying buildings will be moved into town, unless they possess high walls and a musket.”

“That... will not be popular.” Magistrate Duhamel shook his head. “At all.”

“Would you like to know what else is unpopular?” Gideon snapped. “*Being eaten by a ravenous carnivore.*”

Verlaine sarcastically pointed to the scar on her face, shaking her head. “I have nothing but complaints, no.” She calmly chewed more of the meat Dákkru handed to her. “Do not recommend it.”

“From now on, this entire village is to remain indoors until we have killed this monster.” Gideon informed them. “For their own safety, they...”

Burgermeister Portefaix looked appalled by this edict. “How can we possibly do that? The best people from all over the colony are due to arrive within mere hours! This is the *Harvest Festival*, man! It cannot be delayed!”

“No, it can’t.” Gideon shook his head. “*Cancel it.*”

“Good god, man! You speak madness!” Burgermeister Portefaix gaped at him. “This is the *All Hallow’s Eve Harvest Festival* we are talking about!” He cried the words again like they should hold the weight of authoritative religious doctrine behind them. “The entirety of the social calendar revolves around it, and...”

“There is *a monster killing everyone.*” Gideon reminded him flatly. “Now is *not* the time to hold a ball.”

“This is a town matter,” the Burgermeister declared, sniffing indignantly, “and the town *needs* its revelry. Without it, all manner of mischief will take place. All Hallow’s Eve is not...”

“There will be no harvest.” Gideon shook his head. “It will be burned.”

“You don’t understand, we *need* that grain.” The Burgermeister was almost manic now. “It keeps this community and your army alive, that’s the entire reason the General sent you here in the first place! It will be able to be harvested in two weeks’ time, before the first hard snow and...”

“I don’t care if it is to be harvested *this afternoon.* Our enemy uses the grain for cover and therefore I shall deprive him of that sanctuary.” Gideon grabbed one of the watchman’s torches which were set up on the pathway out of town. He tossed it to Dákkru. “*Burn it.*” He ordered.

The sergeant nodded and headed towards the unoccupied fields, while the outlying houses in the other areas were cleared by the rest of Gideon’s men.

“No!” The Magistrate ran for his horse, which was secured nearby.

Dákkru tossed the torch into the tall grain, where the fire quickly spread away from the village, fanned by the cold wind.

“*I shall take this up with Governor Carpenter, himself!*” Magistrate Duhamel cried angrily, his horse racing behind the barn, silhouetted by the

spreading flames, “he will see to it that...”

Verlaine turned in curiosity as the man’s words stopped, mid-sentence.

His now rider-less horse appeared back into view, emerging from behind the barn and running wildly straight down the street to their left.

“What in the...” Verlaine’s eyes narrowed, feeling transfixed by the oddity of this. Had the man somehow fallen off his mount?

A moment later, Duhamel’s screams could be heard over the sound of the fire and the howl of the wind.

“*Dammit!*” Gideon was already moving, shouting to his men. “*TO ARMS!*” He vaulted the split-rail fence which surrounded the field, ignoring the fire around him as Dákkru and Brophy materialized at his side. He looked back at Ceely. “Rally your men, head west to the crossroads, then wheel right.” He brought both of his hands together, indicating a pincer movement. “*We’ll trap it between us.*”

Gideon looked entirely comfortable now. More so than she had ever seen him, in fact. Entirely confident and in command of himself and the men who surrounded him.

Her husband was a beast, but this nightmarish war had patted him on the head and told him what a good boy he was. Carnage was his domain now; instinctively hostile to peace and timidity. He did not seem comfortable anywhere but in the midst of hell itself.

And at the moment... he was home.

Ceely was out of his seat so quickly that he toppled the entire table over, calling to the men he employed and relaying Gideon’s orders to them.

“Prepare to advance in skirmish order. Fix bayonets. Sergeant: watch that flank!” Gideon commanded his small team of soldiers, who had scrambled over the fence after him. “*Pursue and destroy, gentlemen.*”

The men shouted a “Huzzah” in approval, more to encourage themselves than to display any kind of bravery.

They were all terrified.

And they had every right to be.

Anything which went into that field was liable to die.

As if to demonstrate the point, the smoke cleared for a brief moment and Duhamel could be seen, sprawled on the ground, desperately clawing at the loose soil in an attempt to escape The Beast's attacks...

Gideon immediately took aim at the shadow behind the man, cursing...

Dákkru seemed to read his mind. "It's far out of range..."

Gideon fired anyway, but the round fell short of hitting its mark at this distance.

Dákkru's did as well.

The Beast, it was *mocking* them. Waiting just out of range, displaying itself and its prey, to showcase its power and the impotence of its pursuers.

Duhamel let out a scream as he was suddenly wrenched to the side, like something grabbed his head and pulled him away.

Wolves... they did not go for the head like this. It was...

Gideon shouted orders to the men, forming their skirmish line and advancing.

Verlaine started after her husband, but he shook his head. "Get a *weapon*." He commanded, looking irritated that she would head into a burning field after a monster and not at least arm herself first. "*Have you lost your senses?*"

She looked down at her hands, surprised that she'd left her rifle in the graveyard as she was helping him dig the girl's grave. She'd gotten too distracted by her own marital uncertainties.

"Find the rifle," he pointed to the edge of the village where she was standing, "secure *this* position and our rear."

"I do not take orders from..." She challenged.

"You step into that field, I will *shoot you in the leg and carry you out myself!*" He shouted back before she could finish, disappearing into the

smoke. “*And find out where our damned dog is!*”

She cursed at herself for going anywhere unarmed, and started to run to retrieve her rifle.

It took Verlaine five minutes to get back to the graveyard and retrieve her weapon, then another three to find Hrtósteyno. The dog had somehow gotten himself trapped in the garden shed, despite the fact the structure only had three walls.

Segheyki Hounds truly were clearly *not* bred for their intelligence, it seemed.

She shouted for the dog to run ahead and help Gideon, but the animal did not speak her language. She had forgotten its commands in Segheyki, and so the animal simply stared at her in contented canine idleness.

Verlaine let out an irritated shout at him, still running back to where her husband was about to get himself killed. The dog loped along with her, more in excited curiosity about where she was going and if there would be food there, than from any desire to help her.

By the time she got back to the field, however, the fighting had already completed. Gideon’s men were filing back into the clearing, looking shook.

Verlaine anxiously searched for Gideon, feeling on the verge of panic.

He wasn’t here! Oh, god! He had...

Gideon emerged from the smoke and embers of the field, angrily kicking a wooden milking stool which had been set up next to the barn.

She raced towards him and threw her arms around him, unable to contain herself.

He stumbled back in apparent surprise, but did not protest or attempt to extricate himself from her clutches.

“Are you hurt?” He asked softly, his hands sliding across her back,

searching for blood. “Have you been injured?”

She shook her head, unable to speak at the moment. She... she had not had anyone in her life who *mattered* in such a long time. She couldn't believe how close she had come to losing him today. “I... I am fine.” She whispered softly, pressing her face against his chest, trying to slow her pounding heart. “I found Hrtósteyno...”

Gideon continued to gently caress her back, glancing at the huge dog as it absently sniffed at the scorched stool Gideon had just kicked, to see if the blow had somehow rendered it food. Upon making the unexpected discovery that the stool remained a stool-- and thus tragically not any form of meat-- the dog returned to absently wagging at the exhausted men filing out of the field.

One or more of *them* must have gone into battle carrying an armload of sausages for their commander's dog, surely...

Gideon made a humoring sound at it. “*Exemplary* work, Hrtósteyno.” Gideon sarcastically praised, rolling his eyes at the animal's less than stellar ability as a guard dog. “We remain in your debt.”

The dog wagged happily, pleased to be mentioned in any context.

Gideon refocused on her. “The Beast... it punched through Ceely's men and was able to escape back into the woods. We were not foolish enough to follow, but Ceely pursued anyway.”

She nodded, feeling more in control of herself. “What are we going to do?”

Ceely and one of his men staggered down the road to their left, looking tired and battered.

Gideon glanced at the other man, still holding Verlaine. “What is the butcher's bill, wolf hunter?”

“I lost four men in those woods, and another at the edge of the field.” Ceely's tone was hoarse and exhausted. “The Beast was waiting in the darkness of the eastern forest as soon as we went in, and it had us almost instantly. Never even caught sight of it.” He leaned up against the side of the barn, letting out a humorless laugh. “This is... the damnedest thing. I

have killed over twelve hundred wolves in my life, both here and in France. *Man-eaters*. I have never hunted anything like this beast.” He turned to look at the forest, some a million miles away. “This... this is not a wolf. This is the darkness itself, coming alive and reaping souls.”

Gideon removed Verlaine’s hat and calmly pressed his lips to the top of her head. It was a gentle and all-together comforting motion. He slid his thumb across the nape of her neck, then caressed the back of her head. “I am... relieved that you are safe, Verlaine.” He whispered. “This village is becoming more dangerous. Please, *do not* go anywhere without me again.”

She found herself nodding at the plea. Something she would have vehemently objected to just days ago.

He pressed his lips to the peach-fuzz of her shaved head again, letting them linger there. “Back to work.” He sighed, turning to look at the men around him. “Gentlemen, we find ourselves engaged in a hell of a fight.” He told them, voice serious. “But this is not living ‘darkness.’ There is no mystery here. We might not know exactly what it is, but we *do* know what The Beast looks like. We know how it behaves. And we know where it is. Our problem is simply that this creature knows the same of us. This beast... understands us. Better than we could ever understand it. It knows what we are capable of and the tactics we will use to hunt it. This familiarity with us means that it is not afraid. It is reported to *eat from our very hands!*” He angrily waved his hand in the air. “It *enjoys* slaughtering us. And it’s not going to stop.” He nodded in certainty. “An enemy is trying to wipe us out. We will meet its cruelty with cruelty of our own. It thinks it knows us. We will use its knowledge against it.”

Ceely stood straighter as an idea occurred to him. “I devised a plan once, Captain.” He gestured to the other side of the village. “I will set up near the abandoned barn on the outside of town. I have with me thirty shotguns which I will tie to thirty ropes, and at the center I will place a calf as bait. When The Beast comes for its next meal... it shall be its last.”

“This animal does not eat cattle.” Gideon reminded him. “It prefers people.”

Ceely frowned at that news. “What do you suggest?”

“Build your trap.” Gideon commanded. “I will bait it.”

Verlaine let out an astonished sound and hauled her husband away, yanking him onto the porch of a nearby home so that she could yell at him in private. “You would really trust your life to *that man’s* mad scheme?” She demanded angrily, feeling like this was his attempt to make his final escape from their marriage. “Do you truly value yourself so little?”

“No, of course not.” He waved a dismissive hand in the direction of where they had just left Ceely. “Our opponent will smell out that trap.” He flashed a sinister smile, as a plan formed in his head. “That is what I am *counting on*. Present a weakness and wait for your enemy to attack it. I will be the bait for Ceely’s ploy, and when The Beast inevitably bypasses it... we will spring the *real* trap.” He pointed to the highest point in the village: the bell tower of the church, which was several stories above the rest of the buildings. “This beast knows the effective range of a musket. He toys with it, mocking us. Let’s introduce it to your friend from Pennsylvania.” He tapped her rifle meaningfully. “I do not entrust my life to Ceely. I entrust it to *you*.”

Chapter Twelve

It wasn't that Gideon didn't trust Ceely's plan, it was just...

No, there was no way to finish that thought.

The plan—and the man—were foolish.

The “professional wolf hunter” pulled one of the ropes, tightening the knots in the spider's web of tripwires he was creating.

“I was speaking with the widow Freedman?” Ceely shared, gritting his teeth as he pulled tighter. “She told me that last year... there was a two-headed cat born in town.” He nodded knowingly, like Gideon would recognize the all-important meaning of that.

“Why do you tell me this?” Gideon asked seriously, genuinely confused. “Am I to, what? Congratulate its mother? Alert the newspaper? Send General Washington an urgent communiqué about the status of Bilah Freedman's barnyard?”

“No, just...” Ceely cleared his throat, looking uncertain. “They say that the wall between the living and the dead is weakest at this time of year. *Especially* in Nevermore County. They say that the spirits of the dead return on All Hallow's Eve, to reap the souls of those who wronged them in life. They say that it's the work of the meddlesome Subnaturals...”

“I have found that ‘they’ say many things, yet none of it is ever helpful.” Gideon rolled his eyes. “We are dealing with an animal—albeit a very clever one—not some demon or spirit hatched by mythical fairy folk below.”

“Yes... Yes, of course.” Ceely nodded, obviously slightly embarrassed at being called out for his paranoia. “In any case, I am delighted by your company, Captain.” Ceely shared, jaw firmed in what must have been a grimace of sincerity. Or perhaps the man was simply in urgent need of the nearest privy. “I've heard your people are all violent, demented perverts, who yearned for the sea as a man does a virgin, and yet *you* seem an

affable sort of chap.” He made a hand gesture of support, indicating that he was in favor of Gideon’s supposed triumph over his obsession with the ocean. “It speaks well of you, that you have been able to rise above your tragic biology.”

“This man is excellent at judging people.” Verlaine praised to Gideon sarcastically, nodding at the wolf hunter’s supposed qualities. Helpful as ever. She squinted at Ceely appraisingly. “This is why the wolves respect him so, I think. I am told that they have made him the leader of their kind.”

Gideon let out another irritated sigh. “Have you finished this ludicrous contraption yet, Ceely?”

The other man nodded, brushing the dirt from his hands. He frowned at the mud which was now staining the front of his very expensive coat. “Is there a washerwoman in town?” His tone was of a man who had just discovered a beloved friend was a casualty on the battlefield, and was now near desperation, searching for a surgeon. “Hopefully one who…”

Gideon pointed at the machine, drawing his attention back to the matter at hand. Gideon too would weep for the unfortunate fate of his own uniform, once this mission was completed and The Beast killed. Until then, however, it didn’t matter.

Ceely pointed at the pasture to their right. “We are going to have you come through this area here, leading that cow on the end…”

Gideon glanced at the animal in question. “Juba?”

Verlaine’s gaze slowly slid to look at him in amazement that he would recognize a cow by sight.

“I spoke with the woman about the cow and assured her of its safety.” Gideon quickly explained, feeling attacked. “The widow Freedman is *very* protective of her animals, and…” He straightened his coat. “What?” He demanded of his wife, who was still staring at him. “I am attentive to details when planning a battle.”

Verlaine put up her hands, abandoning the matter. “You are such a community-minded man, my love.”

Ceely ignored that, remaining focused on his idiotic plan. “So, you will come through this pasture, leading the... ‘Juba,’” he rolled his eyes, “and The Beast will follow.” He pointed at a spider’s web of tripwires in a depression of the field, half-hidden by the scorched earth and debris from the fire Gideon had ordered. “When it reaches this point, all thirty shotguns concealed in the feedbags over there will go off, sending any demon in this area straight to hell.”

“Hopefully not *every* demon.” Verlaine thought aloud. “I am not prepared to be a widow. Yet.”

Gideon didn’t bother to point out how stupid this scheme was, and instead simply nodded at the wolf hunter. “Carry on then.” He made a hand motion ushering Verlaine and Dákkru to follow him back towards the town.

Dákkru didn’t even bother to wait until they were out of earshot to begin complaining about Ceely. “You realize that this is stupid and will result in your gruesome death, yes?” He stepped over the low stonewall rather than simply walking three feet to his left and using the gate. “Even if you somehow navigate the tripwires—in the dark, mind you—The Beast is not half as dull-witted as Ceely and will smell out this trap in a moment.”

“I am aware of that, yes.” Gideon made his way towards the bell tower. “The plan hinges upon it.” He pushed open the doors of the church, heading for the far corner.

“I did not agree to this, Captain!” The new man who had replaced Patterson complained, in a most unhelpful manner. Sadly, it did not seem like this new reverend would like Gideon any more than the previous one had. “This is a house of the Lord, not a sniper’s perch!”

“We’re on the Lord’s business at the moment: killing ‘demons.’” Gideon reminded him, not bothering to stop walking towards the stairway. “If you have objection to that, kindly take it up with Him.”

Gideon made his way to the top, where there was a trapdoor which led up to a small open-air space below the bell in the belfry. It provided just enough room for two people to move around.

Gideon held the trapdoor open and ushered Verlaine forward.

She nodded, walking towards the railing. “Give me a moment to get

set up.”

“I can load and fire in thirteen seconds.” Dákkru told the room at large, apparently feeling like Verlaine’s request for sixty seconds was excessive.

“You carry a smoothbore *musket*.” She reminded him dismissively. “It’s like bragging about how quickly you can toss a pebble at something.” She unslung her weapon. “It takes longer to load a rifle. The grooves in the barrel present an obstacle when loading quickly, but they make the projectile spin on the way out, increasing the accuracy and range.”

Dákkru made an unconvinced “Hmph” sort of sound.

Gideon moved Dákkru back, giving Verlaine space to work. He watched his wife expertly check over her weapon and begin to load it.

It was... *magical*.

She reached to her belt, then swore, looking around.

“What?” Gideon asked immediately. “What do you require?”

“I left my bag downstairs.” She made a face. “I need wadding.”

“I can...” Gideon began to offer to go retrieve it, but his wife didn’t give him the chance.

Instead, she reached to her belt and removed her beavertail knife, then started to unbutton and shrug off her coat.

Gideon’s eyes widened in astonishment, as his wife was suddenly all but naked in front of him. Verlaine calmly used the blade to cut off a strip of fabric from the bust line, exposing even more of her skin.

“Linen. Tight weave.” She shared, sliding the blade back into its scabbard. “Best there is for this job.”

Gideon didn’t reply, all of his attention was fixed on his wife’s breasts.

“Cow skull out there, yes?” She looked out at the field, her face all business and completely focused.

The darkness of her nipples was visible through the material, the opening at the collar once again teasing him...

“Gideon?” She asked again, uncertain if he’d heard her.

He managed a nod, not moving to meet her eyes.

She began to take on a shooting stance, balancing the long barrel of the weapon...

Dákkru leaned closer to him, so that she didn’t hear. “Would you be open to a competitive bid on your wife, sir?” He cleared his throat, watching the woman like he was witnessing true greatness. “I’m good for it.”

Honestly, Gideon had forgotten the man was even there. He slowly turned his attention to him, pinning him with a glare which adequately delivered his reply to that.

Dákkru recognized the dangerous ground he was treading on. He nodded, looking scared. “Of course.” He cleared his throat and started to retreat. “I’ll fuck off now, sir.” He practically ran from the scene, which likely saved his life.

Gideon went back to watching his wife, of the opinion that she was the *best* purchase he’d ever made.

His gaze skimmed down to admire the gentle curve of her rear.

He decided that she should *always* wear pants. They made it so much easier to admire her figure than her dress did.

He frowned at the thought, recognizing that it was not one he typically had.

He needed to remember the situation and not become distracted.

He had an agreement with the woman and nowhere in that was there room for any kind of fraternization.

It was simply *business*. An exchange.

If he pressed the matter or allowed himself to encourage his seldom seem baser instincts with her, she might well call the whole thing off. And Gideon needed her to kill this monster.

And more importantly, he was becoming more and more convinced that he needed her in his life *period*.

He swallowed, trying to get his body back under control. He cleared

his throat, struggling to keep his tone even and steady, and not betray the fact that all of his instincts were telling him to take this woman right here on the floor of the belfry. Hard and fast and desperate...

“Three hundred, maybe three hundred and fifty yards.” He gestured to the target set up in the field. “Can you hit it from here?”

“Yes.” She made an adjustment to the bracing for the barrel. “It will not touch you, Gideon.” She assured him firmly, meeting his eyes. He wasn’t sure if the promise was for his benefit or hers though. “You have my word.”

“I do not demand results, they are often out of our control. I demand *effort*.” He leaned against the railing, watching her work. “If you take your best shot, and miss, then that is all I can ask of you or anyone else.”

“I will hit it.”

“I am not afraid.”

“I *promise you...*” She repeated, moving to press the barrel of the rifle to her lips. Her tongue gently licked the sight at the end. Her soft pink flesh teased the tip of the metal for a moment, leaving it shining...

Gideon’s eyes widened, heart pounding in his chest so forcefully that he was fairly certain that the movement would be visible from the outside. His shaft immediately hardened, silently begging Verlaine for a similar treatment as the one she was giving the rifle sight...

She didn’t appear to notice, returning the weapon to her shoulder. “The spit helps it catch the light. Easier to see when aiming.” She explained casually.

“Uh-huh...” She could have told him that it was to chase away ghosts and he would have simply nodded and praised her for the *wonderful* idea.

Gideon was in trouble. The line of his resistance was faltering and this woman now had him surrounded.

And he didn’t care.

Not a toss.

“The Beast’s patterns tell us that it will not attack again until we approach dawn.” She observed with the hint of a smile. “Whatever shall we do until then?” She paused for a breath. “Perhaps we could play the game of All Fours...?” She said teasingly.

Gideon tore his gaze away from her mouth to meet her eyes.

Whatever she saw there betrayed his interpretation of that and the intentions it sparked in him.

“It-it is a perfectly innocent game of cards.” She quickly explained, blushing slightly. “That’s not... that’s not a proposition on my part, I remember your edict on that matter.”

Whether it was a card game or not, Gideon was thinking it was close enough.

His eyes narrowed, imagining the many things he could do to his wife while they were up here alone...

Verlaine seemed to be preoccupied with something though, the weapon shifting in her hands. “If... if it comes for you, and I *do* miss...,” she began nervously, “what will you do, Gideon?”

He let out a long breath, trying to focus on his own mortality and not the many miracles his new bride’s captivating little tongue could perform on his body. “I don’t know, Verlaine.” He shrugged. “But I suppose I shall have the rest of my life to figure it out.”

She didn’t reply to that for a moment, then let out a bark of laughter as she finally got the joke.

“Ha!” She smiled broadly, enjoying that. “You are a *very* amusing man, has anyone told you this?”

Gideon grinned back at her, *captivated* by his wife.

She fired the weapon.

The target in the distant field was completely obliterated.

Gideon decided that he loathed mules.

They were possibly the only animal in the world worse than people.

He had spent more than two hours baiting Ceely's trap with Juba the cow, before finally leaving. As it turned out, there was no one in town to take the Worthington's mule, "Henrietta," as the family had been wiped out on the road.

Thus, this tragedy added one more strange reward to Gideon's coffers.

The Beast had already given him a wife and an inn, and now he had a mule.

If this assignment went on any longer, he might very well soon be given an orchard or become some kind of royal.

So, job with Ceely done and unsuccessful, he was moving his new ancient plow animal back to the inn that Gideon had taken possession of. Sadly, the mule was not cooperative, despite the fact that Gideon was the one in danger right now.

And she looked *foolish* in that hat, despite her insistence upon wearing it.

The animal stood still in the darkened field, refusing to move a muscle.

"You will return to the paddock by my inn." Gideon ordered firmly, in a tone which never failed to get his men into proper order. "At once!"

Henrietta the mule did not dignify that with any indication she had even heard him. Instead, she simply watched her surroundings.

The mule recognized the folly of this situation, yet was uncertain which direction offered her the best chance of escaping it.

Gideon sighed, surrendering to the iron will of the animal. "*Fine.*" He snapped, feeling his anger rise. "Then we shall do this the *hard way...*" He removed his hat and coat, leaning his musket against the fence. He rolled up his sleeves and started to simply *push* the animal...

Around him, the shadows continued to shift in the cold wind, moving across the burned, smoking land and the charred stalks of grain...

Gideon ignored it, putting his shoulder against the mule and shoving with all of his might.

Henrietta finally got the message and took off towards the road again, moving with far more speed than he would have expected. So rapidly, in fact, that Gideon did not have time to regain his balance once the resistance the animal provided was taken away. He staggered forward several steps, then hit the ground in a heap, swearing.

“I’ll make you into glue, you...!”

The rest of the threat was cut off by the roar of a bloodthirsty monster, as it materialized from the darkness over him. He wasn’t even aware it was there until it was already leaping through the air at him, a flash of teeth and claws in the shifting light of the torch.

Gideon didn’t even have time to move, the animal was simply too quick. He could only watch as it flew towards him, his life passing before his eyes in that split-second before it eviscerated him...

Then the animal was thrown to the side, like it was caught by an invisible leash.

A second later, came a rifle’s report, its deadly projectile beating the sound to the target.

Gideon rolled towards the barrels to his left and grabbed his pistols, jumping to his feet and whistling loudly.

The barn doors flew open and Dákkru raced out on horseback, followed by Brophy and a horse for Gideon.

In his head, he estimated the time needed for Verlaine to reload. If the animal wasn’t dead, that was too long to wait.

He grabbed the torch and made his way deeper into the field, searching for the monster’s body. He spotted it a moment later, lying at the edge of a gully. It was in an unnatural heap, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

He held the torch out, keeping the pistol trained on the corpse. He took no chances.

Even in the semi-darkness, he could see that this monster was no

wolf. The unnatural posture kept most of its shape hidden, but Gideon could make out an odd assortment of seemingly disparate parts. The chest of a leopard, the legs and feet of a bear, the scales of a lizard, the mane of a lion...

It was very...

To his surprise, the animal stirred.

Gideon fired at it.

The Beast paid the round no mind, either because he somehow missed it or simply because the scales were so tough that the leaden ball could not break them.

The shape of the beast rose back to its feet, only its eyes clearly visible, glowing in the night with refracted light.

Gideon glared back, getting furious now...

Somehow, his club had found its way into his hand and his pistol was... somewhere. He wasn't sure where, as he had no conscious memory of switching weapons.

He dropped the torch, his grip on the club tightening. "*I'm going to put you in the fucking ground, monster...*" He promised in a snarl, still glaring back at The Beast hidden in the shadows.

The monster growled back, taking a step towards him...

Gideon took that as an invitation to battle and moved forward as well, prepared to end this. One way or the other...

An instant later, the animal simply wasn't there anymore.

Then there came the sound of another rifle shot.

By that point, Dákkru had arrived with the horses. Gideon was mounted and ready to go in a breath, catching the fresh musket his sergeant tossed him. He spurred the horse onward, watching the shadows. "That way!" He pointed with the weapon towards where the animal had fled. "*Run the bastard down!*"

Brophy didn't bother to halt his horse, flying past them, torch held in one hand and his weapon in the other.

Gideon's horse soon outpaced him, racing down the gully, watching the tracks in front of him. He'd had the animal—'Champawat'—for some time now. She had seen him through battle on three continents. And he remained certain that there was not a beast yet born who could outrun her for long.

The tracks led back towards the east, and Gideon already knew where it was headed.

The Beast would go back to the forest. That was its base.

Instead of following, he turned sharply to the left and headed towards town.

Dákkru let out a confused sound, as Gideon raced off in a new direction, but was enough of a soldier to continue on the original trajectory Gideon had ordered, since Gideon had not issued any amendment to it.

Champawat took the stockade fence which surrounded the town in a leap, not slowing down. The horse raced through the empty streets, its hooves sounding like thunder on the dirt and cobblestones.

The buildings were a blur around him, a festive display of All Hallow's Eve gourds exploding in a spray of orange goo as the horse trampled them, and was gone from the scene before the remains even hit the ground.

He arrived at the far edge of town, the shortcut having taken a few hundred precious yards of distance from the pursuit.

Sure enough, he could now see the shape of an animal, moving through the shadows. It was headed east, towards the forest, as Gideon had anticipated.

And he was going to meet it before it got there.

Champawat tore from the edge of the village like a rocket in the night, moving faster than even The Beast could run.

Gideon's sudden and unexpected reappearance in the chase surprised The Beast, its gait stumbling for a beat, before it took a slightly different angle towards its home.

In front of them, someone stepped out onto the road.

The Beast leapt through the person as effortlessly as if the man was simply the morning mist, sending shreds of the man in three directions.

Gideon continued the pursuit, ignoring the droplets of blood and tissue which landed on him as he sped through the area where the man had formerly stood.

He was gaining on The Beast now...

He leveled his musket at it, finally back within range...

"I got you..." He growled, eyes fixed on his target. "Just die, you..."

The night around him erupted in fire, the explosion knocking Champawat off her feet. Gideon was tossed head over heels, tumbling across the ground. He winced as something tore open his back, as he finally came to a rest against a rock.

His vision swam for a moment, and the pain was the only thing assuring him that he was still—in fact—alive.

He ignored it, turning over despite the agony that caused.

Somehow, he'd managed to hold onto his weapon and he trained it in the direction the beast had fled. The barrel moved as Gideon's hand trembled, but he was still ready to fire...

At the edge of the forest to the east, a hundred yards away, eyes glinted in the shadows for an instant, watching him... and then disappeared.

Gideon swore, letting his head slip back to the ground. His free hand rested against a rope, which was stretched across the pathway.

Brilliant.

It was the fucking wolf hunter's trap.

The Beast had led Gideon right back through it.

And he wasn't sure if that fact made him angrier at the beast, Ceely, or himself.

Sloppy.

Gideon had allowed his own anger and desperation to kill this

monster, to distract him.

He was better than that.

It was *unacceptable*. And would be noted in his report.

His view of the sky was cut off a moment later by Champawat, who absently began to graze on the charred grain next to Gideon's head, apparently uninjured in the fall.

Gideon let out a tired sigh, looking up at the night sky, his mind bleary.

Despite this latest defeat, Gideon found himself dwelling on the image of his wife.

She really was a lovely woman.

And a *hell* of a shot.

"If you're dead, does that mean I can leave this town, sir?" Dákkru wondered from somewhere. "Because I am *very* ready to leave this town now, sir."

Gideon continued staring at the sky, his mind feeling wide open and free. "Your sister moves with her husband in the 3rd when they are deployed, correct?"

"Huh?" Dákkru looked momentarily confused by the subject change. "Did you hit your head or...?"

"I asked you a question." Gideon demanded impatiently.

"Aye, she travels with him. And *there's* a prized pig if there ever was, sir." Dákkru finally answered. "Told her to let that gambler swing for 'is...'"

"Does that life provide her with fulfillment? As a wife?" He pressed, not caring about Dákkru's brother-in-law's meaningless legal entanglements. "Moving with the army, I mean?"

Dákkru squinted in confusion, looking baffled by this topic. "Huh?"

Gideon let out another irritated sigh, frustrated with the world. What was so difficult to understand!?! It was a simple question!

He cared about Verlaine. He had come to the conclusion that he did not wish to leave her behind here, no matter what their agreement had been. He wanted her with *him*. He had no experience with the wives who traveled with the camp though. He did not want Verlaine to be unhappy with such a life, particularly since she was accustomed to living in the wilds. It would not be the life she *wanted*... but the thought of being parted from her until the war's end was unthinkable to him.

More of Gideon's men made their way down the path towards Ceely's, and they started chatting. The darkness concealed Gideon's presence on the ground.

"The bloody witch missed it completely." Private Turner complained to the man next to him. "Clear shot and she pissed it away." He let out an irritated sound. "If one of *us* had been up there, we..."

"Looked like a hit to me." Gideon announced, rising to his feet. The soldiers looked like they were about to soil themselves in terror as he appeared from the darkness like the specter of death. "But perhaps you are correct. To settle the matter, we shall need to check for blood." He grabbed Brophy's torch and thrust it at the soldier. "*Here*, take this torch and go in there searching for blood." He pointed towards the forest. "If you don't find any, then you have proven me mistaken and I will immediately apologize for ever doubting you."

The man didn't move, he simply stared at Gideon with wide eyes, trembling slightly in fear.

Gideon took that as an answer. "No?" He handed the torch back to Brophy. "Then I must have been correct after all." He straightened his torn shirt, trying to regain his appearance. "I often am. In the meantime, I need someone with eyes sharper than mine on sentry duty tonight. Since you seem to believe yourself the best of us, *you* are the perfect man for the job, Turner." He moved closer to the man, lowering his voice threateningly. "Fall asleep and I will shoot you." He promised, voice hoarse with rage. "And I assure you: I *won't* miss."

Chapter Thirteen

Verlaine was halfway down the stairway when she ran straight into Gideon. She was moving so quickly that she barely had enough time to stop, and almost sent them both tumbling down to the floor below.

She let out a surprised sound, automatically reaching out her hand to steady him on the tread, in case he was in danger of falling. “Sorry, Gideon!” She gasped. “I was...” She trailed off, seeing him clearly in the dim light for the first time. She let out a whispered curse in French. “Are... are you okay?”

She automatically started searching his body for serious injuries, praying she wouldn’t find any.

“I’m fine.” He assured her, continuing up the stairs, pulling her along with him like the tides. “How is your neck wound?”

“My what?” She blinked at him for a beat, then remembered the cut she’d received from the men who had tried to kill them. “Oh... no, that’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Still no infection?”

She obediently shook her head, confirming that she’d followed his order on that.

He’d asked her about it three times in the last ten hours, and personally inspected the wound twice.

It was possibly an overreaction.

“The Beast escaped. Again.” He relayed tiredly. “Ceely lost another man, but I walked away with only minor injuries.” They reached the top of the belfry and he leaned against the railing. “All things considered? An engagement which could have quickly become a lot worse.”

She was not the best at reading her husband’s moods and she was uncertain if he blamed her for the plan going awry. “I-I-I hit it dead-on.”

She gasped in a rush, slapping the back of her hand into her palm to indicate a hard impact. “I swear to you!” If he blamed her for his injuries or his failure, he might never trust her again. “That shot would have killed a *bear* at this distance, Gideon.”

He nodded consideringly. “So... we have thus deduced that our quarry is not, in fact, a bear.”

Neither of them said anything, as Verlaine processed that. Then her mouth quirked at the corner, still not used to her husband having any sort of sense of humor. She moved to stand next to him, looking out into the darkness below.

“You hit it.” He took a handkerchief from his pocket. “Dead on.” He held it up for her to see. The fabric was stained with an oily black substance, which stank of The Beast. “It’s *bleeding*.”

She gazed down at the unnatural blood for a moment, her own veins running cold at the sight. “Whatever’s out there... I’ve never seen an animal like that before. Did you see it? Nothing on God’s earth moves like that, Gideon. I no longer believe that it is capable of *being* killed.”

“If it were invulnerable, it would not have fled.” He assured her. “It *knows* that we are capable of killing it, or it would have eaten us all already. Our task, is simply to discover *how*.” His jaw firmed in determination. “There is no enemy or evil which cannot be surmounted with craft and *will*. Even this one.”

“It’s playing with us. This is a game to it.” She shook her head, turning away from the railing. “It wasn’t scared, Gideon. It’s having fun.”

Her words hung in the air like the scent of blood, neither of them saying anything else.

“*Exemplary* shooting, Verlaine.” He finally assured her, like he didn’t agree with her point but was letting the matter drop. “Truly. If you were a rifleman under my command, I’d put you up for a commendation.”

She was far more pleased by that praise than she was going to tell him. Truthfully, it made her heart beat faster. Verlaine... had been on her own for a long time. Even when she was married, she was... alone. And it felt good to hear someone appreciate her work. Almost *pathetically* good, in

fact.

Instead, she simply let out a scoffing sound, slipping down to sit on the floor. “If I were a rifleman under your command, you would have already had me shot for insubordination by now.”

He laughed pleasantly at that, sitting down across from her. “Most likely. You do have a mouth on you, woman.” His gaze fixed on her lips. “*Dear Lord*, have you got a mouth...”

His tone made her skin warm, and for the first time in as long as she could remember, Verlaine felt *genuinely* attractive. Like this horrible, powerful man, who terrorized this new country... he would eat from her hand, if she asked it.

She began to feel hot, despite the fact they were outside in the chilly night air. Verlaine’s skin was flush, her nipples beading as she stared at her husband.

Despite her teasing, she and Gideon were very much alike in their loves. She was... *unaccustomed* to such a strong burst of desire. As her body dampened, it felt like it was somehow by Gideon’s command.

She wanted him.

And that frightened her. A great deal.

“I...I need a drink.” She announced, reaching for her bottle of apricot brandy, her hands visibly shaking. Whether it was from her desire or the terror that desire brought on in her was anyone’s guess. She took several long swallows of the sweet fire, trying to steady her nerves. “To... to my mouth, I suppose, eh?”

He took the bottle from her hand and raised it to her in a toast. “I shall drink to that, yes.” He took a sip, making a face at the taste. “Fucking Colonial swill. Like licking sugar cane.”

In her mind, that image quickly went from licking a sugar cane to licking... other things on Gideon.

Her heart pounded even more rapidly at the idea, and she bit her lower lip to keep from trembling harder.

“Are you cold?” He asked, looking concerned. “We can go inside

and...”

She shook her head, not wanting to leave this place. “I am fine.” She let out a long, shaky breath. “My first husband?” She began, voice quavering. “I met him at a trading post near Albany.” She swallowed nervously, feeling completely exposed. “I was very young, and I thought I loved him. He told me he loved me. So we were married. But... it wasn’t what I thought it would be.” She stared down at the floor, sightlessly. “Like most things in this world, it soon soured. He was not a kind man... And...” She trailed off, not wanting to relive that or dwell. “And when he was done, he put me up for auction. To be rid of me.”

“What happened to him?” Gideon’s voice was... almost scarily calm. Calm but firm. “What is his name and *where does he live?*”

She shook her head. “He was killed by a mountain lion, three months later.” She took a long swallow of the brandy. “In his rented room. In downtown Baltimore.”

Gideon’s mouth quirked. “Funny how that happened.”

“Wasn’t it though?” She stared down at the floor again. “I-I didn’t do it, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She shook her head. “It was a freak accident.”

“I’m sure.” He didn’t sound convinced. “And your uncle? The one who *raised* big cats?”

“Complete coincidence.”

“I see.” He took another thoughtful sip of the brandy, then handed it back to her. “I was engaged once, when I was young. Did I tell you that?”

“No. What happened?”

“I didn’t love her.” He sounded like that was the obvious answer and should have been apparent to anyone. “I had a moment of clarity and realized... I was pretending. I was only with her because I was after money and position. It was what was expected of me. She knew this and accepted it, felt the same, but... it wasn’t right. It felt wrong every time she tried to touch me. I couldn’t... Didn’t...” He trailed off, looking awkward. “That is to say...”

“I understand.” She nodded, sparing him the embarrassment. It was an action both of kindness and from her desire to not dwell on more thoughts of this man’s erection or lack thereof. She’d already spent more time than necessary obsessively thinking about it. “Not being attracted to awful people is not something to be ashamed of, Gideon. Love should be about the less tangible qualities of a partner, not appearance.” She raised the bottle to him in toast, taking another sip. “If your body is wrong to behave this way, I wish more of us were damned to suffer from the same affliction.”

“I wanted no part of it anymore.” He continued. “The life which was promised with her was not the kind of life I would choose. Not who I wanted to be. So I extricated myself from the arrangement and I left.”

“Did she take it well?”

“As well as can be expected.” He shrugged unconcernedly. “There were hot words shouted at me, which rapidly cooled once exposed to my chilly indifference to her.” He made a disinterested gesture. “She married a Colonel in the Fusiliers instead.”

“Are they happy?”

“I do not believe some people are capable of ever being happy.” He looked down at the lip of the brandy bottle. “It’s not in their constitution. They war with themselves, skirmishing at the edges of their own minds, assuring that no rogue element of contentment is able to break through their lines.”

“Do you include yourself among these people?”

“On occasion.”

She silently watched her husband, noticing for the first time that although he had no serious injuries, he was still bleeding from several cuts and bruises.

She was... she was being a terrible wife right now, and she immediately reached for her supplies. “Here, I’ll patch you up...”

“Thank you, but it is unnecessary.” He told her quickly, looking almost afraid of her touching him.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not trying to hurt you, Gideon...”

“I know.” He assured her flatly. “That’s... that’s not the reason.” He shifted on the floor, looking uncomfortable. He pulled at his own collar, like he was hot. “Besides, I have survived worse.”

She noticed that the high collar he always wore concealed a long scar, which seemed to stretch impossibly wide.

“I can see that.” Her eyebrows rose in amazement. “Impressive.”

He was confused for a moment, then recognized what had caught her attention. “Ah.” He unbuttoned the collar, showing her the full scar. “A memento of a woman from New Jersey. Miriam Dreyfuss.”

“Another one of your spurned lovers?” She guessed sarcastically. “You *heartbreaker*, you.”

“No.” He shook his head solemnly. “I killed her son.”

Her smile instantly faded. “Oh...”

“He was a spy. I caught him near Matawan Creek, passing coded messages. I had him shot. Two days later, I found her in my tent. She’d disguised herself as a local woman of ill-repute and used her charms to get by the guards. She stabbed me in the throat before I even knew she was there. I grabbed my pistol and blindly fired at my attacker.” He tapped his chest. “Hit her in the heart, and she died right next to me. It’s an odd thing to watch someone die. Particularly when if the roles were reversed, and someone killed my son, I would have done the same thing.”

“You would have looked *lovely* in your harlot disguise, my love, I am sure.” Verlaine could not work up much sympathy for anyone who would hurt her husband.

“A brave woman. And an excellent mother.” He decided, raising the bottle in her honor, looking almost sad that his prospective assassin had failed in her attempt to kill him. “May she rest in peace, with her son.”

She took the bottle back, watching her husband over the lip as she took another swig. “I don’t know.” She told him, tapping the cork back into place.

“Pardon?”

“You are debating whether to ask about the cause of the scar on my

face.” She pointed to the scar which ran through her eye. “I don’t know.” She explained. “The people in the village, they say... they say that it was the avalanche which killed my papa. It was not.”

“What was it?”

She shrugged. “I... I don’t know.”

“Do you think it could have been The Beast?”

“Anything which intends to kill the ones you love is a beast.” She gestured to their surroundings, far below. “The woods of Nevermore County are filled with many monsters. There is a thin line between reality and nightmare here, and I believe that one tends to blend into the other in this place.” She absently swirled the last of the brandy around and around, watching the liquid catch the dim light. “We were not hunting it, we were simply walking the mountain and stumbled over a dead moose.” She swallowed, the fright still fresh in her mind, after all these years. “The animal—I am uncertain what it was exactly... It came from nowhere and tore us to ribbons. It killed my Papa, one of my uncles, and two cousins.”

“I’m sorry.” He said softly. “Truly.”

“I do not believe that The Beast is the one which attacked my family though, it looked different.” Her fingers closed into a fist at the memory. “And that one is dead.”

“Are you certain?”

She removed her necklace of its claws and placed it on the floor between them. “*Pretty damn sure.*” She stared down at the grim reminder for a long moment. “But I have come to believe that *all* monsters are the same, whether man or animal. They are beasts, waiting to steal away our beloved and the innocent.” She pointed to the ground. “This is why I am here, hunting this creature. I will fight to live in a world without fear of shadow. Without fear of such monsters coming for my family, or any family.”

“And because I am paying you a mountain of coin.” He added.

That got her attention and she looked up at him, trying to determine if he was being serious or not.

He smiled, indicating that he was teasing her.

She let out a nervous laugh. “I will kill it before it can kill another person that I...” She stopped before she could finish the thought and betray her deep feelings for him.

“Well... it is a *lovely* scar.” He praised, this time sounding entirely serious.

“I’m sure it is the height of fashion.” She rolled her eyes at his lie. “*Every* woman shall want such a horrible wound now.” She finished the last of the brandy in a single gulp. “If you like it that much, I have one across my breasts too, or obvious lack thereof,” she absently tossed the empty bottle over the edge of the belfry, “want to see it?” She offered sarcastically.

“Yes.” He answered immediately.

She was taken aback by that, uncertain if she had heard him correctly. “W-w-what?”

“I would very much like to see it again, thank you.” He nodded, watching her expectantly.

She simply blinked at him, frozen by the situation.

“You offered something illicit. I accept.” He explained calmly, obviously believing it to be entirely logical. “I *did* warn you, Verlaine. I *told* you what would happen if you made me an offer like that again. You know the kind of man you are married to.”

She met his eyes, seeing him. *Truly*. “Yes.” She agreed slowly, feeling a lump of emotion in her throat. “I do.” She continued watching him, the disguise he wore so well finally slipping away. “I was wrong again, wasn’t I?” She asked him rhetorically. “You... you don’t do the things you do because of pride. Or a lust for carnage. You’re... a good man, aren’t you?” Even to her own ears, she sounded amazed by that realization. “You try to hide it and you frequently forget it. But deep down, you are a responsible and largely decent man, who wants to do the right thing. You complain about it. And the people you protect. But you will help those weaker than yourself, with no thought to your own wellbeing.” She pointed at him. “*That* is who you are.” She let out an astonished sound, mind still reeling from this. “I have not met many men like you in this war. Or in this

life. You are a rarer species than the animal we hunt, Gideon.” She nodded at him, still trying to swallow the lump in her throat. “I am proud to be your wife. Even if only a counterfeit one.”

“I looked down your blouse.” He shared randomly, his tone implying he was unsatisfied with that interpretation of his moral character.

“Pardon?”

“Before.” He gestured with his head towards one of the barns below. “You were sitting on a barrel during target practice, and I looked down your blouse because I wanted to see your breasts.”

“Ah.” She blinked rapidly, trying to catch up with this new bit of random information. “Well, that’s... that’s okay. I accept your apology.”

“I do not recall ever apologizing for the incident.” He made a scoffing sound. “In order to apologize you have to be sorry about something. I am not generally a man who regrets any decision I have made, that one included.” He nodded in complete self-satisfaction. “I consider it a damned fine thing and congratulate myself for carrying out the plan flawlessly.”

“Ah.” She cleared her throat nervously. “Do you... do you make it a habit of deliberately looking down women’s clothing?”

“Lord, no. First time.”

“So... just *my* blouse?” She pressed, feeling like this answer was important.

“Yes.” He paused, a new thought apparently occurring to him. “Up your skirt was not on offer, as the angle would have been impossible. But in *full* truthfulness, that would be on the table as well.”

“Oh. Okay.” Strangely, that made her feel a lot better. “Did... did you enjoy seeing them, at least?”

“Very much, yes.” He nodded contentedly. “I think your breasts are *lovely*, thank you for asking.”

“...Good? I’m glad.” She let out a helpless sort of sound. “This is a *very* peculiar conversation. I appreciate the honesty though. You are forgiven.”

“At last.” He deadpanned. “My hellish torment over this matter finally draws to a close and I can move on with my life, a changed man. Your mercy is a soothing balm to my troubled, broken soul.”

“*You’re* the one who brought it up!” She swatted at him. “What the hell do I care anyway!?! If you want to look, look!” She waved a dismissive hand. “Hell, we’re married, I’ll strip right now!”

“Agreed.” He nodded. “As I previously demanded and have been patiently waiting.”

“Pardon?”

“I am a man of my word.” He reminded her. “I made you a promise and I shall hold you to the bargain, even if it means stripping you by force.” He met her eyes, his gaze heated and unyielding. “Kindly remove your clothing, madam. *Now.*”

Verlaine did NOT back down from a threat or a challenge.

If he was demanding to see her breasts, then she was going to do it, if only to watch the total disappointment cross over his face. She was not ashamed of her body in any way, it was simply something she never personally thought about. They were not her best feature though, even she recognized that. She was essentially flat-chested, and it was a matter which more than one person in her life had commented upon in a negative way. Verlaine had never cared about that, in fact their criticism made her life much easier. If they weren’t attracted to her bust, *wonderful*, that simply allowed her to escape being forced to explain to her husbands more often about how their lives together would be, and how she wasn’t interested in their bodies either.

With Gideon though... she cared.

It was a silly concern, born from a girlish vanity and faltering self-esteem, two problems she thought she’d long ago killed off.

She debated the matter...

It... it wasn’t like anything would happen *after* that, anyway. Even if she did remove her shirt. After all, his “body didn’t work that way.”

She set her expression into a determined pout, equal parts irritated

with him for insisting on this and ready to sing his praises for the same.

She removed her shirt and tossed it aside, grabbing hold of her chemise and yanking it over her head.

His breath left him in a long rush, his gaze fixed on her breasts.

She bit her lower lip, heart pounding in her chest, feeling exposed and vulnerable. Her nipples were visibly tightened and it wasn't simply from the cold.

His expression was dark and heated... but he seemed far more interested in her body than she would have anticipated. She found herself unconsciously shifting closer to him, like she was offering her breasts to him.

"I'm going to touch them now." He warned her, voice low, rumbling like gravel. His eyes flashed up to hers, seeking permission for an action he'd already set himself upon.

She slowly nodded, without even thinking.

He reached out to pull her closer to him, his free hand moving to caress her.

She let out a soft curse, feeling that down to the core of her. She closed her eyes, trying to remain in control and not lose herself in him...

His hand moved over her breast, his fingertip tracing over her scar, across the edge of her nipple, and down to where it disappeared just before hitting her ribcage.

It was, in Verlaine's opinion, the single most pleasurable moment of her entire life up until now. It felt gentle and demanding and...

"Pants too." He requested, running his fingers along the waistband. "...Please." He lowered his face to her breast, one nipple slipping into the warm heaven of his mouth.

She was putty. She'd do anything and everything this man wanted.

And that terrified her beyond all reason. Beyond all lust. Beyond all lov...

She stopped the last word of the thought before it could fully form in her head, terrified of the ramifications of it.

She shook her head and desperately pulled away from him, like a drowning woman making one last attempt for shore. “*I’m scared.*” She all but cried, scrambling away from him. She covered up her chest with her arms, trying to ignore how abandoned her nipple felt now that it had left his mouth and was no longer being pleased by his tongue. “I-I-I’m scared...” She said again, voice breaking. “I-I-I’m sorry, please don’t be angry with me, but...”

To her surprise, he did not look furious at her. There was no shouting or... or violence. Instead, he simply nodded, leaning away from her. “There is nothing to be frightened of, Verlaine.” He assured her softly, voice even and understanding. “That is the most *beautiful* scar I have ever seen. I will not ever see its like. You have won our contest.”

She looked away, heart still pounding, panic still racing through her. “You know what I mean, Gideon.” Her voice broke again. “I’m sorry... I’m just... I’m scared.”

He spread out his hands in surrender, indicating that the matter was dropped. “If you are frightened, then we will simply sit together.”

“Simple as that?”

“Simple as that.”

“I’m... I’m sorry that...”

“You owe me no explanation or apology.” He interrupted. “And I do not require one. You are... you are my wife. And my friend. I am disappointed by not continuing, but not angry.” He moved his head to meet her gaze again. “I have become angry with you over a great many things, Verlaine, but I will *never* get angry over that. I give you my word on it.”

She nodded, recognizing that he was entirely serious. “See?” She shifted, calming down. “You *are* a good man.”

“No, I’m not. In the slightest.” He shook his head. “But I am not a beast.”

She considered the matter, her momentary panic draining away now. Leaving behind only her original desire, reinforced anew by her husband’s understanding.

“I’m not... I’m not really as confident as I sometimes seem... Especially about that.” She confessed softly, not looking at him. “I’m sorry.”

“*No one* is as confident as you sometimes seem, Verlaine.” He told her, smiling in reassurance and feeling. “You do not need to be anything you don’t want to be, or apologize for being who you are. For what it’s worth though, I think you are the most capable and justifiably confident person I have ever met. But sometimes even the confident and capable have moments of self-doubt and experience emotions they cannot control. That doesn’t make their confidence an act, it makes them human.”

She nodded, biting her lower lip in nervousness and drawing on her courage. “Do you... do you want me?” She blurted out suddenly, after finally working up the nerve. “I mean, not as a joke or a game or a wartime conquest...?” She met his gaze again, her eyes filling with unhelpful and strange tears. “If you *tell me* you want me, I-I will believe you, Gideon.” Her voice broke again, her words coming out in a sob. “I don’t believe *anyone*-- not anymore-- but I *will* believe you. If you tell me...”

She wasn’t certain which potential answer made her more afraid...

“From the moment you started making my life difficult, I have wanted you, Verlaine.” It was a statement of definite fact.

She wiped a tear from her cheek, ignoring the fact that the movement once again exposed her breasts. “...Truly?” It came out with more desperation and loneliness than she would have liked.

She had been living on her own for years, and it had been so long since *anyone* had cared for her, least of all an attractive man she... well... she *loved*.

Dammit.

“Were I a different man, I would have taken you on the street as soon as you offered yourself.”

“Did you think about it?”

“...Perhaps.” He seemed to recognize her line of thought on this matter. “I make no demands of you on that.” He assured her softly. “This is

your gift to bestow, at your complete discretion and leisure, if ever. My desire for you is not the most important part of that calculation and can be entirely ignored.” He paused. “That would be my advice, if you were to ask for it. I am a horrible decision for anyone to make.”

She let out a sobbing snort kind of sound, laughing at his honesty.

“I was being entirely serious.”

“I know.” She wiped her eyes again. “That’s why it’s funny.” She shook her head ruefully, then dropped her arms to her sides, letting him see her breasts again.

His eyes remained locked with her for a few breaths longer, then he lowered his gaze to the flesh she’d just exposed for him again.

There was no doubting that he liked what he saw.

He swallowed, his entire body rigid, hands forming into fists in an effort to hold himself back and not scare her. “My God...” He breathed quietly to himself. “You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in this world...” He audibly gulped, voice sounding deep and low. “Remember when I said that sometimes people struggled with emotions and impulses they couldn’t control...?”

He was going to have her.

Like the patriot women in the handbills.

He was going to make her *his*, and he was struggling with himself, waiting for her to give him permission.

This knowledge gave Verlaine such a feeling of power, and a love for this man.

He wanted to do all kinds of dastardly things to her body, pound into her until there was nothing left of her but a smile... but he wasn’t going to do a *damn thing* to her, unless she wanted it.

A grin spread across her face, finally feeling like she was on firm ground again. “The... the way I see it... If I don’t take care of you, you’ll just go out and find some horrible woman to be with instead, and then you’ll either be distracted and killed, or you’ll embarrass me in front of the whole town.” She moved towards him.

“You *have* always struck me as a woman who cares desperately about her social status here, yes.” He agreed sarcastically, visibly uncertain about whether he could touch her or not. “And I am obviously a man of irrepressibly fervent desire, continuously anxious to indiscriminately act upon them with random townspeople I loathe.”

“And I *am* your wife.” She made the decision for him, reaching down to take his hand and press it to her breast, letting him watch the immediate impact it had on her face. The way her skin flushed, her eyelids closing tightly in pleasure... “It is my duty, after all.”

“I am well acquainted with your thoughts on the matter of ‘duty,’ yes.” He moved to run his thumb over her nipple, diligently watching the way her expression changed and cataloging it away like he was planning a looming battle with her body in his mind. “As I recall, it is simply ‘a word used by tyrants to convince the stupid to kill the weak.’”

She let out a hissing breath, still not looking away from him. For some reason, sharing that pleasure with him was exciting. There was an openness to it, and she wasn’t open with anyone in her entire life. Ever. She wanted him to know her. And watch her. And love her. “Plus, our fake marriage isn’t an entirely *legitimate* fake marriage unless it’s been consummated.”

“There is nothing more important in a fake marriage than legitimacy.” He agreed, moving to kiss her neck. “Otherwise it could be fake annulled.”

She let out another almost manic laugh of excitement over this. “You’re sure you want me?” She pressed, still not entirely believing she could have any kind of happiness in her life. “*Me?*”

He took her hand and pressed it to the front of his trousers, where the hard length of him was seemingly struggling to burst through the fabric. “You.” He assured her. “Just you.”

She swallowed, her hand moving over him slowly. “Is that... is that for me?”

“Either that, or I am having *very* perplexing and contradictory feelings towards The Beast we are trying to shoot.”

She snorted in laughter again, eagerly moving her hand towards his waistband and then stopping. “Can I... can I see it?” She asked, biting her lower lip. “Would that be alright? Or would that be...”

“That would be *more* than alright, Verlaine...”

A heartbeat later, he had his trousers unbuttoned and his shaft sprang free.

She watched him for a moment, tracing the many exciting lines of him...

Her grip was then around him, squeezing.

He swore, body stiffening.

“Too hard?” She asked, shifting closer, wanting to get a better look. “I’m not... I’m not very...”

“It’s *perfect*.” He whispered into her ear, closing his lips around her earlobe. “You are perfect... Everything you’ve ever *done* is perfect...”

She gripped tighter, watching his reaction, determining what would feel best for him. And enjoying the experimentation...

She moved in front of him, lowering her face, looking up at him seductively... Then she kissed the straining head, lips parting and sliding around him.

Gideon swore again, body jolting like a man hit in the chest with a cannonball.

She smiled, mouth full of his iron need for her, tongue teasing him. She tried to keep eye contact with him, getting so much pleasure from sharing hers with him...

He desperately moved his hands to all but pry her mouth from his shaft, continuing to swear. “*Enough...*” He growled, taking her in his arms and leaning her back. “That will end matters too quickly.” His fingers moved to her belt. She quickly tried to assist him to make the removal of her pants a more immediate reality. Her fingers felt awkward and frantic, eager to show him all of her body...

He yanked off her boots in the instant it took her, then helped her

pull her pants completely off.

He did not take so much as a breath to admire her before his mouth and touch were on her intimate flesh.

Verlaine let out a groan of need and pleasure, Gideon's lips working their way up her thigh and then pressing against her core.

She closed her eyes tight against the pleasure, body rocking. She grabbed for his head, trying to steady herself. She swore in French and Cree and English... whatever language seemed most capable of expressing the depth of this and help her remain sane...

His mouth and lips made short work of her. His tongue started an exploration of the territory she'd just ceded to him, and the urgent survey he made of her was driving her mad. It took her husband but a brief moment to bring her over the edge of passion. His lips sealed over her center, his tongue and teeth gently testing its defenses... She cried his name, every muscle in her body at his complete command. She reached down, holding his head in place as her back arched, thrusting against his face as she rode out her pleasure.

He made no effort to extricate himself, continuing to taste her body as she climaxed, making a hum of satisfaction and masculine desire as she exploded, showering him.

He gave her body a final kiss, then moved up to suck on one of her nipples again. "Will it scare you if I take you now, Verlaine?" He asked her, reaching down to take hold of his shaft in preparation. "If you would prefer to wait, then we will *wait*, with no further discussion..." His tone was one of pain, obviously on the verge of panic that she might say no to this, but remembering her earlier fright...

"Don't be a fool." She reached down to take him in her hand, guiding his shaft to the entrance of her tight, weeping channel. Anxious for him... "I don't need to wait anymore, I'm not afra..."

Gideon immediately pressed into her, unable to hold himself back for a second longer than necessary.

Her husband slid home.

She closed her eyes against the pleasure again, gritting her teeth, preparing for pain... which did not come. There was only an incredible feeling of being one with her husband.

The realization that she could do this, and the joy of having him inside her made her almost giddy.

Her eyes opened and she found him watching her again, not moving. Apparently allowing her to grow accustomed to his size before he moved or so much as took a breath.

She reached up to caress his cheek. "...Hi." She said breathily, eyes filling with tears of emotion and from the pleasure of this.

It was not, in retrospect, the most articulate or heartfelt thing she could have told her lover in that moment of new intimacy.

Gideon oddly seemed to understand it though. Like they were finally seeing each other, as they were. Without any game or pretention.

"Hello, Verlaine." He replied softly, leaning down to kiss her. "I'm your husband."

She started laughing, wrapping her legs around him.

He let out another growling sound of something close to pain. "*Christ*, you are tight..." He lowered his face to kiss her neck, hips starting to move. "I'm sorry... I'll... I'll try to go slow..."

"That's sweet..." She started to move with him at a faster pace. "Sadly, I won't."

He moved to kiss her again, following into step with the rhythm she was setting, his body sliding into her in a steady beat which seemed to mirror the pounding of her heart.

His hands slid under her to cup her rear, pulling her tighter against him, his mouth moving from her lips to her breasts and back again...

Verlaine had secretly been hoping that she would somehow showcase a calm, stoic steadiness this time, to make up for her almost immediate completion when his mouth had been on her. It was the *principle* of the thing. And even though she trusted her husband... that didn't mean that he needed to know how much power he had over her body or how much

pleasure she found in his touch.

Sadly, that was not to be. And Gideon soon brought her to another humiliatingly wet and clenching orgasm, moaning his name into his ear and swearing things to him which she knew for a fact he considered “sentimental nonsense” or “a vulgar harlot’s words.”

He pressed into her even harder, as deep as he could go, and came a moment later.

She stared into his eyes as he climaxed inside her, feeling every movement of his body and hers.

When he was finally finished, he was breathing hard, looking down at her.

“In the future, it’s much easier to simply ask me rather than trying to subtly peer at my body using subterfuge.” She informed him, tenderly running her hand across his face. “See?”

“Understood.” He nodded, rolling off of her and then wrapping his arm around her. “On a similar note, in the future, kindly deliver on all of the indecent things you have ‘teased’ me about over the course of our relationship.”

She pressed her cheek against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. “Only if you’re good.”

“Not much chance of that.” He warned.

“Not from where I’m lying.” She kissed his chest, gently licking at his nipple. “Personally, I found you *very* good...”

Chapter Fourteen

Verlaine let out another laugh, hoarse and wheezing by this point. “No!” She shook her head. “You didn’t, did you!?!”

“It wasn’t intentional!” He defended, smiling at his story. “The weapon misfired and...”

His wife let out another bark of amusement.

Gideon smiled down at her, enjoying his bride more than he could ever possibly tell her.

When he had last taken notice, it was dark. Now though, when he became dimly aware of the outside world, it was already past dawn.

They’d talked through the night, about... nothing, really. Simply their own thoughts and fears and amusements. Things neither of them had shared with anyone else, both because they were too meaningless or too personal.

It was, *unquestionably*, the most fun Gideon had ever had in his entire life.

And that was including a *lot* of surprise attacks he’d launched, so...

She shifted, her head still resting sideways on his lap. He was not wearing pants and her movement caused his organ to rub against the peach fuzz of her shaved head, enticingly.

It had been many hours since he felt even a trace of embarrassment about Verlaine’s face being an inch away from his engorged cock. By this point, it seemed natural and a vital part of his everyday life.

She did not appear to be self-conscious or nervous about that fact at all either, her cheek periodically resting against his thigh and scrotum.

As if to demonstrate, she reached out her tongue to absently wrap it around the width of him. It was an action of impulse, simply because she felt like it.

He gasped in a breath, trying to maintain control.

Gideon watched intently as she worked, memorizing her every movement. Wanting to relive it during any dull moments of his life.

“I can’t believe that you...” She was still laughing at his latest story, tears of mirth tracing down her cheek as she continued to taste his body, the other cheek still pressed down on his lap. Whatever she’d been about to say was cut off as Gideon lost control.

It didn’t often happen, he’d always had a tight rein on his emotions and he *desperately* needed to tread lightly with Verlaine. But he could no longer control himself.

He reached down to pick her head up so that his body could slide into her mouth in earnest and not simply get occasionally teased by her sideways tongue.

Verlaine let out an understanding, almost apologetic sound as she found his cock sliding into her mouth, mid-word. She pulled her lips free of him. “Sorry.” She looked up at him, looking repentant rather than angry over his loss of composure. “I forgot how much you like being teased...” Her eyes were afire with sinful promises her mouth was prepared to make good on. “Do you want me to tease you, Gideon?”

He nodded slowly, hypnotized by this astonishing woman.

Her tongue was already moving to tease him anyway, daring him to force her hand again. Torturing him in the most amazing ways he could imagine. “I did not know that you were prepared for me again, my love. I would...”

He broke, using his hold on her head to press himself into her mouth again.

Verlaine let out an amused sound of pleasure and satisfaction, his body sliding to her throat.

She pulled free, gasping for breath. “I *do* ‘have a mouth on me,’ don’t I, my lamb?” She slowly licked him again, base to tip, letting out a sigh of lust and sin. “*Show me what to do with it, Gideon...*”

His hands were immediately moving to claim her face once more,

desperate for her.

She let out another laugh of victory, the sound muffled by his body as it slid past her lips.

Gideon let out a murmured sound of devotion and dominance and desire, surrendering to his *amazing* wife...

Her tongue continued its wicked exploration of his body and he grabbed her head to hold her in place, terrified she'd stop.

She looked up at him, her beautiful eyes assuring him that she wasn't going anywhere. That she was right where she wanted to be, doing exactly what she wanted to do...

The suction her mouth created was too much, the movement of her wicked little tongue too sharp.

Gideon climaxed a moment later, groaning in release.

Verlaine let out a small sound of victory, as he rapidly filled her mouth with his seed. It started to spill down her chin, unnoticed.

He thrust into her mouth once more, then pulled free.

Her eyebrows rose and she swallowed, looking surprised. "Well, that was... uh... more than expected."

"How much did you 'expect,' Verlaine?" He asked in a low, predatory growl, enjoying the thought of his wife dwelling on the size of his climaxes. "Have you given the matter thought?"

She smiled slowly, recognizing the playful but hungry tone, and the further crimes against her virtue it promised to soon wreak upon her. "I think of it *constantly*, Gideon." She assured him teasingly, meeting his eyes dead-on. She ran her finger across her chin to demonstrate, showed him the warm evidence of his love for her... and then innocently slid her finger into her mouth, tasting him.

He swore savagely, a growl of raw desire, grabbing her to shift her on his lap again, desperate to once more be inside her channel...

She let out another laugh, enjoying that reaction a great deal, her thighs visibly wet simply from the taste of his cock...

Gideon was halfway to pillaging the heaven of her body again, when this hellish world once more intruded into his life.

Overhead, the bell started to ring.

It was not a terribly large bell, but the noise was still absolutely *deafening* at this range.

Gideon swore again, covering Verlaine's ears for her.

She let out a shout, hurriedly gathering their clothes and distributing them accordingly.

In the end, he'd ended up with the wrong pants and they quickly traded, all but running to the stairs. By the time they reached the bottom, they were fully dressed. Well... *mostly*, anyway.

He opened the door at the bottom and ushered her forward.

To find that Service was already in full swing, the few villagers left alive in town crowding the pews.

Brilliant.

Verlaine gave no trace of embarrassment and continued on her way, pausing only slightly to make a religious sign with her hand.

To be honest, Gideon was not certain even what denomination this congregation *was*, but remained fairly confident that God would understand.

Provided that Gideon was sufficiently prayerful and repentant, anyway.

He watched his wife's rear as she moved down the aisle...

A LOT of prayer, obviously. Perhaps... *all* of them.

He hurried after her, ignoring the stares from the parishioners. Sod them all.

He emerged back onto the street, feeling like a new man and anxious to find a quiet spot to finish off their love-making, before beginning the day's hunt, now that dawn had arrived. It was like there were trumpets filling the air and...

He paused. No. There really *were* trumpets and a band playing this

morning. He looked around, trying to determine the source of the noise.

“The hell?” Verlaine seemed equally confused. “Is there a holiday in this county which I am...”

Her thoughts were cut off by the crowd gathered in front of them, shouting in jubilation over something.

Gideon looked around, feeling like the world he’d found this morning was not the one he was accustomed to, in more ways than simply now having a real wife. “What the Devil...?”

He scanned the crowd, looking for reason in this insanity. In front of him, Brophy pushed his way through the throng, looking as excited as everyone else.

Gideon grabbed him by the front of his uniform as he raced by, all but yanking the boy off his feet. “*Explain.*” He ordered flatly, in no mood for nonsense. “What is...?”

“*They got it!*” Brophy pointed over his shoulder, face awash with excitement and relief. “Ceely and his men!” He pointed to the make-shift parade which was making its way down the center of town. At the head was a wagon which was carrying the mangled carcass of a large animal. “*They killed The Beast!*”

In the small interior of the office of the village’s garrison, Gideon was insisting upon an explanation from his men.

He seemed... happy.

Happy that the monster was dead. And that he could thus leave this place.

Leave *her*.

Verlaine was relieved that no one else would die, obviously... but there was still a part of her which recognized that the presence of The Beast was the one string which held him to her here.

He was going to leave. That was the agreement. He would leave,

and then she would be alone again.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, trying to maintain the carefree mask she'd worn through many years of playing her game.

Gideon did not appear to notice, still too preoccupied with his underlings. "Explain it again, *slowly*." He commanded. His tone was hard, but by this point she was familiar enough with him to recognize that it was a tempered enthusiasm, not fury.

Brophy pointed to the east. "Ceely, he..."

The wolf hunter talked right over him, both of them too excited to share the story, to wait for the other to stop. "It was the trap! It worked!" Ceely insisted. "Well, in a manner of speaking." He gestured to where Brophy was pointing. "It fired all thirty shotguns and it simply took the animal awhile to die!" He gestured more enthusiastically towards the forest. "We found it this morning, in the rubble. One of the shotguns had ignited some of the timber your little inferno missed in the field the first time through, and the wounded animal got caught in it!" He snapped his fingers. "Finished." He removed his hat and ran a hand through his hair, looking tired and relieved. "I must say: this has been the toughest and most eventful hunt of my..."

"I want to see it." Gideon insisted. "Where have you put it?"

"It is in the wagon in the alley." Ceely pointed outside. "I intend to have it stuffed and given to Governor Carpenter as a token of..."

Gideon was already stalking away, focused on his goal.

The men looked at her for either an apology for his behavior or an explanation, but instead she wordlessly followed after him.

"Finished." Gideon repeated to her, not needing to look behind to know she was there. "Hell of a thing." He was on the verge of laughter now.

Undoubtedly overjoyed to be rid of this assignment and this village.
Rid of *her*.

And return to the war, the one thing he really loved.

"Hell of a thing." She agreed emotionlessly.

“I knew you’d hit it and that it was bleeding, but I had not *dared* to hope that the wound would be mortal!”

She made a non-committal sound.

Outside, the battered body of the monster was sprawled in the cart.

Yesterday it had seemed unstoppable, a demon brought to life.

This morning, it was a stinking mess covered in flies and only had three of its legs left.

Gideon waved a hand to chase the insects away, trying to get a better look at the animal.

She moved away from him, leaning against the building, not even looking at him. “So,” she began, trying to sound casual, “I suppose you will be going soon then.”

“Huh?” He sounded confused by the obvious. “Because of the smell? No, it’s just the damned *insects*, the smell is...”

“Is this not a *glorious* day?” Burgermeister Portefaix materialized from the shadows of the alley, like a rat from a crevasse. “Did I not *tell* you that this town required a *professional* wolf hunter, and not, well... *amateurs*.”

Verlaine was too preoccupied with her husband’s looming abandonment of her to even care about that.

“I seem to vaguely recall you saying something like that, yes.” Gideon sounded annoyed but still too distracted by the remains to care what the man said. “But to be honest, you say so many things of such *utter* unimportance that I do not listen closely enough to recognize if that is an exact quotation or not.”

The Burgermeister’s mood was too bright to allow even Gideon to cast a cloud over it. “I *do* hope that you won’t take offense when I fail to thank you in my annual All Hallow’s Eve Harvest Festival speech tonight.” He shrugged and let out a sigh of mock regret. “You are obviously invited to share in the presentation I have planned for Ceely there, and I don’t want it to be awkward, what with you *failing* to kill the monster. Thankfully, by that point, you and your men will be well on your way out of town anyway,

and...”

“I told you to *cancel* the festival.” Gideon reminded him, his tone ice cold.

“I do recall you saying something like that, yes,” the Burgermeister agreed tauntingly, “but you say so many things, that...”

“You are going to *kill people*.” Gideon snarled, pointing at the corpse. “If this *isn’t* The Beast, then...”

“Isn’t The Beast?” He rolled his eyes at the very idea. “I wish you wouldn’t upset everyone with that wild imagination of yours. Squirm all you like,” Burgermeister’s smirk was evident to Verlaine despite the fact she wasn’t even looking at the man, “the fact remains that you *failed* here.” There was the sound of rustling papers. “And your superiors know it. You’ve been recalled. Sent packing, tail between legs. I have a copy of the orders myself.” The Burgermeister started from the scene. “Such a shame you can’t stay for the play, despite your ignominious exit from our lives. This year we are putting on a glorious production of ‘*Oath of the Tattered Flag or A Sailor’s Courage O’er the Storm*.’ It will be such a meaningful pallet-cleanser for this village, reminding us all why your simple nameless people should remain on their *boats*, and not join the army,” he moved passed Verlaine and back into the street, “or ‘marry’ women of... *uncertain* ancestry.”

Gideon tossed his orders away, advancing on the man. “I’m Segheyki, she’s French, and you’re a shit.” He growled out threateningly.

There was danger in his tone so dark that even the Burgermeister’s smirk disappeared.

Someone was about to die...

“I have a part this year!” Brophy shared, appearing in the street. “I *wanted* to be Naútes, obviously, but *everyone* wants to be Naútes, so instead I’m going to be simple yet kind-hearted Ankyron, loyal...”

“Fuck that play.” Gideon growled out. “It’s cursed. The damn theater burned down on its opening night, killing everyone inside, and all of the understudies mysteriously hanged themselves within the next week.” He paused. “Also, it is over-dramatized and filled with a myriad of factual

inaccuracies.”

“Sounds like someone is upset that he wasn’t chosen to be ‘Naútes’ either...” Brophy observed with an indignant sniff, following along behind the Burgermeister as he left the scene. He started to practice the most famous monologue from the play. One which *wasn’t* given by ‘Ankyron,’ Verlaine felt the impulse to remind him. “...*Send your winds to fill our sails, let our swords be sharp as lightning and our cannons true as thunder! Ahoy destiny! Onward to glory!*”

Gideon didn’t say anything, probably lost in his own excited thoughts about how quickly he could abandon her and how wonderful it would be to return to the carefree bachelor lifestyle.

She swallowed again, trying not to cry.

“What is your opinion?” Gideon asked, still sounding annoyed. He waited for her reply—or for her to even look at him—and when she did neither, he called to her again. “Verlaine?”

“I believe that the plot is convoluted and lacks any coherent direction, leaving the audience bewildered and unengaged.” She answered unemotionally.

“Huh?” He moved to stand in front of her, looking confused. “No, I mean...” He trailed off as he looked at her face. “Are you unwell?” He sounded concerned, probably anxious that if she were ill, his departure might be delayed by a few hours.

“I am in a state of *robust* health, sir, fear not.” She assured him.

He squinted at her, trying to recognize the obvious.

She simply stared back at him, unemotionally.

The game had new rules, but it was once more at play.

Gideon gave up trying to understand human emotion and walked back to the wagon. “I question that this is The Beast.” He announced. “I do not see a wound from your rifle, and if you look at the...” He trailed off again, recognizing that she wasn’t looking. “Verlaine, I... I do not pretend to know what the matter is, and I will not pry into secrets you do not wish to share with me, but... but I need you right now.” He moved in front of her

again, gesturing back to the cart. “You are *better* at this than I am—much better-- and lives are on the line.”

He ‘needed her.’ For *this*. Not for... anything else.

She let out a sigh, moving to examine the animal for him.

Sergeant Dákkru paused in his packing, looking confused. “We *have* to leave, sir, the orders are clear.” He insisted, like Gideon had somehow overlooked them. “Captain Tavish has asked for assistance in transferring gold through the mountains north of here, and that’s a rough road.”

“I am *well aware* of Tavish’s request, Dákkru...”

“It’s an *order*, sir,” Dákkru corrected, “from the General.”

“Can we truly be sure of that? Without confirmation?” He sounded theatrically mystified by his sergeant’s apparent trusting nature. “We will send word at once for corroboration of this supposed document, *obviously*, but...”

“You know *damn well* that’s a legitimate order, Gideon.” Dákkru interrupted, using his given name for possibly the first time ever. “They will *hang us* for disobeying it.” He insisted in urgent warning.

“There is still a beast in this town.” Gideon shook his head. “I can feel it, and I do not leave a battle half-fought...”

“Possibly.” Dákkru agreed, pointing to the town square where Ceely was once more regaling the villagers with the tale of The Beast’s death. “It’s *also* possible that you simply can’t accept that that man killed this monster, while we failed.”

Gideon shook his head. “That man *didn’t* kill The Beast.” He insisted flatly. “And I will stay here until I can prove that.”

“Ah.” Dákkru nodded knowingly. “Then this is because you *can’t* accept that it’s dead, because if it is, you don’t have to be here anymore.”

“Pardon?”

“You will need to pack up your kit, and leave this town behind.

Leave your ‘marriage’ behind.” He pointed to the alley where Verlaine was still examining the supposed “Beast’s” corpse. “And you don’t want that, so you’re unwilling and unable to accept that the monster is dead. Even if it means we’ll hang for it.”

“Do you honestly believe that this man killed The Beast?” Gideon pressed, pointing at Ceely. “*That* man?”

“No.” Dákkru answered after a beat. “Not for a moment. But the fact remains... whether he did or not, you would deny it.” He went back to packing. “I will gladly die for you in battle, Gideon. I’d be the first over the cliff you ordered the regiment to toss itself from, you *know that*.” He paused, voice serious. “But I *won’t* swing for your love life.” He added his pack to the horse. “I’m headed out. And if you had any sense, you’d join me.” He pulled himself into the saddle and looked over at Hrtósteyno, whistling loudly.

The dog continued to roll on his back in the sun, letting out the occasional sneeze as he inhaled the flies from the dead wolf on the cart.

Dákkru nodded, like he’d been expecting that. “Was always more your dog than the regiment’s anyway.” He spurred his horse onward, making his way from town.

“If you try to run now, it will kill you on the road!” Gideon shouted after him. “It wants a *fight*.” He watched as his friend disappeared into the throng of people, leaving the town behind. “...I will stay and see to it that it *has one*.”

And, obviously, keep his wife beside him until such time as he could arrange for her to travel along with the regiment.

Assuming she agreed, which... which wasn’t likely.

Which meant that they’d have to hang him if they wanted him to leave her.

Because he loved that woman. Completely.

Gideon still had more than one battle to win in this town, it seemed.

Chapter Fifteen

That evening, Verlaine was still not certain how to handle this. The game had entered uncharted territory now. Typically, she was excited by exploring dangerous ground, but in this case, she was fairly certain that it might destroy her.

“What is your judgment, Verlaine?” He pressed again, still seeking an answer from her.

“Are you leaving?” She repeated, struggling to keep her voice level.

“Dákkru has...” Gideon began, then paused as he apparently searched for the right words. “... gone on ahead.” He finally finished. “He will deal with the matter of our orders, while I remain to finish things up here.”

She blinked at him. “So...”

“No.” He shook his head. “I will stay here.”

“Until The Beast is dead?”

He nodded.

“And... and after?”

He let out a helpless sound. “I don’t... I don’t know, honestly.”

She nodded, processing that.

“Have you... have you ever traveled with an army?” His tone sounded tense, almost hesitant, as though afraid of her answer.

“No, I do not make it a habit of sleeping with regiments of random soldiers.” She rolled her eyes, trying to keep the hurt from her voice. “A mere *squad*, at most.”

“That’s not...” He shook his head. “That’s not what I meant.” He moved closer to her. “I mean: do you believe that you could find fulfillment traveling along with the army as it moved?”

“I am not you.” She shook her head. “I do not understand what you see in that life, no.”

If she were in his shoes, there would be *no way in hell* that she’d join the army or travel along with it anywhere. He was trying to make her understand the call of his career and the excitement of the war. Make her understand why he loved it so and needed to leave. But she didn’t get it. His military service *mystified* her, and the fact that he kept asking this kind of question of her was beginning to become irksome.

In his position, the roles reversed, she’d stay with him, no matter the personal sacrifice she had to make.

He nodded, like that was somehow a disappointment. “I see.” He cleared his throat. “I thought as much, but I had to ask.” He shifted, looking crestfallen for some reason. “You... you understand.”

No. She didn’t. But she let the matter drop.

“So,” she leaned against the wall next to him, “have you been enjoying what is certain to be one of your last days in town, then?”

“Indeed.” He continued his silent survey of the field in front of him. He had been scouring the area around town for any sign or sighting of The Beast, and had come up empty, thus far.

Verlaine had been avoiding him all day, not... not wanting the pain of an awkward goodbye.

“I have spent the day ruminating in humbling self-reflection and have discovered that... I hate this damned village and all its assorted bafoonery.” He nodded in complete sincerity. “I truly do.”

She smiled, in spite of herself. “Quite a breakthrough.”

“I strive for personal betterment,” he assured her, stepping over a gully, “always, and am thankful to the good Lord for holding up the candle of self-reflection to light the gloom of my mortal weaknesses.”

She followed along behind him, watching the woods to their right. “I weep that the world has not yet recognized your suffering and greatness, my hero.”

“And your opinion of the purported ‘Beast’ which Ceely supposedly

killed?” He pressed again.

“The size of the paw is wrong, there aren’t enough teeth, the bite pattern is off, and the blood is the wrong color.” She assured him. “That is not our monster.”

He nodded, clearly expecting that.

“What are you going to do?” She asked, cradling her weapon in her arms, keeping it ready.

“Hunt it down.” He pointed to the edge of the clearing. “Somewhere out here is the spot where this false ‘Beast’ was found—Ceely’s men couldn’t say, exactly-- and I want to see it.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I am... untrusting.” He finally said softly.

She nodded, unable to look at him. “As am I.” She agreed. “Sometimes I think that the hardest thing to do in this world is to trust someone...” She cleared her throat, not wanting to return to that unpleasant topic. “Are you not supposed to be at the festival right now?” She gestured to one of the mountains above the village, where the Burgermeister’s estate was located. “If you are staying in town, are you not required to attend?”

“My invitation was rescinded once he learned that I was remaining here.” Gideon kept his eyes on the ground, ignoring the fact the sun was setting. “Besides, while not a *literal* torture, watching that play would represent a circumstance of *intolerable* similarity.”

She snorted in amusement. “I think that you are...” She trailed off, spotting something on the ground.

Gideon saw it too, immediately moving closer. “Ah...” He pointed to it. “*Here* we are...”

Verlaine’s eyes swept across the scene, reading the markings in the dirt and ash like a book. “...They went this way, carrying it...” She followed the tracks, Gideon stepping aside and allowing her to work. “It was heavy, you can see they were struggling with it, trying to reach the cart back on the pathway...” She moved around the scorched stumps of some low bushes, eyes trained on the ground. The trail was intermittent and

occasionally disappeared, but she could still follow it back to its source.

The path led from the far area of Ceely's trap, all the way towards the woods.

Approaching the tree line at this time of night was a *terrible* idea, but Verlaine was committed to this trail now...

She crouched to the mud, running her finger through it, tracing the print. She looked off towards the forest again. "They went in..." She said softly.

Gideon was already following the trail, straight into the trees.

She hurried after him.

"Watch the path, I'll keep you safe." He assured her with complete confidence.

For some reason... she believed him. Completely, as silly as that sounded.

She returned to following the trail, moving through the now darkened trees, as the sun set behind the mountains.

She stopped dead at an area which was trampled down, dried blood staining the fire-scorched earth. "Here." She whispered, pointing to the spot. "They found it *here*."

Gideon nodded, accepting her word on that. He started to survey the immediate area, his pistol now noticeably in his hand.

This was... this was foolish.

They didn't even have a real torch, they...

Gideon stepped around a low boulder, and Verlaine almost screamed at him to show more sense. Did he place no value on his own life?!?

Images of her papa and family being torn apart by a monster in front of her filled the darkness around her...

"You are *desperately needed here*, Gideon!" She whispered urgently, trying to keep her new life intact, even while it planned to flee town to escape her. She lowered her voice, murmuring to herself. "You... you have a *wife* now..." She couldn't keep herself from knowing better, and

immediately followed along behind her husband on his ill-advised nighttime survey of the woods. “Gideon, I think that...” She trailed off, distracted by something.

He recognized her reaction and turned to look at her. “What have you found?”

She spotted a new track, older and less distinct than the one Ceely’s men had made. It led to their left, into a small thicket.

Verlaine knew it was stupid, but she went anyway...

She pushed the branches aside, moving as slowly as possible...

Gideon’s pistol appeared in her peripheral vision, ready to fire at whatever was on the other side of the leaves.

The branches parted, the cold wind blowing the ash around them into a cloud in the dying light.

Sitting on the ground amid the tangle of foliage... was an animal’s severed leg.

She frowned at it, trying to understand why there was...

This was the missing leg of *Ceely’s beast*! She recognized the fur now.

This paw was as massive as the others. Certainly very large for a wolf in this area, but not nearly as big as the markings on the previous victims seemed to indicate. And the length of the leg was...

Her gaze locked on the thigh of the wolf, which displayed tattered flesh...

Verlaine’s blood ran cold...

Gideon let out a curse, recognizing what that was, without needing to be told. “That’s a fucking...”

“Bite mark.” She finished for him, voice now terrified. “Something *bit* that wolf’s leg off...” She spotted something else in the underbrush, immediately moving to get a better look.

By this point, she was well-acquainted with the tracks of The Beast which had terrorized this town...

“It’s heading that way...” She pointed behind them, along the tree line. “Towards...”

“The *mountain*...” He spun to look in that direction, his face turning ashen. “Where...”

Verlaine was already moving, leaping back over the boulder and racing towards the Burgermeister’s estate and the festival taking place there.

They’d barely made it out of the trees when they heard the sound of distant musket fire on the mountain...

Gideon barreled through the gates of the mansion grounds, eyes scanning the carnage around him.

The Beast had attacked the festival, making a grim meal of many of the partygoers and revelers. Not even the All-Hallow’s Eve decorations had been spared the monster’s rage.

Gideon stepped over the mixed remains in front of him, one poor man’s brain mixed with the shattered pumpkin he’d been carrying.

He motioned with his arm, ordering Verlaine to his flank.

“I... I don’t know what that means, Gideon.” She whispered to him, sounding tense. “I’m sorry, I...”

“That way.” He pointed to his right. “Watch that way for an attack, I’ll watch the left.”

She nodded, immediately leveling her weapon in that direction.

There was the sound of screams from the back of the house, and Gideon raced towards it. He hurried through the front door and the unfamiliar rooms beyond, scanning the corners for the attacker as he went...

He arrived at the back of the home, bursting out onto the rear garden, weapons ready.

Ahead of him, The Beast moved like a shot across the lawn...

Gideon fired at it, moving to pursue. “*Drop him!*” He shouted,

ignoring the elegant garden he was tromping through. “*Verlaine!*”

His wife braced her foot against one of the planters and took aim at their fleeing quarry, her rifle spitting out death a split-second later.

The Beast rounded the corner of the wall, her round shattering the edge of the stone which shielded the monster.

She swore savagely, trying to reload her weapon on the run.

Gideon reached the wall and clamored over it, trying to cut off The Beast’s retreat. He climbed to the top in a breath, instantly aiming his remaining weapon down into the darkness...

But the monster had already gone.

All that was left behind was the body of Burgermeister Portefaix. Only one of the man’s eyes remained inside his smashed skull, the other having been gnawed away.

The man stared at him in condemnation, the vacant socket seeming like an endless abyss, damning Gideon to its darkness as punishment for failing to stop this man’s murderer.

He dropped back to the ground, swearing more than he’d ever sworn in his life.

Verlaine joined him a moment later, looking up at him, eyes wide.

“We pursue.” He informed her, reloading his pistols. “Take whatever ammunition or supplies you need from the fallen here, as we are moving out, *immediately.*”

She nodded. “I am ready.” She assured him.

One of the doors at the back of the house flew open and Dákkru appeared, musket trained on him. He lowered it a moment later. He nodded at Gideon.

Gideon nodded back.

It was a good conversation. It was a relief to settle matters between them.

A good man.

“Our losses?” He asked the sergeant, voice tight. “What’s the butcher’s bill this time?”

“Not good.” His sergeant gestured with his head back into the room. “Better come, it’s *bad*...”

Gideon hurried to the door, hoping that his sergeant had somehow developed a tendency to overstate things.

Sadly, that was not the case.

There were scores of dead in the rooms.

Dákkru paused at the edge of a table, where someone was working on one of the injured. “It... it got Brophy.” He informed him, his tone indicating that the man’s wounds would be fatal, despite the fact that they were still being worked on.

Gideon nodded, moving around the partygoer who was trying to stem the blood flow with one of the tablecloths.

Gideon spared the wound a quick glance, immediately recognizing that it was mortal.

Brophy met his gaze with frightened, already glazed eyes.

He knew he was dying too.

Fuck...

“Private Brophy here, sir?” Dákkru cleared his throat, taking on the tone of the man’s sergeant, reporting admirable conduct to their superior. “Pushed six women to safety in that closet, choosing to remain in the fight and protect the civilians, sir. Got off a shot at the Beast, before it struck. Hit it too, sounded like it hurt the bastard.”

“Six?” He nodded at the boy. “*Damn fine score, son.*” He praised, saluting the man sharply. “Worthy of the *best* of my unit. You’ll earn a *commendation* for this.”

Brophy’s bloodied mouth turned up at the corner in pride over this news, then went slack.

“Once you’ve recovered from that scratch, I’ll have a military parade through town.” Gideon promised him in a hoarse whisper. “All the girls in

town will flock as we dedicate the new ‘Brophy Highway’...”

“He’s gone.” Verlaine said softly, voice breaking.

“I know.” Gideon nodded, reaching over to close the boy’s now lifeless eyes. “I know...”

Gideon stared down at the blood now on his fingers...

“Your orders, sir?” Dákkru asked, sniffing in an attempt to hide his cracking voice.

Gideon simply walked away, back out into the yard, needing to breathe. He made his way to the back patio, righted one of the chairs and sank down into it.

In front of him, the stage was still decorated with the absurd and improper naval scenery which typified *any* production of *Oath of the Tattered Flag or A Sailor’s Courage O’er the Storm*.

Nothing good had ever come from that fucking play...

Verlaine appeared beside him, silently holding out another bottle of apricot brandy to him.

He was too preoccupied to respond, gaze now fixed on the valley below.

“I have been in two dozen different wars.” He shared with her, his voice hoarse. “I have killed men I did not know, for reasons I did not care to learn. I have watched men do unspeakable things to the guilty and innocent alike, allowing themselves to become true *monsters*.” He tapped his finger on the table. “And in all of that blood and death, I learned one important lesson. A simple wisdom which I keep in my heart, when things seem hopeless. I believe it is as close to God as I am liable to come.” He swallowed at the memory. “Something... something which first formed in my mind as I lay dying next to my dead assassin, watching our blood mix in the grass. The last gift of Miriam Dreyfuss and her dead son.” He turned to look at his wife. “It is simply this: there is such a beauty to this world, Verlaine. A wonder. Despite the pain and the grief and the blood. Or perhaps *because* of it. Because if beautiful things are guaranteed forever, then they’d no longer be special. It is precisely because they are temporary

that we value them so much more.” He swallowed again, voice breaking. “I recognize that... life is a fleeting gift. It should be treasured and enjoyed while it is still there. Because once it is torn from us, it is too late.” He nodded, watching the fires of Tarasque Creek move in the darkness of the valley. “This is a beautiful village.” He decided randomly, taking the bottle from her and drinking a long swallow. He got to his feet, facing the gate where The Beast had fled. “I can think of worse places to die.”

“You try to leave me behind and go back to your fucking war, and *I’ll hunt your ass down and tie you up to keep you with me until the war is over! Longer!*” She blurted out, voice cracking in an utterly furious sob of long repressed yet unspoken rage. Like this was a matter which had been on her mind for some time and she wanted to finally take the opportunity to tell him. She stabbed a finger into his chest. “I am a huntress and you will *not* escape me. Your ass is *mine*, Gideon! I picked you out of a crowd of potential husbands, and I don’t intend to ever regret that. Although, if you push me, I guarantee that *you* will.”

He smiled at her, truly touched by that violent threat. “I have spent most of our time together trying to arrange for you to travel with me in the army. In the camp, as my wife.”

“Ah.” She nodded, then frowned. “Can... can I do that?”

He nodded.

She considered the matter, looking more than a little intrigued by the offer. “Will I get to shoot things?”

“I doubt it would be allowed,” he shrugged, “but sure. I have no quarrel with that, other than over your safety. You’re the best shot in the regiment anyway, so it makes sense.”

“*Deal.*” She moved to stand next to him, silently watching the gate too. “People say I’m going mad, and sometimes I think they’re right.” She shared, reaching down to take his hand. “I’m... untrusting. I’m quick to believe the worst about people—even you-- because I’m self-sabotaging.” She cleared her throat; using her free hand to wipe away a tear. “I’m *terrible* with money. I’m quick to anger, think I know best, and I have a jealous streak.” She squeezed his hand, looking up at him with wide, earnest eyes.

“I am going to make your life more difficult than it needs to be, and I’m going to ruin your career because it’s stupid. But I don’t care, because I’m also incredibly selfish.” She nodded her head to him, as she’d done the night of their first meeting. “I am Verlaine Gévaudan. ‘The Mad Trapper’s Daughter.’ And... and I will be your loving and devoted wife... if... if you will have me. For however long we have.”

He nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat as well. “At one time or another, both sides of this war have accused me of committing unforgivable atrocities, only *some* of which I am actually guilty of. I *also* always think I know best, and I’ve been told that I’m the only person in the world who would rather be ‘right’ than ‘alive.’” He squeezed her hand back. “I assure you: I am a man who can endure whatever difficulty you offer. The only thing my life needs is *you*, difficulty be damned.” He bowed his head to her. “Captain Gideon Wlkwos. ‘The Grave Digger.’ I possess thick skin, more coin than I reasonably need, and recognize that the most beautiful roses have the sharpest thorns.” He kissed the back of her hand. “For however long we have.” He repeated.

“Yes?” There was a note of excitement in her voice.

“I am good, yes. *Of course* I am, I’m completely mad about you.” He nodded. “I wish to now graduate from ‘fake married’ to ‘married.’” He looked down at her. “I love you, Verlaine. Will you be my wife? For real?”

“Gladly.” She nodded, trying to hold in a sob of happiness, since the pile of corpses next to them made that inappropriate. “You’re my husband. I love you too. And I will until my last breath.”

She moved to shake his hand in the complicated manner of trappers and woodsmen.

He went back to looking at the gate and the darkness beyond.

“We’re going to die here, you realize.” She informed him, like he wasn’t already aware of that fact. “I know you’re planning on going after this thing, head on. And if we go into that forest to the east...” She trailed off. “We’re going to die in there.”

“Never does a man begin a day in life where he knows with absolute certainty that he will see the end of it. The only difference is that today... I

have someone I'd want to share my last day *with*. And that if we don't go in there, there might not be a tomorrow. For any of us."

"*Piss on Nevermore County.*" Dákkru appeared beside them. "When I die tonight, hell will be a nice change of pace from *this* shithole."

Ceely appeared on their other side, weapon in hand. "I have already killed this monster once. I will see the deed through to *completion*. Its head will adorn my wall, or mine *his*."

Hrtósteyno trotted from the house behind them, then the dog unconcernedly sprawled in the bloody carnage at their feet to lazily begin chewing on one of the carved pumpkins...

Verlaine nodded, her rifle once again clutched in her hand and ready to fire. "If this is my last day alive, I think my new husband should make it truly *memorable*." She started forward, once more a confident hunter on the trail with her family. "Let's go *shoot a fucking beast*."

"'Onward to glory,' my love." Gideon quoted, falling into step beside her and whistling to his dog. "*Onward to glory*."

Chapter Sixteen

This time, there would be no retreat. They were going to track this monster, for however long it took.

And Verlaine did not expect to come back from that.

She calmly watched the ground, following the tracks the Beast had made. As predicted, it was headed towards the eastern woods. The thickest and most remote area around the village, out by Kintner Bridge.

“You should return to town.” Her husband informed her calmly, clearly recognizing the grim fact they’d both already accepted, and trying to save her from it. “Let Hrtósteyno track it...”

“Our beloved dog once started growling at his own tail because he believed it to be a *snake*, my rabbit.” She reminded him, absently gesturing to the brave hunter in question, who appeared lost, despite the four people leading him.

Gideon made an uncertain sound. “I think you should... you should try to save your life, that’s all.”

“I am.” She turned to look up at him. “You *are* my life. And I will fight any monster which comes for you.”

He let out a sigh. “I don’t want to play your ‘game,’ Verlaine. I am being *serious*.”

“So am I.” She assured him, meeting his gaze. “I mean it this time. Completely.” She pressed a hand to his chest. “You are my life, Gideon.”

He didn’t have a reply to that, he simply nodded. “I still believe this to be a mistake. I try to save *my* life by sending her back to town, yet she is determined to thwart me.” He kissed the top of her head, lips lingering there for a moment. “I trust your skill, but *please* be careful...”

She made a humoring sound, once again concentrating on the trail. “Try to silence your expressions of total devotion and adoration, my shining

sun. They make my female heart go faint, but they also alert hideous monsters to our presence.”

“And they irritate the fuck out of your sergeant.” Dákkru added, eyes scanning the trees to their left.

Gideon glared at him, but did not reply.

“I think it’s lovely that you have finally brought your rebellious woman to heel, Captain.” Ceely praised, sounding genuinely thrilled for him. “As I have often said, the *problems* of this world—both human and animal-- can so often be traced back to males who allow their females too much freedom. And I...”

“My wife will shoot you if you continue that thought, wolf hunter.” Gideon warned him seriously.

Verlaine nodded, not looking up from the dirt. “*And* my darling husband as well, if he agrees with you...” She took off to their right, heading deeper into the woods. “I’d advise silence now.”

The men took that as a warning of The Beast being close, rather than a warning that she was on the verge of shooting Ceely for his views on gender relations. It was also very possible she meant both, however.

They formed a rough skirmish line in the brush, walking four abreast within easy sight of each other, Verlaine slightly ahead and leading the way.

And Hrtósteyno, who was... somewhere in the darkness.

Damn dog got lost more than he was found. If she lived through this, she was going to buy him a fucking *bell* to wear around his neck.

As they walked, the dark sky overhead started to rain, adding yet another problem to their list. It wasn’t a deluge, but the icy rain still chilled them all to the bone and added yet more movement to the forest around them.

Ahead of them, the trees unexpectedly began to open up onto an overgrown section of an old unused road, the pathway thickly clogged with clumps of dying weeds and debris. The road went over the crumbling Kintner Bridge, which spanned the dried riverbed which had given the bridge its name. Since the new road had been put in, this one had been entirely forgotten and the forest had quickly reclaimed it.

Beyond it, in a tangle of dead and fallen trees, were the decaying remains of an old structure.

Thunder cracked in the distance, the wind picking up.

It was a large, two story home, but it was abandoned and falling apart now. No one had lived there in quite some time.

No one *human*, anyway.

She stopped in her tracks, recognizing that The Beast was most likely inside, waiting for the first light of dawn, when it would go back on the hunt.

The place *stank* of it...

She braced herself against the remains of a large wagon which had crashed off the edge of the road, and gestured with her head at the house. She took up a firing stance, balancing the barrel against the bar of a large cage which had been in the wagon. She motioned with her head towards the leaves above them, silently telling the men to remain downwind of the house, so as not to tip off their prey.

Gideon understood the movement, motioning with his hands to Ceely and Dákkru.

His sergeant nodded, grabbing Ceely and pulling him towards the back of the house, staying in cover.

Gideon met her eyes, seeking her approval to move.

She took a deep breath, trying to keep her hands steady. They were trembling in fear, excitement, and the cold wind which was currently buffeting them. Then she nodded.

She started walking in step with the love of her life, towards the abandoned house and the nightmare which lurked inside...

Gideon crept up the stairs, moving without a sound. He paused at the semi-opened door, his presence hidden by the jamb, waiting for something.

A moment later he burst through the opening, a movement wordlessly choreographed with his sergeant thanks to years of working together.

Verlaine moved to cover him as he went inside, sweeping the

wreckage of the interior with her rifle, looking for a target.

Gideon gestured to his left, and then he nodded to the stairs.

Dákkru nodded back, leading Ceely to the rooms on the left.

Gideon pointed to jagged openings in the ceiling, silently telling her to be wary of them, while he remained fixed on the hall Dákkru had just disappeared down. The man reappeared a moment later, shaking his head.

Gideon started towards the stairs, wincing with every creak and groan of the ancient treads as he ascended them. He reached the top, spared the hall beyond a quick glance, then moved to the opposite side of the entry.

Verlaine took up a position in the space he'd just made for her, rifle already trained down the hallway.

Gideon started forward, moving quietly, aside from the occasional snap of a bone or rustle of a leaf. He made it to the first doorway and then paused, repeating the process with her.

They soon swept the second floor, arriving at the last room...

She swallowed, heart pounding in her chest.

With each room they found empty, the odds increased that the *next one* would hide The Beast. And that foreboding anticipation was making her more and more afraid.

She nodded at her husband, ready to support him when he moved...

Gideon slammed into the room, no longer bothering with stealth. He was sure The Beast was inside, and he entered the space like a man looking for a fight to the death...

Instead, The Beast offered none.

It was not at home, it seemed.

The floor was strewn with torn clothing and gnawed bone. There was a rough sort of... *nest*? Which was apparently where the animal slept, surrounded by skulls and decaying heads. The putrefying eyes of its victims were forced to watch the monster sleep, baring eternal witness to its slumbering horror...

Verlaine let out a breath she hadn't been aware she was holding,

somehow *relieved* to find only fifty-some severed human heads inside the room.

The smell of the rotting bodies mixed with the repulsive smell of The Beast itself, creating an ungodly stink so extreme that it made her eyes water.

Then a new thought occurred to her...

Gideon frowned, eyes still sweeping the space, like they'd somehow simply *missed* the creature inside. He opened his mouth to say something to her, but she immediately held up a finger to stop him.

He paused, confused but he trusted her instincts and skill, remaining silent. He moved to watch her, letting her guide him.

Overhead, there was a creaking sound in the attic...

Both of their gazes moved in unison towards it...

She turned to aim her rifle upwards, watching the stained and crumbling ceiling, tracking the sound's movement...

"There's nothing here." Ceely announced loudly as he appeared in the doorway, sounding both relieved and amused. "It must have seen us coming and..."

The man's next words were cut off, ending in a swish of air and the sound of something heavy slamming into him.

It happened so quickly that Verlaine didn't even have a shot. She ran to the doorway, leveling her weapon down the hallway, which was now stained with Ceely's bloody gore. The Beast had emerged from its perch in the attic and attacked him before he'd even seen it. She raced to the railing of the stairs, trying not to think about the fact that what she tripped over could have only been Ceely's now headless and battered torso.

There was a struggle downstairs, the sound of swearing and a musket going off...

She brought her rifle up to fire, just as The Beast saw her coming and dropped Dákkru to the ground. The Beast took off towards the back of the house, as the wall next to it exploded from Gideon's musket shot, his angle on the landing better than hers. "*The back!*" Dákkru cried weakly, the hand he clutched to his chest wound already dripping with a worrying amount of

blood. “*It’s headed out back, Gideon!*”

She turned to spot her husband on the landing behind her, expecting him to make his way down the stairs past her. Instead he simply crashed through the filthy window, landed on the roof of the side porch below, and raced across it towards the back of the house, leaping to the ground like a man accustomed to action. He disappeared round the house, letting out a shrill whistle. “*Wēgghséuos!*” He shouted in to the darkness in Segheyki, using the command which called his missing and *entirely* useless dog to war.

Verlaine swore, leaning out the window and finding that she was not able to get a clear shot towards the back from here. She abandoned the effort, taking the stairs three at a time.

Gideon fired off both of his pistols an instant later, the noise already sounding distant.

“*GO!*” Dákkru shouted to her as she raced by. “I’ll be right behind! *GO!*”

Verlaine was already moving, pausing only long enough to toss the man a makeshift bandage from her pack. Then she was running through the back door and into the darkness of the yard.

Several hundred yards ahead of her, she could see her husband as he pursued The Beast into a narrow gully which opened up at the tree line.

The depression was already filling with water, running down from the surrounding rocks and in danger of flooding out. Verlaine’s boots splashed through the icy cold runoff, racing to catch up, trying to keep the frizzen and powder dry in her rifle.

The Beast rounded on Gideon, preparing to end its flight and begin an attack...

Verlaine brought her rifle to her shoulder and fired in one movement, the round pulling to the right in the wind from this distance, slamming into a bolder by the animal’s head and showering it with rock splinters and a spray of water.

The Beast apparently recognized an unfamiliar weapon and the danger its range presented, and resumed its flight. Its giant shape bounded

over a fence, followed a moment later by Gideon, his club already held up, preparing for the fight...

“Dammit!” She started to reload on the run without getting it wet, spilling more black powder from her horn than she got into the measuring flask. “*At least load a pistol, Gideon!*”

The man was impossible. And was about to die.

She raced after her foolhardy spouse, her good eye adjusting to the darkness after the flash of the powder from her shot.

She scrambled over the fence, running down the gully, following the tracks in the wet mud left by her husband and The Beast.

The sounds of a fight got louder, growling and cursing and the crack of dying tree limbs as the two beasts in Tarasque Creek finally fought to see which was the toughest.

She burst into the clearing as the Beast prowled closer to her husband, her arrival taking the massive predator by surprise.

She didn't pause to gape at this strange and horrible creature, as soon as she had a shot at a vital organ, she took it.

The Beast reeled to the side as the rifle round hit it, a shower of blood filling the air, and knocking the animal to the ground.

It let out a growl, recognizing that she was the bigger threat and was now defenseless for the next few moments, her weapon empty.

It somehow righted itself from the rifle wound immediately, and moved towards her, muscles tensed to pounce...

The next instant it yanked its head back, the spike at the top of Gideon's club glancing off its skull as the animal frantically moved to the side to avoid Gideon's thrust.

“*Come on!*” Gideon shouted at The Beast, blood staining his face, eyes mad with rage. “*Don't even fucking look at her!*” He recovered from the missed blow and was already moving towards the Beast again, his words then becoming indecipherable threats and curses in his native Segheyki language.

Verlaine started to reload her weapon, hands oddly steady and businesslike. She'd done this a thousand times in her life, and...

The Beast's tail swung out like a whip, smacking the rifle from her grip with so much force that it felt like it broke her hands in the process. She staggered backwards, ducking under the animal's follow-up strike.

She'd heard one of the witnesses say that the creature had a whip tail, but she hadn't really believed it...

The Beast swung its tail at Gideon, attempting to knock his club away in a similar manner, but instead Gideon spun the weapon in his grip at the last moment, presenting the blade side of the club's head.

The force of The Beast's attempted blow knocked Gideon backward, but also severed two feet of the animal's tail, sending the detached flesh flying into the fallen leaves, where it wriggled like a dying fish spewing thick, black blood.

She ignored it, searching for her rifle...

Then recognized that it was lost for the moment and was likely too wet to fire now anyway. Instead, she simply pulled her knife and her uncle's tomahawk.

She stalked forward, a lifetime of hunting leading her steps and allowing her to anticipate The Beast's movements, at least to *some* degree...

The Beast saw her coming, recognizing that it was basically cornered against this cliff and would need to kill one or both of them if it wanted to live.

Gideon moved towards it suddenly, drawing the monster's attention. Its jaws rounded on him, letting out a furious snarl, prepared to eviscerate him as he drew close... But Gideon had already pulled back, simply feigning his advance.

The Beast recognized it at the last moment, as Verlaine's tomahawk slammed into the base of its neck. The thick scales blocked most of the blow, but the weapon came away dripping in black, foul-smelling blood.

She attempted to stab the monster's neck from below with the beavertail knife, but it dodged, slashing at her with its claws instead.

She pulled away, the fabric of her coat getting ripped open by The Beast's deadly swipe.

Gideon swung his club, missing The Beast by a hair, and then immediately continued the motion to take another shot at it. The monster had not been expecting that, and the head of the club slammed into its side, opening up a cut from the shallow blade embedded within and undoubtedly breaking bone...

The Beast saw Verlaine move to attack it again, instantly striking with one of its back legs, knocking her away.

It sprang after her, sensing its opening...

The Beast landed on top of her, snarling into her face, its jaws wide...

Gideon's club crashed into the side of its head, knocking it aside. He reached down to help her to her feet. "You okay!?!!" He asked desperately, not taking his eyes off their enemy. "Did it..."

The Beast was upon them both before he could finish that thought, pouncing on them so quickly that Verlaine didn't even see it move, despite literally watching it the entire time. It knocked Gideon to the ground beside her.

She tried to scramble away, but in the loose leaves, it was impossible to find adequate traction. In her few seconds of desperate attempt though, her fingers closed around Gideon's weapon. His hand joined hers a heartbeat later, helping to raise the club up as the huge weight of The Beast crashed down upon them... Driving the iron spike at the top of the club straight into the monster's chest. It let out a cry of surprise and agony as its own weight impaled it on the weapon. It staggered away from them, its blood now running down the club which was still stuck in its flesh, and into the leaves in a thick stream...

Gideon was already on his feet, pulling her away from it. Verlaine stumbled along with him, now completely unarmed.

The Beast recovered from the shock of its massive wound, head slowly turning towards them...

It truly, deeply *hated them* now.

And Verlaine took a grim satisfaction in the fact she had inspired that kind of reaction in the thing which was about to kill her.

It prowled towards them, its movements more unsteady than they had been. It looked like it might be on the verge of death, but it was still dangerous and more than capable of finishing them off before it bled out...

“If you have any last words, now might be the time, Gideon...” She warned him softly, gripping his hand tighter.

He nodded, watching the animal. “Indeed, I’ve got one...” He assured her confidently. “‘*NOKTSUPO*’!”

The Beast leapt towards them, seemingly suspended in the air for a timeless moment like a falling autumn leaf...

And then the monster disappeared as a huge foreign war dog slammed into it, catching The Beast in mid-air and slamming it to the ground hard enough to shake the forest....

“Dinner time.” She gasped, staggering backwards in shock.

“Loosely translated.” Gideon agreed, quickly grabbing his weapon from the ground now that the impact had dislodged it from the monster’s body.

The Beast let out a howling whimper of pain, trying to get up and fight back, but the dog was unyielding. Hrtósteyno’s massive paws slammed the monster back down, his teeth ripping and wrenching at The Beast’s throat in a frenzy of blood and rage...

She gaped at her husband’s silly, playful dog as it literally tore The Beast apart.

“Segheyki Hounds really *can* humble anything, can’t they.” She got out in quiet amazement, searching for her fallen weapons.

“They’re excellent dogs.” Gideon nodded, then swung his club down onto The Beast’s face, ending its anguished squeals of pain. Unsatisfied, he slammed the weapon down twice more, until it started hitting the dirt beneath.

Then he stood straighter, nodding at the dog. “Good boy.” He praised.

Hr̥ósteyno wagged at him in canine joy at the attention, a section of the Beast’s windpipe still clutched in his teeth.

Gideon patted him on the head again, his tone taking on an entirely uncharacteristic cooing quality. “*Very good boy.*”

Then, the dog became distracted by a firefly and started to chase after it, like it too represented a deadly foe his master would *surely* want destroyed as well.

She watched the dog go, amazed.

Gideon took the opportunity to reload his pistols and return them to their holsters, because that’s the kind of man he was.

“To think... all of this was caused by an ordinary wolf after all.” Someone said behind them.

The woman’s appearance startled Verlaine so completely, and she was so exhausted from the fight, that she literally fell to the ground.

Gideon spun around to face this new arrival.

In the clearing with them, the white-haired young woman with the fiddle was calmly looking down at the shattered and bloodied remains of The Beast, an unreadable expression on her face.

“What? No, it’s...” Gideon’s words cut off as he saw the monster’s remains. They looked... different now. They were now simply a wolf. A very large and terrifying wolf, but in no way out of the ordinary.

“Still, quite a victory.” The young woman praised, looking impressed. “Well done.” She slowly started to walk away, whistling the *Nevermore Hornpipe*.

“That’s not right.” Gideon gaped down at the dead animal, shaking his head, trying to make sense of this. “No... no, it was... Stop, you can’t just...”

The girl continued to make her way from the clearing.

Gideon cocked his pistol, turning around and pointing it at the

woman in one motion. “I said: ‘*Stop.*’” He commanded coldly. “You overplayed your hand. I’m not like the other men in the village. Your pretty disguise doesn’t work on me.” He paused for a beat, calling to her. “Verlaine?”

She grabbed her knife and tomahawk from the leaves, then slowly moved to her left, flanking the girl but keeping her eyes on her the entire time. “You certain this is our move?” She asked him, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Yes.”

“Okay.” She let out a long breath. “...Oh, *this* will not end well.” She told the assembly at large, readying her weapons for another fight. “It would be such a crime to mar your pretty face, my lovely girl.” She called, blocking the white-haired woman’s exit. “Listen to the nice man with the pistol, yes?”

She started to say a prayer in French and Cree, hoping this wasn’t as bad as she thought it was going to be...

“You’re *funny.*” The girl giggled, like all of this was a joke. “I like you.”

Verlaine’s breath left her lungs in a hopeless rush...

Nope.

This was *worse* than she thought it would be.

Verlaine moved closer to Gideon, shaking her head in warning, keeping her voice low. “Any girl who can summon up a creature like that... she is *beyond our ability to fight.*”

“*Nothing* is ‘beyond my ability to fight.’” He assured her confidently.

“Very well, I will restate,” she tried, “‘beyond our ability to fight and *survive longer than a moment.*’”

He ignored that, his attention still fixed on the girl as she took another step. “You will *stop*, or by God, madam, *I will shoot you down where you stand.*”

“You’re mean.” The girl shook her head, lower lip pouting. “Now I know why everyone hates you.”

Around them, every shadow in the area seemed to be drawn towards them, like a rushing river of darkness under their feet. It raced by them in a torrent of gloom, channeling directly into the girl, leaving the dark forest oddly... empty. Like there was no light *and* no darkness there.

Shadows moved like a liquid over the ground around her, and over her skin, which began to glow an eerie greenish-pink in the gloom of the night.

Verlaine took a step away. “What the hell *are* you?”

The girl smiled an expression made of lightning and shadow, the dark red wine of her lips stretched to unnatural lengths, widening her grin into a yawning maw, showcasing *far* too many teeth.

Verlaine took another step away, her back running into Gideon’s chest.

“Congratulations.” The girl’s voice was as smooth and malicious as festering honey, coating her ears in malevolent schemes disguised by a virgin’s tone. “You’ve proven yourselves the most intelligent and violent of the simians which inhabit this village.” Her laughter seemed to be coming from several directions at once, all around them. “I’m *very* impressed.”

Verlaine could only guess if that was sarcasm or not.

“It is a fearful thing to be judged by the darkness.” The girl told them. “The light? It blinds the eyes. But in the darkness, all is revealed...”

The rain picked up and the night was split by a bolt of lightning, the flash causing her appearance to shift into something terrifying for the briefest of moments. The shadow she cast in the flash was MUCH bigger than the girl, towering over the trees around them.

“This town is under my protection.” Gideon informed the demon calmly, like none of this was at all abnormal. “Leave *now* or commence with battle.” He warned coldly.

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with, do you, boy?” The girl snarled. Her white bangs hung off her forehead, casting her eyes into

unnatural shadows. They seemed to howl and sparkle in the strange pinkish-green misty gloom, glittering like poisoned diamonds. “*What* you’re dealing with?”

“I have a fairly good idea.” Gideon assured her, his weapon steady and still aimed at her head. “I know what you are.”

The white-haired woman’s eyebrows rose at this news. “Are you not impressed?”

“I am from *Quebec*.” Verlaine told her, like that was all the explanation which was needed as to why someone might not be amazed by encountering a living demon. “You will have to show me some *truly* unique and demonic powers for me to be at all impressed by...”

“I am the horror unheeded.” The girl interrupted, her hair now slowly floating and lapping above her head like flames. “I am the endless shrieking madness which burrows into the mind and twists it to my will. I bathe this unfriendly land in blood and sorrow, from the eleven black stars which hang overhead in the dead sky, to the festering roots girdling the bowels of this world, writhing in the reeking primordial ooze beneath your boots. I am the one behind the hysterical cries in the night, shaper of the discordant, nightmarish erebus which brings them to life.” She gestured to the forest around them. “I am the infinite yawning *bones* of these hills, creaking under the fathomless weight of my own unforgiving power. I am the thing which dwells below, yet still looks down upon you.” Her voice was now the growl of an ancient, infinite evil, wearing the shape of a pretty maid. “I am the cavernous, moldering void, echoing with the silent roar of a terrible, numberless infinity. I am the immovable bedrock of this haunted land.” There was another flash of lightning, and in that fraction of a heartbeat, she had somehow moved to a completely new location in the clearing. “I am *Temesra*, ruler of the Cthulhónoi. The Wretched Queen of Those Below. The ‘Subnaturals.’” She rolled her eyes at the name. “I am the Darkness itself.” She snarled, shaking her head. “And where you step... *belongs to me*.”

“Yes, yes, I am very impressed.” Gideon made a scoffing sound, calmly redirecting his pistol to her new location. “I am Captain Gideon Chastel Wlkwos, Her Majesty’s 1st Grenadier Guard of Segheyk, under

service to the United States of America.” His eyes narrowed at her in irritation. “I do not abide invisible demons lurking in my woods like ghostly highwaymen.” He moved to pull Verlaine behind him, taking on the firing stance of a pistol duelist. “You are obstructing trade.” He warned, like the demon would somehow care about his regulations. “You will leave.” He gestured away with his pistol. “You will pack up your demonic minions and your parade of sinister-sounding adjectives, and you will go back from whence you came, *immediately*.”

Verlaine’s grip tightened on her weapons...

“This *is* where I came from.” The demon reminded him. “Nevermore County... belongs to me. I was summoned, long ago.” Her head lowered dangerously. “You never should have called up what you couldn’t put down.”

“And yet... you failed.” Gideon made a dismissive sound. “We have killed your Beast.”

To Verlaine’s surprise, the girl seemed either taken aback by that or amused. “What makes you think *I* was the one who sent it?”

“I took *one wild goddamn guess*.” Gideon deadpanned. “And if you do not leave this place, at once, we will put you back in the ground, *permanently*.”

The demon girl considered that. “I stood with my kin on the Eternal Shores of Time, watching in contemptuous amusement as the Multiverse itself took its first stumbling shamble into existence.” She let out a snort of dismissive laughter. “You don’t want to fight me, boy.” The demon promised. “You think I am capable of being slain by someone like *you*?”

Gideon did not seem scared. “*Let’s find out*.”

Verlaine moved to flank the girl again, preparing for another fight to the death to protect her beloved from the terrible fallout of his own atrocious people skills...

Gideon’s social toolkit consisted of two equally important and carefully honed instruments to aid him in solving whatever problem life presented him: listening with calm business-like indifference and responding with swift savage violence. He seemed to believe that what one didn’t solve,

the other most assuredly would.

Verlaine didn't trust that would be the case this time...

The white-haired woman watched Gideon for a long moment, then simply smiled. Like he amused her, for some reason. "This place has brought me a warrior. At last." She said softly to herself. "Long ago, they promised me one..."

"You shall *not* have mine." Verlaine interrupted, then paused, like she was theatrically having a second-thought. "Unless, obviously, I am there *too*." She spared her husband a quick glance, finding him looking back at her. "What?" She asked innocently. "There is no shame in that, if the joy is shared."

"You are not being 'discrete.'" He chastised, refocusing on their foe. "This violates our agreement."

Verlaine simply gestured to the woman, like her sinister beauty and shape made this breach forgivable and entirely understandable.

"I could make you kill each other." The white-haired woman informed them, like she was promising them a freshly baked cake.

"*And?*" Verlaine raised an expectant eyebrow, trying to show a confidence she was in no way feeling. "I can do that *on my own*, my darling girl. I make my husband want to kill me every second of every day."

The white-haired woman advanced on them, eyes blazing. "I could sit on a throne made from the bones of the ones you claim to protect, and watch as you clawed each other's eyes out and ate them, laughing." She motioned to Verlaine, her gaze fixed on Gideon. "I could make you hurt her in ways you haven't even imagined in your darkest nightmares, 'Captain.' I could make you *feel* the enjoyment you gained from her agony."

"Perhaps." Gideon admitted, his tone clipped. "But you won't."

"Why?" The white-haired woman seemed as confused by Gideon's show of total confidence as Verlaine was. "*Why* would I not do this, 'Captain Gideon Wlkwos'? When it is within my power and would be *so* amusing?" She sounded like a child demanding the end of a story now. "*Tell me* what power you believe you possess which would prevent this from coming to

pass?”

“We possess the one thing you want more than anything else in your limitless existence.” He assured her, gesturing to Verlaine. “We are in love. That is the power we possess.”

“You believe that I would care about something so petty and childish?” She rolled her eyes. “Such a *mortal* way of thinking.”

“You are a romantic. You would have to be, to hold a grudge against humanity this long over being jilted. And your demon wolf isn’t around to do your dirty work for you anymore.”

“Again: what makes you think it was mine?” She sniffed indignantly. “Perhaps I am simply an innocent spectator, watching a performance play out.”

“You are a being of pure malevolent rage... but you’re not going to lift a finger against us.” Gideon holstered his weapon.

Verlaine blinked at him, amazed that he would lower his guard. “Uh... Gideon?” She started warningly. “There’s a demon girl there, still threatening to....”

“And you *know* it.” Her husband insisted, waving off Verlaine’s entirely justified cautions. “That’s why you’re a being from ‘the dawn of existence’ or whatever such tosh you spouted, yet are wasting your time even bothering to *talk* to us right now.” He nodded at the girl, recognizing that she knew he was right. “Because you’re a monster. A beast. Like us.” He gestured back and forth between himself and Verlaine. “One who is bored. And lonely. And in pain.” He met her eyes. “So you’re going to walk away, because you know we’ve won. The game is done.” He moved to pull Verlaine closer. “Now *go away*. I am on my honeymoon.”

“This game? *My* game?” The girl spat out. “It is *not* over. It will *never* be over.” She paused for a long moment. “But... your part in it is.” She visibly relaxed, the shadows around them returning to normal. “You have won your lives. Cherish the scant heartbeats of time which remain for you. I will not interfere with your line again.” She paused meaningfully. “...Unless you or they *force my hand*.”

“Brilliant.” He deadpanned unconcernedly. “I’ve heard enough

from you. You may go.” He pointed back towards the forest. “Now.”

The woman looked oddly amused by the threat, a small smile passing over her lips. “Do you have even the vaguest *conception* of what I could do to you, ‘Gravedigger’?”

“No.” He shook his head. “But I think my wife has some ideas.”

“I shall be gentle, little one, do not worry your lovely face.” Verlaine leaned back against his chest. “Do you believe her prettier than me, my love?”

“Not after I’m done with her.” Gideon snarled.

“My husband, he is not a gentleman, fair one.” Verlaine laughed in delight. “I fear he is *wicked* and will make quite a mess of you.” She nodded in a show of looming pleasure at the promised spectacle. “I shall enjoy watching this a great deal.”

The girl smiled in demonic amusement again, and when the lightning flashed once more... she was gone.

Verlaine let out a long, low whistle. “That might be the *second* most pretty thing which has ever tried to kill me.” She shared with her husband, heart still pounding in fear. “Now that you know her better, have you developed manly feelings for her?” She teased. “Are you *sure* you would not welcome her into our bed, my love?”

“Fairly certain, yes. Again, I am not attracted to suffering and agony, particularly when it’s mine.” He bent to retrieve his club and reattached it to his belt, preparing in case yet another enemy randomly appeared in the clearing. “Besides, I detest the fucking fiddle music she plays more than I ever hated The Beast.”

“*Quel dommage.*” Verlaine pressed the back of her wrist to her forehead dramatically. “My attraction and yearning for that captivating white-haired demon shall have to go unfulfilled, it seems.”

“I shall strive to ease your disappointment.” He pulled her closer. “I think I can fill the void she left in your heart...”

“Someone mind telling me what in the holy hell is happening?” Dákkru asked weakly, his pistol held in his trembling hand, the bandage on

his chest soaked through with blood.

“The Beast is dead.” Gideon told him simply, leaning down to kiss Verlaine, his lips claiming hers. “*Let’s go home.*”

Epilogue.

Ten Years Later

Verlaine rolled over, kissing her husband as she woke. “Good morning, my treasure.”

He made a sleepy sound, which shifted quickly into a pleased growl of surprise and pleasure as she deepened the kiss. His hand moved to her hip. “That’s the way a man wants to greet the day...” He nodded, caressing her rear.

She slid her fingers over the sheet covering him, feeling his body harden for her. “A marvelous way...” She agreed.

He pulled her onto his lap, his shaft already pressing against her.

She silently shed her nightclothes, exposing her breasts to him. His mouth closed over her nipples, teeth lightly grazing them in a way he knew from long experience made her wild.

She shifted on his lap, reaching down to free his shaft. She ran her fingers over it admiringly, debating how *best* to love him today...

His hand lowered to her thighs, finding her already wet and ready for him.

Honestly, she’d been ready and waiting for him for an hour now, patiently lying there in bed like a predator, body tense and prepared for him to show the first signs of waking so that she could pounce on him.

He needed to sleep, obviously. But she had needs too.

She nodded as his fingers slid over her body. “Do you still like that, Gideon?” She whispered into his ear in a purr. “Finding how hot and wet I always am for you...?”

He let out a low sound which indicated that, yes, he did in fact still enjoy it.

His fingers rubbed against her faster, a possessive friction and

worshipful attention to her body.

She met his eyes, caressing his face as she sat on his lap, sharing his breath as his fingers explored her.

“Do you want me to climax for you, Gideon?” She asked breathily, groaning in pleasure at the same time. “Once again earn the two week’s wage you spent to win our marriage back then?”

Her husband was too far gone to enjoy being teased, his finger sliding into her channel up to the knuckle.

She let out a gasp, as Gideon nipped at her chin, and then lowered his mouth to her breasts again. His tongue traced the line of her scar...

She clutched him tighter, nodding. “I’m... I’m close...” She warned him, sharing the news like he couldn’t feel it and didn’t recognize it from the countless times he had experienced it firsthand through the decade of their marriage. She groaned again. “So close....”

The tone had a pleading nature to it, begging him to bring her the pleasure she needed...

Gideon lifted her off his lap and his fingers were replaced by his mouth.

Verlaine let out a cry, her body lost in the rush of her total love for this man. Her hips arched, the wave of her shattering climax helped along by the dedicated ministrations of Gideon’s tongue.

She panted for breath, eyes swimming.

Gideon eagerly licked the taste of her from his lips, casually repositioning her on the bed.

Verlaine allowed herself to be moved to her hands and knees, her aching channel now weeping his saliva and her own climax down her inner thighs.

Gideon moved to kneel behind her, sliding his hand over her rear.

She panted for breath, anxious for him...

She didn’t have long to wait, and his cock slid inside her a moment later.

She let out a low, pleased sound. Throwing her head back as her husband claimed her, once again.

He reached under her to caress her breasts as he started to thrust. She looked back at him, watching the man. She arched a teasing eyebrow at him.

He started to thrust harder, accepting the unspoken challenge.

She let out a delighted sound, her body rocking and feeling *alive*.

The pace and force brought her quickly to another explosive, whimpering climax, and she collapsed her face to the pillow.

Gideon managed several more thrusts, holding her head down and pulling her hips up to more fully meet him.

Verlaine moaned as the only man she'd ever love truly took what was his, with complete abandon. Worthy of any of the fake pamphlets she'd read about him during the war, where he mercilessly fucked innocent Colonial women.

Losing himself in her...

He gritted his teeth a moment later, letting out a possessive and adoring growl as he came deep inside her.

They were both still for a moment, then he gently patted her rear again. "'Clicket' truly is a *hell of a way* to start the day." He repeated, out of breath.

"And end it." She nodded, righting herself on the bed and smiling at him. "I love you, Gideon." It was, as ever, an expression of complete, thoughtful truth. Like it was a secret they alone shared. "*Madly*."

"I am hopelessly in love with you too." He agreed, kissing her softly, pressing his forehead against hers. "For however long we have." He whispered the endearment, promising her his life.

She nodded. "Every moment." She agreed, kissing him again. "Every. *Moment*."

She got to her feet, stepping onto the rug she'd made from The Beast's pelt, and started to get dressed. Then made her way out into the kitchen of their... well, it wasn't really 'looted', she still preferred to think of

their inn as having been ‘salvaged.’

Gideon had retired with her to Tarasque Creek, after they both got back from the war, starting an orchard. She had argued that the place was quite literally cursed, but he’d said that they had an “understanding” with the evil here, while they’d have to start all over again winning the respect of some new evil if they moved somewhere else.

It... it had made more sense at the time than it did in the abstract, but to be fair, his face was between her thighs during the entire conversation. Her mind was... *elsewhere*.

And she had no regrets about the decision.

In any case, they had quickly found that one could buy up *large* swaths of land cheaper in Nevermore County than anywhere else in America.

Which... probably wasn’t surprising.

But it had given Gideon his dream of owning a large amount of property, which he’d used to make them even *more* money. As it turned out, her husband was an incredible businessman. The orchard had gotten so large that they’d taken on Dákkru as a foreman of the property to help them.

All told, it was... heaven. A peaceful life of bliss and love, in the middle of this godforsaken county and village.

She looked around for a moment, then opened the front door, searching...

In the yard, Henrietta, their now *very* ancient mule, idly wandered by grazing.

The rows of trees beyond stretched into the distance, eventually meeting the sea of grain Tarasque Creek was famous for. The plants and leaves moved in the breeze, hiding whatever lurked at their base, concealing dark secrets from the world.

No.

Something wasn’t right...

She could feel it.

Verlaine was still a hunter and recognized the sensation that

something was stalking her from the shadows...

“Hi!” Her daughter suddenly leapt from nowhere, shouting the greeting like the little beast she was. She grinned wildly, hoping to scare her mother.

Verlaine feigned surprise, so that the girl’s game wouldn’t be ruined.

Her daughter giggled pleasantly, enjoying the ambush. “May I have a liquorish root, mommy?”

Verlaine made a face at her oldest child. “After breakfast, Miriam.” She promised, reaching down to pick the girl up into her arms. “Where is your brother?”

Her daughter pointed over her shoulder. “Daddy said yesterday that Uncle Dákkru could take Benji and the puppies and me out into the orchard this morning.” She waved at Dákkru as the man was undoubtedly once again trying to patiently explain to Verlaine’s five year old, Benjamin Franklin Wlkwos, the essentials of fruit growing and proper hit-and-run tactics in a military engagement. “We just got back!”

Dákkru waved back at the girl, allowing Verlaine’s son to dash towards her, arms outstretched. She stepped from the porch to greet him, as Gideon appeared behind her carrying their toddler, Franklin Benjamin Wlkwos. Hrtósteyno wagged happily at everyone, like he hadn’t seen them in decades, then forgot all about them and raced across the yard with his stone toy, chasing another squirrel which most likely didn’t actually exist.

Gideon took Miriam from her arms with his free hand.

“Daddy, you will not *believe* what I found today!” The little girl shared excitedly.

“I’m sure I won’t,” he teased, giving her a kiss, “but I *demand* that you tell me anyway. At once.” He leaned over to kiss Verlaine and his son, carrying Miriam into the house.

Miriam let out an excited laugh, eager to tell him of their adventures this morning.

Verlaine motioned to Dákkru with her free hand, calling him to breakfast. Then let out a sigh of complete contentment, taking a moment to

enjoy her life and the love it brought her. Then she followed her husband and children into their home.

She had finally won her game.

Lizzy's Notes and Behind-the-Scenes Commentary on the Book

“Growing up, Lizzy's favorite dwarf was Grumpy. Her favorite Care Bear was Grumpy. Her favorite Muppet was Oscar the Grouch. Her favorite Smurf was Gargamel. She voted for Cobra. She watched Return to Oz an unhealthy number of times. And she always named all of her toys after herself. Psychologically, I'm not sure what any of that means, but it's probably not good.”

- My sister Cassandra's description of me.

The monster in this book is largely based on a real life event(s). During the latter half of the 18th century, parts of Europe were menaced by a series of mysterious attacks by an unknown menace. Most notably, “The Beast of Gévaudan,” which attacked hundreds of people in rural France. Its behavior, general appearance, attack strategy, contemporary theories about its origin, and overall effectiveness is borrowed entirely for this book. It too was hunted with a mechanism consisting of thirty shotguns on thirty tripwires, wagged at its eventual victims one day and killed them the next, had specially trained dogs hunting it, and survived being shot numerous times, including being supposedly killed by a professional wolf hunter before making a surprise and deadly reappearance. Its identity remains a bit of a mystery, despite two animals believed to be the beast having finally been shot and killed, and run-through by a woman with a spear as it lunged at her. Oddly, this was not the only such monster to attack people during the era though. If you look into it, you can find *dozens* of attacks and sightings of beasts fitting the same strange description found in this book, killing people all over the continent for many years. Sighted by people who lived with wolves and who *knew* what they looked like, and how they behaved. Yet many of the witnesses insisted that the beasts in question were *not* wolves and were

instead something they had never seen before. Something new and unnatural. I found this idea interesting, and tried to stick to the actual animal and take inspiration from real events whenever possible.

If you're wondering, wife auctions were also a real thing. And that price he paid for her is indeed the real closing price on an actual bride, back in the day.

This book took a little over a year to finish. It would have been faster, but it's been a dramatic year for our family. It was written almost entirely in chronological order, aside from a few of the major scenes which I wrote out as a blueprint to guide the story. (I literally spent an entire day trying to convert the offered reward for anyone who could kill the "Beast of Milan," a wolf-monster which murdered ten children in 1792, from the original sum in 18th century livre into 18th century British pounds, and then determining the buying power of that sum in America at the time. Why did I do that? Because I knew you'd notice and *deeply* appreciate that historical authenticity in a romance book about a demon-monster that's eating people in a made-up town somewhere, especially since I took little notice of historical accuracy anywhere else in this book. If you've ever read any of my other books though, you've probably already noticed that I can be a stickler for some details—no matter their ultimate importance to the narrative—yet am sometimes content to finish off the meticulous minutia of the image with broad brush strokes. That's just my way.)

Incidentally, for those keeping score at home, "You're a shit" is actually a period correct phrasing, which is surprising. (No, that's not a joke, it really dates back at least that far.) As are most of the ways Verlaine refers to her vagina (*that* was an interesting series of internet searches, my friends. Hoo boy...) Most of the other speaking styles only needed to be as accurate as a typical 1990s teen horror paperback though, as that's the inspiration for this series. I simply didn't think anyone wanted to read a lot of difficult to follow language. Is this technically accurate? No. But easier to read. I thought the same about the muskets. Thanks to a few hours of research, both for this book and for *The Guy Your Friends Warned You About*, I am now very well acquainted with loading and firing a Revolutionary War musket and rifle. But that's really hard to write every time, and it unnecessarily takes up words, so we'll all just pretend like it's

possible to always keep the weapons loaded, rather than only loading them immediately before firing. It's easier that way.

The description of the passenger pigeon flock is entirely accurate. They were once the dominant bird species in America, crowding the skies. They're extinct now, sadly. But they must have been truly *brehtaking* to see.

Growing up, the Rottweiler that lived across the street from our house played with a large rock that was bigger than a football. Carried it around and rolled it up and down the sidewalk all day. He loved that thing, and I've always thought it was odd. A large, patient, tough dog. Although, Hrtósteyno's personality is so close to my dog now that it's basically Toby fan-fiction. I don't think he'll mind.

Gideon is based on every evil military commander in every period film I've ever seen. I watched a lot of Revolutionary War, French and Indian War, and Napoleonic War films as research. Because when I'm watching the bad guys in *The Patriot* or the incompetent Europeans in *Last of the Mohicans*, I kinda want to see them have entirely inappropriate sex with crazy women who wreck their orderly and dastardly little lives. Which... is weird, I know. His army is very much based in the basic idea of Hessian mercenaries who served in the American Revolution. I thought that was an interesting situation, but ultimately found that I'd rather create my own fictional unit and country, rather than spend months studying the politics of 18th century Germany. Originally, Gideon was on the British side the entire time in the book, but somewhere along the line, that shifted and his story became that his army switched sides as the need and economic incentives of his lands warranted. I'm not quite sure *why* I made that choice, but it happened within the first couple chapters of writing, so I simply went with it. His club is based on the Flemish *goedendag*, only his is heavier and has a shallow blade on one side.

Why is he sorta demisexual? I have no idea. It just worked out that way. It's difficult for me to imagine someone who tries to have that tight a control over himself lusting after random pretty women though. I think he'd see it as a kind of weakness. I think him being somewhere on the asexuality spectrum is much more in keeping with who he is. I think most 18th century

heroes in romance novels tend to be kinda man-whore rake sorta guys, which is fine, but I wanted to take that in the opposite direction. Or rather Gideon did, anyway, as I don't recall ever making a conscious choice about it one way or the other. It's simply who he was.

Gideon formerly had more of an introductory chapter, dealing with his thoughts and history as he arrived in the village of Tarasque Creek, but as I prepared the preview chapter of this book to include with Cassandra's *Love vs The Ooze Monster!*, I realized that the chapter was not necessary to the narrative. As such, I recycled a few paragraphs of it here and then edited the rest of the chapter out to move the story along faster. Instead, I'll simply send it out as a bonus chapter in our next newsletter. If you'd like to give it a read, just drop me a line at starturtlepublishing@gmail.com and I'll add you to the mailing list.

Verlaine is based on the crazy heroines of classic slapstick romantic comedies, mixed with the protagonists of those period war films I watched. Someone who is at peace in the wild, as opposed to the antagonist military guy's regimented life. The actual Beast of Gévaudan attacks were filled with a number of different military men and colorful hunters, and I sorta wanted to capture that kind of "These are people from two different worlds, who are both dedicated to stopping these attacks" feeling. She began her life as a serious and rather stern hunter kind of woman, but within a few paragraphs, completely changed who I thought she was. From that point on, I simply allowed her free reign to play with Gideon, since it seemed to be all she wanted to do. I believe at some point in her early history, I planned for Verlaine *herself* to be the monster and for the killings to have been committed by someone else, but that idea didn't last long. I feel like there are a TON of romance novels where the characters have powers or are monsters themselves, but scant few which are a *Terminator* kind of situation, where the main couple are regular people and are fighting a monster which has powers. I simply find the danger of that more interesting and hot at the moment, and more in keeping with the 1990s horror paperback inspiration of the *Frightful Loves* series.

I have some French ancestry and took a year of it in high school, but by this point, the only thing I can say in the language with even 60% accuracy is "That is not correct. Please try again." which is what the Learn

to Speak French! computer program told me thousands of times over the course of my education in the language. So, apologies for the mistakes in Verlaine's dialogue I undoubtedly made.

I have kept a list of book ideas for many years, where I record story ideas, character concepts, bits of dialogue I randomly think up and want to use somewhere, and even dreams I've had that I woke up from and found inspirational. This is the original entry I had for this book's concept, which spun-off of an idea for another book that I had maybe 8 years ago, but the two ideas quickly became distinct. I wrote this down as a stream of consciousness thing about 5 years ago, and then thought it over for a few years, before actually writing this book once I decided to do a series based on horror plots. This was not the first book I started to write for *Frightful Loves*, but it was the first one completed. Which makes sense since it is chronologically the earliest book—so far—in the history of Nevermore County:

“Monster book. Our hero is the sheriff or whatever, the guy in charge of law and order, and now there's a monster killing people. (Maybe Medieval times?) He's levelheaded and only cares about protecting the people. A hard man; tough as stone. Named something old-fashioned. A colorful band of hunters arrives and quickly starts getting wiped out. Heroine is one of them. Daughter of hunter who died in France, killed by something like this monster. She doesn't care about the money, she wants vengeance. Hunts it the way you're supposed to hunt something. Heroine is badass with like an eyepatch or something. Named something like “Verlaine” or something cool. Close-cropped light color hair, maybe? Scars running along her scalp, disappearing under her eyepatch. Maybe story is something more mysterious and animal related, like the prince of the kingdom can always be trying to have some kind of ceremony in the town, claiming that there is no monster or that it's already been killed. But then it reappears and kills him. Maybe monster is shapeshifter and it's actually someone in town? (No, real monster is better.) Maybe it should be set in Colonial time? Called like Nevermore County, which is like a Sleepy Hollow kind of place, where everyone is all ‘The Crucible’ about everything? Call it something like ‘Victims of Love and Ferocious Beasts,’ but better than that because that sucks.”

Then my notation ended with links to articles about the Beast of Gévaudan and the Beast of Milan. A few entries later in my random series of notes was a notation about the existence of wife auctions and how that would be a strange meet-cute for a couple, so after years of reading through my book notes document, I started to associate one entry with the other. I don't know why.

Other alternate titles for this book:

Yet Not a Wolf

Love vs The Beast of Nevermore!

The Mad Trapper's Daughter

Monster: 1780!

The Beast (Not the Romance Novel Kind)

I have a tendency to listen to a single song on repeat while writing. Again and again and again, until I stop hearing the beat of it and it is essentially used up for a few years and I can't write to it anymore. I care less about genre than having a mood or beat which energizes me. The songs I listened to while writing this book were mostly focused on old tunes and folk songs to put me in a Colonial mindset, or random faster ear-worm kind of songs which I found catchy at the time. And a song that is literally *about* the Beast of Gévaudan, because obviously:

Bully in the Alley – traditional folk song

Over the Hills and Far Away– traditional folk song

The Game of Cards- – traditional folk song

Auprès de ma blonde – traditional folk song

The Rogue's March / Poor Old Soldier– traditional folk song

Beyond the Yellow Brick Road- Elton John

Run-Around – Blues Traveler

Leave Her Johnny Leave Her – traditional folk song

When Johnny Comes Marching Home – traditional folk song

Paddy on the Handcar (it's a military march from the Civil War with a very objectionable and inappropriate name, my apologies)

Fuck This Job - Wheeler Walker Jr. (Um... yeah, content warning on that one...)

Beast of Gévaudan – Powerwolf

I hate asking for online ratings and comments, because it's cringy,

but if you want to help, that's how. The more ratings we get, the more books we sell, and thus, the more books we have time to write. If you don't feel like it, that's fine too. I rarely comment or rate books either, so I *completely* understand. Still, I would truly appreciate it if you have the time.

If you feel like talking about this book or any others Cassie and I have written, feel free to drop me a line at startturtlepublishing@gmail.com

In any case, thank you so much for reading! Hope to see you again next time!

- Elizabeth Gannon

Free Sneak Preview of the Next Book in Cassandra Gannon's Kinda Fairytale Series

Happily Ever Witch

By Cassandra Gannon

Prologue

Pick your perfect nail polish from our unlimited selection!

Burnt It All Orange: Hot, hot, hot! This illuminated polish is ideal for keeping warm on a cold night, because it's actually on fire. Containing all the burning colors and shifting shadows of a blazing inferno, it glows in an unholy conflagration for up to a week before your nails melt off.

(This product is not recommended if you work with small children or plan to ever grow fingernails, again.)

Happily Ever Witch Cosmetics Website

The Four Kingdoms

Wicked, Ugly, and Bad Prison

Seven Years Ago

"I'm not helping you set off a bomb." Marrok Wolf told him for the millionth time.

Trevelyan, Last of the Green Dragons, slanted him an aggravated glare. The Big Bad Wolf was one of a handful of people Trevelyan counted as a friend, but sometimes he wondered why he bothered. Marrok might just be the most moralizing villain ever born.

Unlike the wolf, Trevelyan wasn't willing to passively wait out his sentence and dream pretty fairytales about his True Love. He couldn't. He had to get out *now*. Maid Marion had come back in time with news from the future. She'd told Trevelyan what would happen if he stayed in prison, beyond today.

Snow White, the lunatic doctor who ran the asylum, wanted one of Trevelyan's spells and he had no intention of giving it to her. If things continued on this course, she would kill him.

That was completely unacceptable.

Trevelyan paced around the confines of his cell morbidly aware of every second that ticked by. It was a literal countdown to his demise. The entire situation had spiraled out of control. He didn't want to die. He was too fucking powerful to die. Too *important* to die. He was a dragon!

"I mean it, Trev." Marrok insisted, when Trevelyan didn't respond to his latest refusal to help. Even in his human-form, the wolf was some lupine-y mix of lazy and watchful. Topaz eyes stayed fixed on Trevelyan, revealing none of his undoubtedly infuriating thoughts. "I'm not going to blow anything up."

The two of them shared a cell in The Wicked, Ugly, and Bad Mental Health Treatment Center and Maximum Security Prison and had formed an alliance against the other inmates. From the beginning, it had made strategic sense. The enemy of your enemy is your slightly-less-hated enemy.

Marrok and Trevelyan were the strongest. Against each other, there would only be mutually assured destruction. But *together* they had total dominion. Young as they were, they were still more dangerous than all the other villains in the jail. The two of them ruled the Red Level. Since Red Level housed the worst-of-the worst offenders, that meant they ruled the entire WUB Club.

Well, *Trevelyan* ruled it.

To his way of thinking, Marrok lacked a killer instinct. Oh, he could hold his own in a fight, but he'd never have Trevelyan's ruthless need to win. Marrok got by on cunning coated in charm. He was surprisingly smart, for a sports star. Words and schemes and a glinting smile were his weapons of choice.

Trevelyan preferred to rely on fear. People were so afraid of him, they rarely posed a problem. They just fell into line. He was willing to use his knack for intimidation to shield Marrok from the more aggressive monsters roaming the halls. The wolf therefore owed him some loyalty. It was obvious.

"We *are* bombing the prison." Trevelyan intoned.

The magic inhibitor on his ankle precluded him from casting any spells, but Trevelyan didn't need magic to make a bomb. He needed bleach and hydrogen peroxide. Maybe some ammonia or vinegar to toss in the mix, so he could poison a few guards. Marrok was assigned to the laundry. Some of that shit *had* to be available down there. Why was the wolf complicating something so simple?

"The chemicals will catch fire, Trev. Or make chlorine gas. Or mustard gas. Or just fucking *explode*. It will kill hundreds of people."

“One hundred and eight people, I would guess.”

At least that’s how many he killed on his last attempted escape, in some other timeline, according to Maid Marion. This was a new plan, obviously. Still, he imagined the universe would somehow balance out the corpses on his ledger book. This time it would perhaps be one hundred and *seven*. In Marion’s original timeline, Trevelyan had died along with the others. That had to change, as he probably wouldn’t get another do-over. He needed to *survive*, no matter what. And if he didn’t have that bomb, his only option was doing something even more God-awful.

Trevelyan hated needing anything, but he needed the wolf. He needed help.

“I’m not killing a hundred and eight people.” Marrok shook his tawny head, like the number was just so huge that it was crazy to even consider it. “No way. Not even for you.”

Trevelyan was insulted. “Why the frozen-hells not?”

As a species, dragons were isolated and mistrustful. They didn’t make allies easily. Or really *at all*. The fact that he’d accepted Marrok into his confidence was a huge honor for the wolf. He should be grateful. Their pact had started out as strategy, but now they had a genuine friendship. And friendship meant loyalty and loyalty meant setting off a bomb, so Trevelyan could escape.

It was crystal clear as a wishing well.

He didn’t appreciate Marrok’s squeamishness. It was madness to worry about the means they employed in order to reach the necessary ends. All that mattered was results.

All that mattered was *Trevelyan*.

“Well, for one thing, this plan could get me locked up for the rest of my life, if we’re caught.” Marrok was stretched out on his bed, one foot swinging over the edge of the mattress. “I can’t be locked up in here forever. I have to find my True Love.”

“Oh for God’s sake...” Trevelyan rolled his eyes so hard it was a wonder he didn’t catch a glimpse of his own brain. “I’m sick of you talking about this imaginary girl and your fantasy romance.”

Just about everybody had a True Love. Allegedly. The one person they were destined to be with. Also allegedly, most Bad folk knew their True Love the moment they met them. No one was quite sure why Good folk took a longer time to figure it out, while Bad folk could just look at their other half and *know* at first sight. They just blindly accepted the story.

Trevelyan thought it was all troll shit. He’d never experienced it and Trevelyan didn’t believe anything he hadn’t experienced for himself.

Marrok, on the other hand, believed in True Love without question. In his pitifully naive mind, some glamorous she-wolf was going to show up and propose at any moment. Marrok rhapsodized about the woman on a loop. Wolves were always fanatically dedicated to their True Loves, but Marrok rivaled Maid Marion’s large, gargoyle husband when it came to obsession. Nothing mattered to him more than his True Love. Nothing.

“My True Love is not imaginary.” Marrok insisted, right on cue. “I’ve felt her, for a long time. I know she’s real and that she’ll save me from my life. She’ll *give* me a life. A family. A future. I won’t do *anything* to risk her.”

Trevelyan didn’t understand why the man was so hung up on this ridiculous idea. Even if True Love had some basis in reality (And it probably

didn't)... so what? By and large, dragons didn't depend on love. With so few of their species left, most dragons' relationships were rooted in practical, concrete, unsentimental concerns. They wanted a mate. A partner. You didn't need to *like* the person you mated with. You just needed to breed more dragons, and fight your enemies, and expand your family's power.

True Love matches were far more arbitrary. Assigned by fate and beyond a person's control. Trevelyan didn't accept *anything* was beyond his control.

Why should he settle for some random woman? He wouldn't. It was that simple. Dragons chose their own mates, based on logic and instinct. Love rarely entered into the equation. Even if they felt it, they would then *decide* whether or not to claim the person causing those feelings. They didn't just blindly submit to them. It was all about survival and empire building, which was a far superior system. Anyone rational could see that.

(Honestly, why was Trevelyan *always* the only rational person in the room? It never failed. Everyone else was a moron.)

"How are you going to find this wonderful, perfect, destined love, if you're stuck in here?" He tried, arching a brow at Marrok. Wolves were primitive. You couldn't always use reason, because they were primarily motivated by emotions. "For all you know, she's out there right now, fucking some other man. My plan gets you beyond these walls and looking for her."

Yellowish eyes stayed fastened on Trevelyan, not falling for it. "I'm out in ten months, anyway. I can look for her, then. If she's with someone else, I'm fairly certain I can coax her away." He gave a smug smile.

Trevelyan frowned, conceding that point. Marrok was the best-

looking man in the Four Kingdoms. Everyone knew that. Even Trevelyan knew it and he hated to give anybody else credit for anything.

There was a downside to being so handsome. Marrok was constantly harassed by the WUB Club's administrator. Dr. White was a licentious bitch, who went after any male prisoner who caught her eye. Whether they were willing or not. And Marrok had *definitely* caught her eye. It was a small miracle the wolf had kept himself out of her clutches, but could he sustain his luck? She was always pawing at him, seeking him out, and making suggestive remarks. Marrok detested her. Everyone in the WUB Club detested her.

Especially Trevelyan.

He hated that Snow White had any power over him. Not only was she plotting to steal his spell and then kill him, but the overly-sweet smell of her turned his stomach. So far, Trevelyan had ignored her innuendos and eluded her touch. The thought of *not* eluding her made his whole body contract in horror.

No. He couldn't do that. He just... couldn't.

Not even eminent threats from Snow White's deviant appetite would convince Marrok to escape. It would be no better for him out there. Wolfball players were sold by their coaches for sexual shit, all the time. It was no wonder Marrok hated the sport that he was forced to play. Bad folk had no place to feel safe. To belong.

Trevelyan thought for a beat, looking for some kind of deal he could strike with the wolf. Nothing came to mind. Having his unknown True Love was all Marrok cared about. Trevelyan could perhaps preform some spell to find her, as a bribe. But that was far lighter magic than he typically used.

Good magic rarely worked for him. He was too Bad to access the power of it. And he couldn't cast *any* spells inside the prison, so the entire idea was moot from the outset.

Shit.

Marrok raised his eyebrows in sardonic unconcern, seeing Trevelyan's increasing frustration. The wolf was always nonchalantly sure of himself. He was also even better at pissing people off than Trevelyan and that was a high bar to clear. It was what made him so dangerous. Like all wolves, Marrok knew how to exploit a weakness. Trevelyan had seen him convince opponents to destroy themselves, using nothing more than a taunting smile and some lie that the sap desperately wanted to believe.

The wolf might be a closeted do-Gooder, but he was also... insidious.

Trevelyan's eyes narrowed, his thoughts going darker. He saw the man's intentions, now. Marrok knew he had Trevelyan over a barrel. The plan wouldn't work without the cleansers from the laundry and only Marrok had access to them. The wolf thought he could stop him from escaping. Prevent him from killing anyone dumb enough to stand in his way. Stall him with all these pointless arguments.

It was a ludicrous notion. Nothing would deter Trevelyan from a goal. Once he decided something, it was *done*.

"You think you can outsmart me, wolf?" He asked quietly, danger in his tone. Deep inside of him, the dragon stirred.

"I think you need to rethink this plan." Marrok temporized. "Take some time."

There *was* no time.

“There’s nothing to rethink. It’s me or them.” Trevelyan waved a hand at the wall and all the nameless, faceless, insignificant creatures beyond. “Which means it’ll be *me*.”

Why was Marrok so eager to save these worthless beings and this worthless cesspit? Everything and everyone in the Wicked, Ugly, and Bad Prison was nauseating. Dragons were scent-based creatures, so the stench of the place was sickening to Trevelyan. Awake or asleep it assaulted his senses and clouded his mind. Even without his impending death, he would be determined to escape. Wolves had a keen sense of smell, too. You’d think Marrok would understand his desire to get away from the odious odors.

Instead, Marrok slowly shook his head. “Don’t do this, Trev. You can be *better* than this.”

Frozen hells, the man was exhausting. Trevelyan couldn’t imagine the energy it took to give a troll’s ass about “being better.” “We’re Bad, you colossal imbecile. This is how Bad people act. You might want to stay on the fringes of evil, pining for your precious True Love, but I’m an *actual* villain.”

“What are you going to say to your True Love, when she finds out you did this?”

“I don’t have a True Love!”

“Everyone has one.”

“I don’t. I don’t even *want* one. I just want to go home.” Wherever that was. The ancestral Green Dragon estate had been destroyed years before and everywhere else was unimportant. “I will rip through you, my fictitious True Love, and every single organism in the Four Kingdoms, if that’s what it takes to escape.”

Marrok watched him in stubborn silence.

Since they were supposed to be friends, Trevelyan decided to allow him one last chance to show some loyalty. He hadn't given Marrok all the details of why he needed to escape *tonight*, but why should he have to? The man should just do what he was told, goddammit.

"I *need* to get out." Trevelyan couldn't put it any plainer than that. They'd been arguing about this for two days and now it was the end of the line. "The best way I can think to do that is to blow a hole in the side of this prison and walk away amid the confusion." There wasn't time for a better plan and no one else in the WUB Club seemed capable of lending a hand.

(Why was Trevelyan *forever* surrounded by morons? Where did the smart beings hide? Had he killed them all, already?)

"People will *die* if you do this."

"I don't fucking care!" Trevelyan roared, pushed to his brink. Inside of him, the dragon was pacing, too, in agitation and impotent rage. The lack of support from their ally bothered the monster, as much as it bothered Trevelyan. The dragon was the truest part of him and it was locked away, unable to surface with the magic inhibitor on his leg. That smoldering frustration drove his ire to even greater heights. "You need to have my back, the way I've had yours. ...Or else."

Marrok slowly blinked. "Or else *what*?"

"If you screw me over, I will make sure you regret it." Trevelyan stabbed a finger at him. "I've played fair with you, so far. That can change."

The wolf's head tipped to one side, like he sensed the atmosphere in the room shifting.

Trevelyan watched him with glowing green eyes. “If you’re not with me, then you’re against me. Countless others have learned that I am a real Bad enemy to have.”

“I guess I’ll learn it, too.” Marrok’s foot still swung with casual, animalistic grace, but his gaze had gone cold. “Because, I’m not doing jackshit for you.”

Trevelyan saw red. The wolf was trying to kill him. It was the only rational explanation. “You miserable little *fuck*. You think you can betray me and I’ll just let it pass?”

“I think you’re out of your mind!” Marrok snapped back. “I’m not betraying you! This plan is terrible and you’re acting crazy. I’m not going to blow up this prison *with us still inside of it*.”

“I will make sure we get out! I *told* you that!”

“You *can’t* be sure and we both know it.”

“I will be dead or free. I’m sure of *that*.”

“What about everybody else? I won’t let you kill a hundred people, just because you want to go home early!”

Trevelyan’s restless anger and agitation reached a breaking point. He stalked across the small interior of the cell and hauled Marrok right off the bed. “How about if I just kill you, then?” He tossed the wolf up against the wall, prepared to slaughter him with his bare hands.

Marrok shoved him back. “You wanna fucking do this? Fine! We can fight it out.” He lifted his arms in a mocking shrug, his expression aglow with self-satisfaction and fury. “But, no matter which of us wins, *you’ll* lose.” He leaned in closer, an infuriating smirk on his face. “Because there

isn't a damn thing you can do to make me help you. ...And you know it, asshole."

Trevelyan hit him. What choice did he have?

It was hard to say which of them would've eventually won the fight, since physically they were evenly matched. But alarms went off after a few minutes and dwarf guards rushed in to pull them apart. Marrok's face was bruised and bleeding, as they wrenched Trevelyan off of him. Trevelyan imagined he looked much the same, but he was too enraged to feel any damage.

"I will take away everything you ever loved!" Trevelyan shouted, as they dragged him from the room. Betrayal burned at him, blocking out everything else. Marrok had been his friend. It went against his nature to trust, but Trevelyan had trusted him. The man's treachery burned like acid. "I will leave you with *nothing*, you bastard!"

"I could threaten the same damn thing, except you don't love anything!" Marrok bellowed back. "No one even likes you! You're an evil fucking monster!"

"Who you just betrayed!" Trevelyan grabbed onto the doorway to pin him with a venomous look. "What do you think is going to happen, when I get out of here, wolf? What do you think I'm going to do to you, if I survive?"

Marrok had enough sense to look wary at that threat.

The dwarf guards finally pried Trevelyan away from the door and hustled him down the hallway.

"Time for a one-on-one with Dr. Ramona." One of them muttered, standing back from Trevelyan in respectful fear. As if Trevelyan didn't have

bigger problems than slaughtering some prison lackey. “You know she always wants to talk to inmates who can’t get along with their cellmates. Make sure you two don’t kill each other during the night.”

Trevelyan wouldn’t be there during the night. Dead or free. There were no other options.

He blew out a calming breath, his mind racing. The bomb wouldn’t work. Marrok had ruined that plan. But today was Trevelyan’s birthday. Dragons were strongest on their birthdays. He might not have his magic in the WUB Club, but there was another way to win if he had the strength to endure it.

The idea was repellent. Dirty and disgusting and beneath him, but it was the only way. It made his skin crawl to even consider it, which is why he’d been *refusing* to consider it. Until now, when it was literally life or death. Now, there was no choice.

Trevelyan decided.

He ground his teeth together and blamed the wolf for what was about to happen. Marrok had caused all of this. One day, he’d pay. But for now, Trevelyan needed to survive until morning. That was all that mattered. *Him*.

Trevelyan was all that ever mattered to Trevelyan.

“Afterwards, I want to see Snow White.” Hate swelled within him, even as his resolve strengthened. He could do this. He was a dragon! He could do anything. And then he’d get revenge. “Tell her I’m in the mood for company.”

***Happily Ever Witch* by Cassandra Gannon**

Coming in 2024!