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Chiaroscuro

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by
Dylan Whitaker

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

Simon stood alone in the asphalt sea of the parking lot. Like a buoy in the still and dark Atlantic, he swayed only slightly with the wind, letting the myriad city scents it carried waft over him like an old, used blanket. It was precisely this feeling he had dreaded while on his journey to “the city that never sleeps,” a nickname he had found utterly inane from the night he had first heard Sinatra’s voice with that quintessential American vanity smooth the phrase over his tongue and perfect white teeth, to this very night now. It was *almost* cute back then, but like sugar and chocolate it had become commodified, oversold. Common. Just like the apartment buildings, much like the one Simon stood before now, once had a new world flair built off the backs of the old, they inevitably became mired in a film of modernity. Things just weren’t *made* anymore, they were fabricated, manufactured. Wrought iron fire-escapes, dull white AC generators, and the ungodly glow of cable television displayed symptoms of an underlying and pervasive sickness. There was a time when America was cute and quaint to Simon, but someone, or some people, somewhere at some time had cut the land up into many little slices, carried off to be enjoyed elsewhere. These people, whoever they are or were, proved themselves far more vampiric than Simon could ever claim to be. Mortals in their droves were far more dangerous than any immortal in solitude. Likely something to do with their constant fear of death—that was Simon’s theory. Yet, death was the very reason Simon found himself standing in front of a cheap Manhattan apartment.

He had been keeping track of a certain descendant of his throughout the years, when the sudden and inexplicable urge to see her in person had struck him one night. This was certainly odd on the face of it, but even more so considering Simon knew that this descendant, a sixth-great-grandniece of his, had taken residence in Manhattan, and Simon’s distaste for cities and infinitely greater preference for forests was apparent even to his most indirect servants. Yet here he stood, amidst the

so-called “concrete jungle” (a particularly amusing term), smelling death, among other things, on the air. If taking his time, Simon could focus his nose to a pinpoint miles away, but for now, it worked like a spotlight, washing over the walls of the apartment building until he caught something he hadn’t smelled in a very, very long time. Chiaroscuro. Dark and indolic, yet light and minty, the image of the Camphor trees’ canopy like a series of white-hot veins pulsing against the sky flashed in Simon’s mind. He had few memories left of the daytime, and only the scent of Chiaroscuro—that elusive perfume that hid the fragrance of Camphor deep in jasmine and myrtle—could bring the dwindling survivors out into the open. They had been picked off, one by one, as Simon’s dark unlife grew in breadth and experience; starting with his first taste of strawberries in June. While he did not maintain the memory itself, he could recall with perfect inhuman clarity the moment he had realized something was missing. The blushing cheeks of a newly-wed bride as she lay still against the grass, and the rush of wind in the trees, echoed something familiar: A tiny hand grasping in its palm another thing, small and red and sweet. Such was the power of Chiaroscuro, to dredge up the sediment of an ancient mind. But there was another, greater power standing at its side: a name.

Claudia.

And it was, upon Claudia’s soft and supple neck, that Chiaroscuro transformed; shifted to blossoms and a warm autumn breeze, and that is the scent Simon caught amongst the cooling concrete and tar around him.

There was a single spot of light amidst the darkened windows of the apartment, its source a dim lamp likely on the other side of the room within. Taking the whole mess into account, and briefly closing one eye and blurring it, Simon imagined the face of the apartment as the terrible visage of Polyphemus: A single bright eye amongst dark, mangled scars and a mouth readily swallowing humans

whole. Swiftly, Simon made his way up to the window, a feat of speed, strength and agility that would amaze mortal passers-by, if there were any. Cautiously raising his head above the windowsill, Simon peered into the room, and cast his eyes on the bed first. Beige covers bulged with the mass of someone underneath, topped with a mat of gray hair resting on yellowed pillows, but what caught Simon's eye was the small, dark brown bottle on the nightstand. With nearly three centuries of experience getting into places that humans didn't want him in, Simon could make short work of the window's lock. Only, something about this night made him feel like going through the front door, for a change. He glided back down the way he came, and strolled slowly and casually in his best impression of a mortal up to the front door of the apartment. Through the filth-speckled glass doors, Simon could see a man in a gray uniform hunched over his desk, illuminated only by the single fluorescent bulb in the center of the lobby. He had his phone in both hands, thumbs tapping away rapidly, before he threw them up suddenly, letting the device clatter on his desk. As he rubbed his eyes, Simon tapped on the glass, and the guard jumped and looked at him. Simon waved and beckoned him over, making sure to keep their eyes locked together. That was the secret about mortals, you have to keep their eyes firmly on yours, or they'll notice what's different about them and bolt like rabbits. Simon could tell this one in particular was a little flighty, but even the most wary moths still wander to the flame.

As the man made his way over, his eyes glazed, he said "You know, I can't let you in, sir. You can come back earlier tomorrow, though."

"I'm here to visit my grandmother. She's very sick, and lonely. I know it's late, but...can't you make an exception?"

"Well, it's just that we've got a protocol here, and you gotta sign in, and if they see I let someone in then I could get in trouble."

“You won’t get in trouble. I’ll speak to your supervisor tomorrow, and clear it all up. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

Simon could see beads of sweat going down the man’s face, as he licked his lips and gulped.

“You...you promise?”

Simon smiled. “Of course. I promise.”

“Okay...”

He produced a set of keys from his pocket, unlocked the door, and opened it. As he walked in, the guard kept staring at him, mouth slightly open. Simon could take him here and now if he wanted, but the city stench had a way of working into the blood, and Simon was not nearly desperate enough to resort to that.

“Why don’t you go back to your desk? Catch some sleep.”

“Yeah...” the guard mumbled, and he shuffled over back to his seat, and promptly nodded off.

Simon made his way up the stairs, to the top floor. As he went through the cramped, littered halls, he could hear every little thing happening through each door, down to the rats and roaches skittering through the walls. This was no place for children, but he heard plenty of them. They breathed as they slept in a certain carefree but almost brutish way that seemed to be lost in adulthood, and Simon wondered at what traumas would befall them to put that in motion. There had to be no shortage of them here. When Simon reached the door he could smell the most of Chiaroscuro through, he was surprised to find it unlocked. As he walked in and shut the door behind him, all the sounds of nighttime Manhattan seemed to cease in one moment, as if he had sealed himself in his coffin for the day. The only noise was this low, rasped breathing coming from the mass under the bed, entwined with the murmur of some kitschy movie on the television. The room was small, as to be

expected, and positively filled with junk. Objects of note included faux tiger-skin slippers that, when placed together, made the phrase “Bite Me,” a matte white glass pipe, a grinder made to resemble a chocolate chip cookie, and finally a shotgun under the bed, which Simon only noticed because he could smell the gunpowder. But—Chiaroscuro was here. He could smell it stronger and stronger the closer he stepped to that little brown bottle; its effect on his body was astounding, rivaled only by the rush of fresh blood down his throat. Simon reached out with a shaking hand to grasp the bottle, and pull it close. Nearly tearing the cap off, he breathed deep of the bottle’s aroma, again the flash of canopy coursing through his mind, and he let out a small groan. Composing himself, Simon knew that the real perfume he came for, the one he had so briefly caught outside, required another ingredient. He hoped that the generations of outbreeding had not somehow muted Claudia’s scent with the essences of others among her descendants, and that for the first time in nearly two centuries, Simon could have the slightest, fleeting morsel of Claudia back with him. He plugged the bottle’s mouth with a finger, and turned it upside-down briefly, and back up again when his finger was wet with perfume. Simon then parted a gap in the mop of hair, and ran his finger along the woman’s neck, which was velvety and wrinkled from age. He bent over her, mouth and nose mere centimeters above the flesh of her neck, and basked in the flower blossoms and autumn breezes that issued forth. Yet, in that same instant, Simon looked up into the old woman’s face, and saw that a single eye had cracked open.

* * *

“Simon! Simon!”

He opened his eyes, and was greeted with the playful yet unsubtly impatient face of his sister, peering out from over her eyeglasses.

“I can’t have you half-dead when we meet His Highness. You know Father would be terribly embarrassed,” she said, with a light poke to Simon’s chest, after which she turned on her heel and sat down on the velvet bench in front of the vanity.

Each piece of furniture in the room, from the vanity and its paired velvet bench to the matching silk curtains and bedspread, was hand-picked to go overseas with the two siblings, all for the effect of a faux hotel parlor; the likes of which Simon and Claudia had grown accustomed to. However, Claudia wasn’t looking in the mirror to do her makeup or to fix her hair or apply a perfume, all that had been diligently taken care of already. She was hunched over, pencil in hand, developing a sketch of a strange canopy she had seen in a woodcut. A canopy that she knew was here, in Sarawak. Simon himself was seated on an imported-leather bench against the wall, with his feet up on a footstool and his hands folded over his belly, a position that his sister had incessantly warned him about for its effects upon weary travelers who had pressing business to attend.

“I was just resting my eyes,” he said. “I’ll be perfectly awake for the Rajah. You really think he won’t understand that we’ve traveled a long way, and might be tired?”

“It’s not about the Rajah, Simon.” She looked at him again with that same look, glasses slipping off the bridge of her nose. “It’s *always* about Father. You know that if it were up to me I’d let you rest...while *I* have all the fun.”

Simon laughed lightly as he rose, taking his time to peer out of the make-shift parlor window. This was a much less developed country than Simon had been accustomed to, with its dirt roads and wooden shacks, coupled with towering palms. It was almost alien to him. But Simon and Claudia had a

great interest in travel, funded by their father's connections to the English East India Company, and His Highness The Rajah of Sarawak James Brooke—patriarch of the newborn reign of “White Rajahs”—both of which were relationships that Simon was fully expected to keep profitable in his father's inevitable absence. There were more reasons for the approval of this trip other than beneficent Father spoiling his darling children, it seemed, and Simon for his part was mostly satisfied with the arrangement. Yet, there was that gnawing little feeling, a trifling torment nesting itself in Simon's chest that flailed for some semblance of sovereignty. It called him a dog on a leash, a pitiful thrall. What was it, exactly, that made him any better than the countless laborers that served up his allowance of luxury? Yes, he had been pampered, coddled, educated, but there was no control. Simon demanded mastery. He, and Claudia for that matter, deserved so much more than to kiss the ring of some strange king at the behest of a man too busy or too old to do it himself.

All in due time, Simon would say to calm himself, *All in due time*.

In fact, he continued chanting this mantra even while on the boat to the Rajah's house, occasionally interrupted by spurts of comments from Claudia.

“Oh, do you think the Camphors are tall, like that? I hope to see them by today.”

“Look at that! Look! I've got to know what bird that was!”

“This is His Highness's house? You cannot mean to tell me that *our* lodgings are larger than the Rajah's?”

She was right. The Rajah's house was much smaller than either sibling had expected, just enough for the dwelling of three to four residents. The servants' quarters, for the few that there were, was almost the same size. The villa in which Simon and Claudia stayed could easily encompass the house and the servants' quarters, maybe even the little hill they both occupied. To get there, the pair

had taken a double-decked boat, which carried many other passengers, whose business did not necessarily relate at all to the Rajah or his estate. Many, it seemed, were simply hitching a ride from the markets back to their farmsteads, which happened to be not too far from the house. Sarawak was an ever more curious place to Simon, a land with royalty, yet very little pomp seemed to be made about it. Even the king himself would live in a small house on a hill. After gathering themselves at the front door, somehow even more minimalist in presentation, it slowly opened. Simon raised his eyebrows, and Claudia inhaled a sharp breath, as they were greeted with a starkly different interior than the exterior suggested. It was as if they had been transported hundreds of miles back across the sea, to the heart of a proper English manor, only miniaturized. They were relieved of their outerwear (which politeness demanded they wear despite the weather), and guided to a cozy, albeit stuffy and strangely dark study, because the windows had been shut and locked, with thick black velvet curtains pulled over them. The darkness seemed to highlight something stark and white in the corner of the room: a bust of Octavian, which Simon thought fitting for the private chamber of a king. In the center of the room, sat upon a large button-tufted leather chair, was a thin, dark-haired man, whose face was centered between the frames of two long sideburns. His dress was simple: A black jacket over a white shirt, with a navy blue cravat hanging loosely about his neck, and gray trousers.

Upon seeing the pair, he rose and said, "Ah! The children of my esteemed friend, at last!"

He greeted Claudia first, gently taking her hand in his own and bringing it to his lips. Then, as he turned to Simon, the light smile upon his face died, and he approached with a heavy stride. In the mere moments it took, Simon wondered what it was he could have possibly done to offend the Rajah, as he had only just arrived. Was his mere presence so rude to him, that he would really walk right up

and smack him across the face, in front of Claudia no less? All these thoughts were dashed as the Rajah took Simon in his arms in a firm embrace.

Simon felt the Rajah's breath on his ear as he softly whispered, "Good to finally get my hands on you, my boy."

Still holding him at the waist, the Rajah took a few moments to peer into his eyes and study his face. Simon cleared his throat, and in that moment, the Rajah appeared to snap out of a trance. He released Simon from his grip, and clapped his hands together.

"Well! You two must be positively famished from the journey here. Allow me to fetch you some hors d'oeuvres!"

What was brought to the table was not the ordinary tourist fare that Simon and Claudia had for breakfast that morning, but instead an assortment of local dishes that the Rajah took his time to introduce and explain as the siblings wore their uncertainty upon their faces openly. The dish that contorted their faces the most was one known as *ambuyat*, which the Rajah described as a starchy substance extracted from the sago palm, that was not too dissimilar to tapioca in texture and taste. The traditional way (and therefore the *only* way, the Rajah joked) was to use a special utensil called *chandas*, which was essentially a pair of prongs fashioned from a bamboo stalk split down the middle.

"You take the *chandas* like so, then you roll the *ambuyat* onto it...yes, like that...and now plunge into the dip!"

Given the relatively flavorless nature of *ambuyat*, it was typically prepared with one or more dipping sauces to enhance the flavor and nutrition. At this table, there was only *sambal tempoyak* which was made with shrimp, lime, garlic, onions, shallots, scallions, a dash of palm sugar and a lively

dose of various chilis; but one other ingredient was far more unique to the region: the fermented flesh of the native durian fruit.

It was this particular ingredient that had Simon nearly gagging, while Claudia went for a second helping. Almost immediately, Simon grabbed his napkin and spit out the contents of his mouth, coughing as he did. He had unknowingly made the mistake of chewing the starch, which allowed it to work itself into the nooks and crannies of his teeth, prolonging the durian's presence on his tongue. It called to mind the miasma of soiled bandages and the buckets of vomit that went in and out of Mother's room, that last winter he had seen her.

The Rajah laughed heartily, pushing a pitcher of water in Simon's direction.

"Well, it is an acquired taste. Your sister seems to have a liking for it!"

"I do, sir. It reminds me of...roasted almonds? It has a very unique flavor...and aroma..."

Claudia mused with uncertainty.

"Ha! Yes, I imagine it could cause some trouble if it ever got out of Borneo. The local children here find it an amusing prank to smear it on your bedsheets when you aren't looking. That one got me for quite some time before I finally broke down and tried the stuff."

The three chatted for some time before the half-finished dishes were carried out, and the Rajah asked, "Have you read the literature of Jane Austen?" with his eyes fixed on Simon.

"I have," replied Claudia.

"But Simon? You have not?"

"No sir, I cannot say that I have."

"Well, then I would be a most embarrassing host if I did not introduce you!" he nearly shouted, and rose towards the vast bookshelves that surrounded the room.

After a few moments of hunched murmuring and the soft stroke of his finger along the book spines, the Rajah let out a single *abh* and promptly returned to his seat. In his hands was a small, orange colored volume, which neither sibling could read from across the table or within the darkness of the study. As if remembering something, the Rajah reached for a small ornate matchbox at his side and struck a match, lighting a single fresh taper candle on the small table adjacent to his reading chair. Simon and Claudia looked at each other with a hint of pain in their eyes as the Rajah cleared his throat and began to read. As the Rajah's narration spiraled on, a strange anxious energy built up in Simon's chest, flaring up in brief moments of daydreaming about what could possibly be happening outside of the stuffy walls of the study. Only the gradual reduction of the candle gave Simon a clue as to how long he and his sister had been sitting there listening, and its length suggested that a few hours had gone by. Simon mustered up the courage to speak, and said "I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, sir, but Claudia and I were hoping to see some of the natural beauty of your kingdom while there was still sunlight, and—"

"Oh my dear boy, you're in the tropics, not London! There is always daytime to spare, and I insist you stay. Neither the island nor its beauty is going anywhere, I assure you."

That gnawing feeling came back again, sinking its teeth into Simon's chest, spurring him as if a little voice was saying *Go on, do it! Show the old man!*

"I'm afraid that *I* must insist, sir." Claudia nearly pierced Simon through the eyes with her glare as he pressed on. "My sister and I are very grateful for you hosting our time here, but I must be entirely honest when I say that we did not come to Borneo to have Jane Austen novels read to us—although I will say that her prose and your narration were both very...satisfying."

Looking immediately to his right, Simon could see Claudia wringing her wrists and pressing the joints of her fingers until they popped. The room was so silent for moments after he had finished

speaking that the clock and Claudia's fingers took turns filling that silence with little ticks and pops, one after the other. For a few seconds as the Rajah inhaled and closed the book with some force, Simon thought he had made some terrible mistake that would send them both home early in disgrace.

"I see," said the Rajah, who simply looked off to his left without facing either sibling. "I'm not one to keep guests who feel they have overstayed their welcome, although that is certainly not the case. Please, take your leave. Enjoy Sarawak."

Simon rose, took a small bow, and promptly walked out of the room before noticing that Claudia had not come with him. He turned an ear to the closed door of the study and heard her voice from within, but could not discern her words save for the phrase "petulant child" at which point Simon stepped outside and waited for an amount of time he could not guess, although he knew it wasn't long. Eventually, the door swung open, and Claudia's quickened steps went past him as though he were part of the scenery, and he matched her pace.

"What did you say about me? I know you dreaded being in that room as much as I did!"

"Sometimes I swear you must have eyes that face inwards, Simon."

"And whatever is that supposed to mean?"

She stopped and turned on her heel suddenly, facing Simon directly with a furious scowl.

"It means you're not the only one with a reputation! We are only here because of Father's relationship to the Rajah, and you want to spoil everything just because you cannot sit and listen for a few hours like a schoolboy! At least he was kind enough to tell me where the Camphors are, no thanks to you."

During the boat ride and subsequent hike to the protected grove the Camphors called home, Simon stewed over what he had said. He had every right to cut the Rajah off, they were his guests after

all, and everyone should know the guest is God, especially a king. According to Claudia, God would have to eat sticky rotten fruit and listen to you blather on about some woman author you love.

Thinking about the slop he had somehow allowed to touch his tongue, Simon kept thinking to himself: *How could anyone put something like that in their mouth?*

Unbeknownst to anyone who happened to be traveling with them, the siblings were firmly locked in a silent sparring match. Neither would speak, as the first to break the seal would be forced to concede and apologize; for the silence was built on a foundation of anger, and to breach that silence was to display that one's anger was lesser than the other's, and therefore admit that their reason for outrage was less righteous. All the while they gave each other sideways glances, deep chest-heaving sighs, and—in the sparse moments in which one of them did speak to another person, or did anything other than engage in their own personal brand of rage-driven mutism—the smack of lips or the click of a tongue. Each of these sounds made by one sibling had no truly discernible meaning to the other, and this was in and of itself their meaning. It was the barest form of communication possible to spring the trap, to goad the other into saying the fateful phrase: “What is it?”

This strategy worked only rarely, as all but a handful of Simon and Claudia's arguments simply faded away after the next day, never to be seen or heard from again, and neither sibling could tell you where they had gone off to—but they were never far. Neither were Simon and Claudia very far from each other very often, for that matter. They went nearly everywhere together, and received many comments from strangers who mistook them for a young couple—already married or about to be—which caused both of them some embarrassment, which they hid well.

Later in the afternoon, they finally arrived at the grove. It was a space deliberately tucked away in a defensible position, likely to keep away pirates or rebels. The visible presence of walls, cannons, and

men armed with swords and rifles reminded the pair of how the Rajah's power was maintained here. Simon and Claudia had received a few vague explanations on the political climate of Borneo by their father before they had set off. They were aware that the Rajah had been given the land and sovereignty by his predecessor, but many of the people living here consented to no such thing. After negotiations between the White Rajah and the Iban Dayak people had soured, and the encroachment of the white man continued, conditions gave way to what many called the Headhunters—Iban tribespeople who adhered to the practice of ritualistic decapitation begot by their ancestors. The siblings had been assured of their safety here, as long as they stayed close to the heart of the Rajah's territory. Claudia did not allow the threat of conflict or her impatient brother to ruin the very reason she had wanted to come to Borneo in the first place. Simon noted her near immediate change in demeanor as they neared the grove, and the emerald tops of the camphors came into view. It was as if he wasn't even there, an ephemeral thing finally cast off at the sight of something even remotely more pleasant. It was almost enough to make him say something. As Claudia hurried on, her eyes glued skyward, she stopped abruptly and put a hand over her mouth. Simon looked at her for a moment before looking upwards himself, and his eyes widened in awe. The scene before them truly put the woodcut back in London to shame. It was as if they had been encased in some massive, membranous egg with glowing-white veins and flesh the color of jungle, a lush chamber of warm, wet air and distant chirping. Claudia spared little time, and found a tree with a nice comfortable nook in its trunk to start her sketching. Simon kept his legs straight and his neck bent, barely able to peel his eyes away from the canopy, with the only distraction being the occasional scratching of pencil on paper, and the hint of Claudia's voice as she blew graphite off the page. Eventually his legs and neck grew tired, and so he spread out his jacket on the forest floor, and lay on it. He stared at Claudia while she sketched vigorously, occasionally flicking

her eyes up at the trees. It seemed to him that he merely blinked and the world turned to gold while Claudia remained the same. An amber ray of sunlight illuminated his sister's face, utterly transfixed on the page. Just the bare edge of her name nearly escaped Simon's lips, but he stopped himself, and instead rose to his feet, put his jacket back on, and stared at her. Eventually, she noticed the shadow looming over her work, and she looked up at him briefly, before noticing how far the sun had fallen. As it continued its descent to illuminate the rest of the world, they made their way back to the hotel, where the mutual silence met no end. As Claudia walked ahead of him, and they reached the lights of the village, Simon noticed some strange substance smeared on the back of Claudia's dress, a web of something clear and sticky, but he said nothing. When they retired in the parlor, he could smell it. Minty and fresh, it wasn't unpleasant by any means, but Simon was starting to hate being in the hotel almost as much as he had hated being in that musty study, and it welled up and throbbed in his chest, wanting to burst out.

"I'm going out. I don't expect to be back very late, but don't wait on me."

Claudia looked at him for a moment, nodded, and returned to her sketchpad. Stepping out of the door, as the gleam of the full moon took center stage in the clear night sky, Simon felt some small peace come over him. He would have a calm nighttime stroll, return by the time Claudia would likely be finished with supper, and promptly go to bed, as he wasn't feeling hungry. But first, he had to decide which direction to go. There wasn't much choice to be had, as either the left or right both went deeper into the neighborhood of longhouses that surrounded them, eventually becoming sparser with growing amounts of vegetation, until they finally gave way to the full, dark jungle. Simon looked to his feet and spotted a flat little rock, one side light with dust from the comings and goings of the day-to-day, and the other dark and clean, hidden from the countless feet and hooves and wheels. He

picked it up and flipped it, as he would a coin, and caught it in his hand, before placing it on the back of the other. Moving his hand away, it revealed the dark side, and considering it for a moment, Simon felt that this side meant “left.” And it was left he went, with the moon lighting the path before him. As he walked, he took moments here and there to listen to the chirp of insects and the strange calls of distant jungle-dwelling beasts, the nature of which he had some entertainment in guessing. He recalled that the word “orangutan” was of Malay origin, meaning something like “man of the wood,” and that Borneo hosted its very own species of orangutans. Maybe tomorrow, he could take Claudia somewhere where they were common, and she would forgive him for what he had done at the Rajah’s house.

It was in the middle of this thought, as Simon came upon an incline in the road, that he saw something at the top of the hill. Loomed over by the brimming moon, stood a naked statue of nearly incandescent white marble. It depicted a man, holding his right arm slightly aloft, with his index finger pointed outward as if gesturing authoritatively to a crowd of people that was not there; while his left arm and leg were both bent and held slightly back, as if he were frozen in place while walking. Simon inched forward, wondering to himself how such a thing, obviously made with exquisite craftsmanship, could end up in the middle of the road in a Sarawak village. The only thing that resembled anything similar to it was the bust of Octavian that Simon had seen in the Rajah’s study, and as Simon got closer to the statue, it seemed to resemble that bust more and more, as if the rest of its body had been somehow concealed when he had seen it earlier. Eventually, Simon and the statue stood face to face, and he scanned the thing up and down. It was clearly carved of marble, and the detail was astonishing. Getting even closer, he could make out dark veins beneath the surface, and tendons flexed under the skin like taut ropes. He looked at the statue’s feet, and realized that it had no foundation on which it was standing. Whoever had taken it had deliberately placed it here, having somehow balanced the thing

on its feet. It was probably the most curious thing that Simon had ever seen, and he observed the strange, silent orator for a while longer before continuing his way down the road. Even then, his eyes were so glued to its alabaster majesty that he walked backwards down the hill to keep it in view. As he shuffled, Simon felt something catch on his heel, and was sent tumbling down the hill before he managed to stop himself at the bottom. After getting up and dusting himself off, he checked the road to see what had tripped him, and recognized a foot-sized divot in the earth as the culprit. He let out a breath of agitated air, and trailed his eyes back up the hill, expecting to rest them on the statue once again. But it was gone. Simon's mouth went dry. He ran up the hill to see if it had fallen, but after having spun around in every direction, he could not find it. There was no commotion of someone or some group coming by to snatch it away, and if there were, it couldn't possibly have been enough time for them to lift it and run while Simon had his fall. Simon stood there in the same spot where the statue had once been for uncounted moments, trying to find some explanation for how it could have been there in one moment and gone in another. For a long while, he stood there listening to the sound of his own breath and the cadence of his heartbeat just underneath, before realizing that was the only sound he could hear. The insects were silent. No night birds played their songs. Even the wind had seemed to cease, stuffing the very air with muffling cotton. Simon felt very strongly that it was time to return to the hotel, and turned back the way he came, until his heart sank into his stomach at what he saw. The statue was standing there, below the hill, just as it had been at the top of the hill on which Simon now stood.

This was some elaborate prank. He remembered the Rajah mentioning that local children liked to play practical jokes, and perhaps his Highness had picked up that habit just as he had learned to love

the durian. Maybe this was some form of comeuppance for Simon's rude behavior earlier today.

Certainly, Simon was completely safe.

"I understand," Simon called out, making sure to chuckle in spite of his nerves. "I've been had!

Why don't we put this behind us over supper?"

Nothing. The deafening silence of the village was lifted only briefly with Simon's voice, but as his shouts echoed off the roofs and trees and died alone somewhere in the dark, the dead air only seemed to come back stronger than before. Simon took a deep breath. Something inside him was shouting with twice the volume and desperation to run. Now. He turned quickly, and at first only walked at a quicker pace, but as he reached the other side of the hill, his legs began to run. Simon's mind raced with the possibilities: where to go, when to stop, what could possibly be going on. Looking left, he realized he had a much better chance of losing whoever it was behind this unnerving scheme within the maze of huts and longhouses of the village. Turning sharply, he made sure to keep track of where the hotel was while he zig-zagged his way through the narrow wooden alleys. He winded past house after house until his sides ached and his body yearned for breath, and he gradually slowed down. Leaning against the back of a hut, he looked up to see the moon hanging over him as a single dark cloud passed over it and the night grew darker. Feeling like he shouldn't remain in one place too long, he rounded the corner, and only caught a glimpse of a stark white hand before the world went black.

Simon awoke on his back, gasping for air. He got up as quickly as his body allowed, and looked around wildly to figure out where he was, how he had gotten here, and who had taken him. Looking once more into the sky, he saw something strikingly familiar: a canopy, now like black and bespeckled veins running through dark green flesh.

"Simon," a chill voice echoed through the air.

“Who...Who are you? What do you want?” Simon could barely contain the wild fear that blazed in his chest.

“Be not afraid. I offer a gift.” The voice trailed for a moment, before resuming somewhere else.

“Look here.”

Simon whipped his head around to see the statue, once again standing perfectly still as it did every time he had seen it, but now amongst the tall, dark camphors.

“A gift? What gift? Of what kind?”

The cold voice, which lacked any cadence, projected from the statue.

“Everything that I know you want. To feed that which gnaws at your heart when you prostrate yourself before lesser men. I offer life unending, so that which you build shall never crumble, and power unmatched to rend any and all that dares to stay your path.”

“Who *are* you? Are you...the Devil?”

There was a moment of silence after Simon had spoken, but the voice spoke again suddenly.

“And what answer to such a question would satisfy you? If I say no, then the Devil lies, as the Devil does. If I say yes—then what does that make me?”

Simon remained silent. He had no answer to that question, much less to the innumerable questions that flooded his mind as he stood before a talking statue. His only real thought was that he must have lost his mind. He ate some rotten durian and it infected his brain. Coming here with Claudia was a mistake.

“Calm yourself. Your mind is intact. Accept my gift, or do not.”

“How do you know what I’m thinking, what I’m feeling?”

“Accept, and all secrets will be revealed. None shall conceal their hearts from you.”

Simon was convinced that he had truly gone mad. There was actually a part of him, that gnawing little trifling feeling, that wanted this gift if the statue did not lie, and it was growing. What if this is what he needed? What if this is how he could break the collar set on his neck by his father? He could gamble, make the greatest risk he had ever made in his entire life, and that could be how his empire begins. Or, he would die. Either option felt better than simply walking away, and accepting the insipid seat that was ready and warmed-up for him. At least it would be his choice.

“Yes.”

“No, *say it*,” the voice shot back, this time with almost a hint of venom.

“I...I accept your gift.”

In one single, fluid motion, the statue dropped its pose and strided over to Simon with impossible speed, before bending down mere inches away from his face. Simon finally understood that this statue had been no statue at all, not even when he had observed its surface so carefully, or so he had thought. This statue was in fact a man, a man with skin like pale marble, and perhaps just as hard, cold, and inveterate. All but the face, that was true marble, and in the exact image of Gaius Augustus, the very progenitor of the Roman Empire. A marble mask to conceal a marble face underneath, it was curious enough to almost make Simon laugh, but all thoughts ceased when he saw the lids through the mask open, and reveal two gleaming orbs the color of gold. At this moment, a strange call began to trail through the camphors, some bird that did not heed the warning that caused every other living thing to stay perfectly silent. It was brief, but consistent. A clean, light sound that never warbled or croaked and remained sheer and concise. Locked in the man’s golden gaze, Simon could see only in his periphery as the man raised his right hand, and with a finger on his left, somehow lacerated his palm, causing black blood darker than the night around them to ooze forth. Then, Simon felt the buttons of his shirt being

undone, and the clothing parted to reveal his bare torso as it was kissed by the wind. He could feel the tip of the man's icy fingers come to rest at his side, just under the ribcage, and slowly press inwards. With a sudden thrust, Simon gasped as he felt the man's hand plunge into his flesh, and his entire forearm slithered its way through his body from within. The heat leached out of Simon's body as the arm, like a frigid serpent, set its jaws around his heart and pierced it. His vision darkened and tunneled as he was lowered down to the ground, and the man climbed on top of him. Slowly, the man brought his face to Simon's neck, and he heard a strange sound like something made of stone popping out of a socket, and he felt a sharp pressure clench down. He was now transfixed on only one single golden eye that had no end to its depth and color. The bird's call had changed now, added some small note at its beginning, and the space of time between each call gradually grew shorter and shorter as Simon's heart beat slower and slower. He could feel his life draining away and being replaced with something else. The wound in his heart and the cut on the man's hand kissed like lovers, and began their exchange as the darkness that encroached upon Simon's vision reached its climax.

Simon felt the tickle of a voice, soft in his ear, whispering, "The price of my gift shall be paid every night of your new life." The last thing he heard was a shrill, maniacal laugh, resounding from the very tips of the camphors.

When Simon opened his eyes, there was nothing but green. At first, he thought that he had opened his eyes facedown in the grass, or in a bush, but this was not the color of the jungle. It had a luster, an almost polished gleam like emerald or jade, a kind of refinement indicative of those precious, arbitrary things prized by humankind. Simon put his hands up to his eyes to try and feel whatever it was that obscured his sight, but he felt nothing other than the familiar slopes and hills of his face. He blinked once, and the green seemed to dim. He blinked again and rubbed his eyes, and eventually the

verdant curtain became transparent enough to see through. It was the camphors all around him again, Simon felt like he already spent an eternity in this grove, but something about it was different. He was perplexed to find that he could not quite tell if it was day or night. There was a haze around everything that seemed to both sharpen and obscure detail, and yet the colors of everything were far more vibrant and captivating than Simon could ever recall them being before, even through the green lens over his vision. For a long while, Simon simply looked around, taking in whatever it was that had changed in his eyes. At one point, the wind picked up and carried on it something rotting to the north and a kind of milky, musty smell to the east. Simon was fascinated that neither scent was really all that offensive to him, and so taking a deeper breath of air, Simon could feel almost the entire grove around him and the camphors blaze with a cool, clarifying scent almost like mint. He recalled smelling something like that somewhere before, but where?

“Claudia!”

From above, a voice said “In due time, my friend.”

Simon whipped his head in the voice’s direction, and saw the statue clinging to the trunk of a camphor with a single arm. He dropped down to the forest floor, making no noise on either his descent or his landing, and touched down perfectly upon both feet.

“Before, I asked who you are and you gave me rhetoric. So I must ask again, as you have promised me the answer to your secrets.”

Simon could hear the statue blow a sharp bit of air out of its nose before it replied.

“So, you don’t recognize me?”

It once again assumed the pose it had taken the night before.

Simon recognized the statue's game. All secrets were to be revealed, except this one. That, obviously, meant it was likely the most important secret of all, and Simon would find it out. But for now, he would play along.

"You're Octavian."

"Well, we *should* be on a first name basis...especially after what went on between us...don't you think, Simon?"

Octavian's sudden change in demeanor, and the appearance of a rather colorful inflection of the voice, surprised Simon.

Before he could reply, Octavian continued.

"This night has only just begun. The fruit bats come out only briefly at dusk before they go to rest again. They will be our prey, while they are at their most vulnerable."

Simon shook his head.

"Bats? You mean I am to eat...*bats*? Why?"

"Only for now. We can't start you off with anything bigger. It would be...dangerous."

"Dangerous! Are we hunting in the woods like savages now? Is this really what you promised me?"

A laugh erupted from Octavian's mask, one unlike any other that Simon had ever heard, and it reminded him of the mortal fear that had seized him only the night before.

"I understand how you feel, my friend. Come, walk with me, and all shall be revealed." As they stepped through the grove, Octavian explained.

"You have partaken of my Ichor, and in doing so I have made you immortal. Like the divine, you will not age or tire or fall ill. You will be capable of feats of such speed, strength, and agility that

only the armies of the greatest nations of the world would be a match for you. However,” Octavian stopped abruptly, faced Simon, and spoke with a grim tone, “you must never again step into the light of the sun. It is forbidden to us. And, to sustain yourself...you must consume the blood of the living. Animals may stave off your thirst for a time, but only the blood of mankind will be sufficient to extend your life...and your power. As I said, I understand your reluctance, but this is no mere mortal hunting. You have not hunted like *us* yet.”

Simon stopped suddenly.

“What *are* we? What have you made me accept?”

“I haven’t *made* you accept anything. You are now the ultimate predator, Simon.”

Faster than Simon could react, Octavian slashed Simon’s wrist with his long nails and he yelped, not out of pain, but surprise. As he stared at his lacerated wrist, blood black as pitch oozed forth...and he felt nothing. There was only a prickling sensation, as if his hand had merely fallen asleep. Simon’s eyes widened as he saw the wound begin to close, and eventually disappear, leaving behind only the traces of now coagulated black slime.

“Pain has no meaning, death has no meaning,” Octavian said, and he put two fingers against Simon’s chest as he went on. “Can’t you feel it? The thirst beckons to you, calling you to use that newfound power. Without that thirst, you would have nothing to push you to *do* more, to *be* more than you are. And without pain, without death—and therefore without fear—and the oldest, most powerful form of motivation at your side...you can do anything. So, *if* I made you accept something, it was only the greatest form of freedom that any mortal man could hope to have. Freedom is hunger, and hunger is freedom. Never forget that, Simon.”

Octavian was close enough that Simon could see his eyes just as clearly as the night of his transformation. Only, he was intrigued to find that his eyes were no longer that solid, gleaming gold color, but instead had irises like a clear day sky, but in place of black pupils, the gold had seemingly settled there, like strange jewels embedded into his stone face. As they continued through the forest, now certainly outside of the camphor grove, Simon struggled with how he should feel. Finding something to feel was its own struggle. From what he could assess there were motes of certain emotions like confusion, curiosity, perhaps even some excitement and fear, but they were strangely muted. It was like the indifference of a surgeon to the sight of his patient's innards. There was the study of a process, but none of the raw emotion, except for one thing: Hunger.

Over the course of their hike, Simon could hear the ever-growing roar of a waterfall. At last, they reached a large pool with a massive, water-wreathed cliff looming over it. Simon walked to the edges of the pool where the water was still, and saw his reflection. He was more pale than he recalled, and his features slightly more gaunt, but his eyes were the most striking. Like Octavian, his pupils had changed color, only his own took on that same emerald sheen that obscured his vision when he awoke.

"Our eyes, why do they change color?"

"That, I'm afraid, is a secret that I do not have a good answer for. I have my theories, of course. I believe it has something to do with one's inner character, the reason *why* they accepted immortality. I've seen many colors over my lifetime...there is likely no limit to which ones can manifest, just as there is no limit to the reasons why mortals reject their mortality." Octavian kneeled down beside Simon, peering at him with a single, blue-gold eye and gently running his hands through the clear water.

"Something to think about, while you wait out eternity."

Octavian continued saying something, but it trailed off as Simon peered at the waters of the pool. It was so clear, and cool to the touch, he had no doubt that this water was likely the most refreshing drink he could find for hundreds of miles. He dipped his face into the water, and began to drink. It went down his throat with ease, but the thirst still lingered, so he began to gulp down more and more. Then, Simon felt a sharp tug at the back of his head, and was suddenly pulled out of the water, with Octavian gripping his hair firmly and staring him in the eyes.

“Don’t. Water will do nothing for you, neither will any flesh, plant or animal alike. Your *only* sustenance must be blood from a living creature. You would drink this water until your stomach ruptures, and you would still be thirsty. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Simon replied, and Octavian released him. “Earlier, you said eating something bigger than a bat would be dangerous, but you also said that I cannot feel pain nor can I die, so where is the danger?”

“An astute question, but nothing I can say would explain it better than when you finally get a drink. Come.”

As Octavian led Simon closer to the waterfall, he was surprised at how eager he was, and how desperately he wanted to quench his thirst. Drinking the blood of a bat didn’t sound so terrible if it could rid him of this gnashing, yearning feeling that grew with each step he took. When they reached the cliff face, Octavian pointed out a gap between the falling waters and the cliff. After Simon leaned a little closer, he could make out a large opening in the wall, and little black shapes in clusters gently shuffling around within.

“We must climb to reach inside. You’ll find it much easier than it seems.”

Simon expected himself to be nervous or even frightened, but he wasn't. Octavian went ahead, but he didn't climb, instead he simply planted one foot on the cliff face, and then the other, and he was walking upon the wall completely parallel to the ground, as if gravity had flipped sideways, but for him alone. Simon, firmly planted on the earth, watched in awe.

Octavian turned to him and put a hand to his chest.

"Excuse me, I misspoke. *You* must climb, but it should still be easy for you."

Not knowing how to begin, Simon started by firmly planting both of his hands on the wall, and then put a foot on it. He hesitated for a moment, feeling sure that if he tried to place his other foot on the wall he would lose his balance, but he fought the feeling and committed. To his surprise, he stayed perfectly attached to the cliff. He looked up at Octavian, who beckoned him with a wave, and he began slowly crawling towards him. Eventually they reached the mouth of the cave, which now seemed like a massive hole in the ground, with massive sheets of water flowing above him. Simon peered inside, and marveled at the stalactites and the bunches of little soft things at their bases. Octavian transitioned onto the cave wall effortlessly, crouched down as he waited for Simon. There was still a lingering fear of falling within him, but he tentatively grasped the edge of the mouth, and slowly crawled over and into it.

"Good. I told you it would be easy."

But there was now something different about Octavian's voice, a slight haze at the edges, much like the one that lingered in Simon's vision.

"As you can hear, I am speaking at a volume so low that even these creatures, attuned to the dark like us, cannot hear it. This is the voice you will use when hunting with another, and speaking to them. It makes for a perfect test to tell if someone is an immortal or not, should

you be otherwise unable to. Now, look at that cluster of bats, there.” Octavian pointed at the nearest bunch. “I will throw something to startle them, and you’ll jump through the fray, catching as many as you can. You should be able to land on the other side of the cave.”

Octavian then broke some small piece of rock off the cave wall, looked at Simon as if to say *Ready?* and threw it. Immediately, the rock exploded upon contact with the stalactite, which itself had a decent chunk blown off, and the bats scattered. Instead of leaping immediately, Simon hesitated for a moment. It wasn’t out of fear or uncertainty, but rather he was mesmerized by what he was seeing. The bats didn’t seem to move like they were flying through the air, it was as if they were swimming in ethereal waters. Simon could see the myriad hairs of their bodies flowing up and down as they beat their wings, the membranes contouring with the air giving them lift, and the veins within pumping hot, warm blood. Without thinking, Simon leapt into the swarm, catching one in each hand and another in his mouth, and landed on the other side of the cave. They were the largest bats that Simon had ever seen, but their struggle was barely perceptible to him, not only because their strength paled in comparison to his own, but also because he had already begun to feed on the one that flapped vigorously in his jaws. Slowly, the blood filled his mouth, and he had never downed something more eagerly than the lifeblood of this bat. The more he drank, the more the cave took on that green luster from his eyes, and without realizing it, he let go of the bats in his hand. He could hear Octavian catching them as he leapt to the other side of the cave, and then laugh as Simon felt himself fall, and hit his head on the cave floor, by which time he could see and hear nothing but green.

“Get up, newborn.” He could hear Octavian say, as the green subsided at some point. “This is why I had you start with bats. Any more blood than that, especially human blood, and you would have been down until the sun came out.”

“I’m still thirsty,” Simon said, inflected almost like a question. He sat up from the floor, and felt something sticky on his head.

“Yes, you will be. You should keep feeding on these for tonight. Then, you will have new prey.”

For the rest of the night, Simon bounded off the cave walls, catching bats and drinking them dry, and each time the green washed over him a little weaker. Eventually, the green became just a pulse that surged at the edges of his vision, and was gone just as soon as it arrived. By that point, Simon could look out of the cave mouth through the flowing water, and see that the night had gotten lighter. He recalled Octavian saying that the sun was forbidden to him, and some part of him wanted to stay in the cave and wait out the night to see why exactly the sun was so forbidden. But another, greater part knew better.

“Thinking about me, Simon? How sweet of you.” Octavian said, suddenly appearing upon the cave wall. “I think it’s about time we called it a day, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it’s getting light out. I think the cave is deep enough. We could...sleep here?”

Octavian looked out of the cave mouth as he walked down the wall and onto the floor.

“It is quite scenic,” he said, turning to face Simon. “I have such a good eye for things like that. Find us a spot, would you?”

Simon explored deeper into the cave, which tapered sharply as it went on until he had to crouch in order to fit. Eventually he came across a hole in the wall, almost like a cubby, with some of the smaller survivors of Simon’s onslaught hiding within. He stuck a hand in and scattered them, before catching the runt of the bunch in his hand, stuffing it in his mouth and sucking on it until it was dry, spitting the remnants onto the floor. Simon turned to yell for Octavian, but he was already right behind him.

He kneeled down and inspected the space for a moment.

“This will do perfectly. After you.”

Simon crawled inside, and Octavian followed him. The cubby was just large enough to fit both of their bodies, tightly pressed against one another. Simon became acutely aware that Octavian was still naked, which surprised him that he hadn't really thought about it much until now. There was no part of him that was uncomfortable with the arrangement, but there was no part of him that was comfortable with it, either. Simon was once again faced with the stark, stone wall of his own indifference to things he knew he would have otherwise considered shameful and grotesque; but those feelings had clearly fled or been so greatly muffled that they were unrecognizable, along with the others. He remarked for a moment on how, just a day or so ago, he was eating human food, sleeping in downy beds, and walking about during the daytime. Now he was sleeping in caves, eating bats and avoiding the sun because his life, for all he knew, depended on it. And there was only a tinge of regret in him. If what Octavian said about their immortality was true, then he had plenty of time to live comfortably. For now, he was in his apprenticeship, and he meant for it to be a blink of the eye in his time on this earth. Eventually, Simon drifted off to sleep with these thoughts, and he dreamt. He was standing among the camphors again, beholding their canopy in the glory of the sun. Those trees just kept finding their way back to him, it seems, and he wanted to see something else. So he walked and walked in one direction for a long while, but when he looked up, he was still in the grove. When he looked down, he saw a pair of eyeglasses, broken and bloodied. He picked them up, and licked them clean. They tasted of bat blood.

“Simon,” a voice said somewhere.

He looked up and saw Claudia, standing there expressionless in front of him. Simon was about to say her name, when she opened her mouth and a great, big fruit bat flew out at him and screamed with her voice. Awaking with a start, he hit his head on the cubby's ceiling, rubbing the spot out of habit. Octavian was gone, which meant it must be nighttime, he guessed. Making his way out of the cave, he spotted a pure white figure submerged just under the surface of the pool, facing the night sky.

"Octavian?" Simon called.

He rose from the water in such a way that it only barely disturbed the surface, and walked out onto the edge of the pool.

"Good evening, my friend. Sleep well?"

"Yes," Simon lied.

Octavian cocked his head to the side for a moment, before reorienting it, turning around.

"Tonight we hunt new prey. I think you'll like it much better than bats, but not more than what comes *after*."

Simon thought of the possibilities. Birds? Reptiles? Were there deer in Borneo? He wished he had done more research into the fauna here before he came.

Octavian chuckled lightly.

"Keep guessing while we make our way there."

Of course, Octavian already knew where to go. Simon thought to himself, does it really count as hunting if you already know exactly where your prey is, and can overpower and outrun it, now matter how strong or fast, with ease? Did hunting not include some degree of sport? He contemplated whether or not he would hunt for entertainment, or keep it strictly practical, but eventually settled that he could not know, given how long he would supposedly live. Maybe at one point in time he

would, and in another he wouldn't. Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe nothing really did, with eternity ahead of you.

"Simon," Octavian said sternly, "don't distract yourself now. Look."

They were in the heart of raw, unchecked jungle, posted among the highest branches of some strong, thick tree they had found. Simon leaned a little forward, and saw a man. Except, this man had long mats of orange hair draped over his body and limbs; his arms came down to his knees, both of which were bowed, and he was eating leaves.

"An orangutan?" Simon asked.

"Orangutans," Octavian answered, and Simon looked again, but closer.

There was in fact more than one. At least three or four more, variously scattered about either eating or sleeping. One of them played with something small in its arms.

"Apply what you learned in the cave. Find an opening in the canopy, and leap from trunk to trunk, avoiding the branches. It will make too much noise."

Simon looked through the branches to find a space through which he could thread himself, turned to Octavian, and nodded. On Octavian's signal, they began their descent. Simon noticed that Octavian almost seemed to glide through the warm night air, only taking brief moments to step off a trunk before seamlessly floating to the next. Meanwhile, Simon had to cling to each trunk he leapt to with his hands, and was at least a few trees behind Octavian at all times. Eventually Octavian held onto a tree with a hand, waiting for Simon to catch up, but his amateur method caused enough commotion that when he got close, the nearest ape looked up and began rising from his seat. Immediately they sprang on them, Simon pinning down the nearest one, feeling its matted fur between his fingers as it thrashed and screamed underneath him. It punched, kicked, pulled, and even bit him, but none of its

strength, even enough to rip an arm from its socket, was enough to contest Simon's. He had a hand on its throat, but not being entirely sure of what to do, he began pressing down. As its breathing became more hoarse and labored, he heard a strangely familiar squealing. At first Simon thought it was some swine that Octavian had somehow produced, but when he turned to look, he could see him casually wrestling something small from the arms of another orangutan. Its grip failed quickly, and Octavian held the thing with one arm as the ape rushed at him, before he pushed its head into a tree and it slumped to the ground, blood dribbling from its mouth. Octavian cradled and rocked the thing in his arms, shushing and tutting at it as it tried to pry away his impossible grip. Simon watched as he slowly brought a hand up to the mouth of his mask, and somehow disconnected it from the rest to reveal his true mouth underneath, making that same stony popping sound that he had heard when Octavian transformed him. He dropped the piece of marble onto the ground, and Simon heard a sinewy, wet crack as Octavian's hands tensed around what he was holding, and held it up in the air, by a single leg. Little arms and a tiny head came limply drooping down, along with a steady stream of blood that fell into Octavian's mouth. Simon simply couldn't look away, and felt an unpleasant tingle on the back of his head as he grew thirstier watching the blood flow. Eventually it became so unbearable that he turned to the ape beneath him, who at this point had gone limp, but was still gargling air, and sank his teeth into its neck. The blood came swiftly, and the verdant wave came in force alongside it, but did not reach its climax as it had done in the cave. It tasted differently, sweeter than the bats, but more bitter at the end. When they were finished, Simon sat down against a tree and stared up into the sparkling tapestry of stars above him.

"Octavian...I need to see my sister."

Octavian stared at him for a while, and Simon stared back.

“In due time,” Octavian said.

“You said that before. How much time will be ‘due?’”

“It depends on how you react to what comes next. I hope you know where all of this has been leading.”

“What, the hunting? I am to consume human blood from this point on, yes? And only *then* can I see my sister? I don’t understand.”

“You *will* understand once the first drop of mortal blood touches your tongue. If you are unprepared when you see her again...you could kill her.”

Simon didn’t quite believe it, but given how animal blood affected him and how little he knew about being whatever he was, he had no choice but to trust Octavian.

“I’ll give you this,” Octavian said suddenly. “Seeing how you handled this prey, not yielding to the thirst...we shall begin tonight.”

Simon leapt up, saying “Let’s go, then. Lead the way.”

Octavian stood in place for a moment, before slowly turning and leaping away into the trees.

His voice trailed behind, saying, “Only if you can follow me like this!”

Simon sprang into action, and found trying to copy Octavian’s mode of travel to be far more difficult than the other skills he had learned. Eventually, he got enough practice to weave between the trees with some amount of grace, but it was evident that Octavian was still slowing himself down so he could catch up. After some time, Octavian stopped on a tree and slid down to its base into the bush below. Simon joined him.

Before them was a wide river, and across it, a small gathering of longhouses. In the center there was a fire, and around it were seated at least half a dozen or so men. Simon wondered, since they were

far from the Rajah's territory, if these were the Iban headhunters he had heard of. Given their reputation, he was not opposed to killing some.

"Make sure to keep control, Simon. They deserve what's coming to them, but you shouldn't give in. Not yet."

Simon nodded, and Octavian gestured to him to follow. They crept alongside the river, keeping close eyes on the men on the other side, until they reached an angle at the riverbank that placed a longhouse between them and the men, to cover their approach. Octavian slinked into the water, and disappeared under the surface. He emerged a few seconds later on the other side, and beckoned to Simon. Putting a foot in first, he slowly lowered himself into the water and held his breath as his head went under. Walking along the bottom of the river, he was strangely amused by the feeling of the water trying to pull him away, and stayed there for just long enough to realize that he felt no compulsion to rise up to the surface and breathe. That in of itself made him pause more, and he released the air from his lungs. After a short time, he finally emerged.

Octavian looked at him and asked, "Why were you under for so long?"

"I realized I don't need to breathe. Octavian, what *are* we?"

Octavian put a finger up to Simon's mouth, and started creeping behind one of the longhouses. Simon had no choice but to follow as Octavian climbed the house up to the roof. "You go for the men," Octavian said. "While they're distracted, I'll see what sweet treats are in here."

Simon gave Octavian a puzzled look, who replied, "Remember, no pain. No death. And if you think bats are slow, and orangutans weak, then mortals are even more pathetic."

Simon looked down for a moment, and, sensing his hesitation, Octavian continued, “Don’t back down now. This is your prey. They are beneath you, and you are above them. That is the natural order of the world.”

Something in Simon still kept him firmly where he crouched on the roof.

“You can try to spare them, but they won’t try to spare you,” Octavian said, and with a single motion, pushed Simon off the roof and into the village center.

The men around him jumped in surprise, but Octavian was right, even their quickest reflexes were astonishingly sluggish. His eyes were seized by the color of their garb which was bursts of red, green, and blue illuminated by the fire they circumferenced. As they reached for the spears and bows at their sides, the bright feathers that adorned their clothes danced in the air with the long shadows cast by their bodies from the flame. Simon was astonished to find himself enchanted by these men. Their clothes, the gleam of their weapons in the light, the glimpses of fear and fury in their eyes. As one got closer, pulling his spear back for a thrust, Simon could smell the sweat on his skin, and hear each of their hearts pumping blood through their flesh. It was an utterly seductive sensation, the life and body of another human being standing right there, in front of him. He understood now why Octavian started him off with animals, who did not even begin to scratch the deep, maddening itch that Simon never fully understood that he had, until now. With barely a conscious thought, Simon rushed upon the men and slashed at each of their throats with his bare hands. Their jugulars parted like warm clay before a sculptor’s hands, and Simon embraced the one closest to him, put his mouth to the gaping wound, and sucked every drop of its contents. The green came with such strength and depth that there was simply nothing else for Simon to see, or hear, or even think about.

When he came to, he was licking out the last remnants of blood from one of the mens' throats. He sat up straight when he remembered where he was and what he was doing. Looking at the bodies, their faces contorted with terror and all color drained from them, something twanged in Simon's chest and he couldn't look at them for much longer. He had to think about something else. Octavian had not answered his question earlier. He turned to go into the longhouse behind him, and opened the door. Octavian was standing in the middle of the house, bodies lying still all around him, while he held and rocked something small and wailing in his arms. Simon allowed himself to say it in his mind this time. It was a baby. Just like the orangutans they had terrorized earlier in the night, Octavian clearly had some taste for them. The twang in Simon's chest grew to a screech, of the same type and pitch as the bats he had massacred in the cave. It was like the weight of every life he had taken up this point had molded into a single, driving pillar that bore its way through his heart, leaving nothing but a single word.

"No!"

Simon leapt at Octavian, crashing the both of them through the straw walls of the longhouse. On the ground, Simon tried to pummel Octavian with his fists, but he caught them in each hand, his now completely golden eyes staring at both Simon's very soul, and nothing at all.

"Stop this." Octavian said, now with the same emotionless voice he had used when they first met.

Simon didn't listen. He drove his skull into Octavian's, feeling them both crush and fragment underneath. The moment he felt Octavian's grip loosen on his arms, Simon wrenched his arms free and began smashing Octavian's already compromised skull into the ground. As he let loose blow after blow, he thought of his father, and how desperately Simon dedicated each throw of his fist to him. He

found himself screaming, cursing, crying into the gaping head underneath him over every grievance of his life as they flashed before his eyes like lightning, until circling back like birds of prey. Back to Octavian. Back to this night. When he realized he was punching nothing but blood, dirt, and powderized skull and marble, Simon finally stopped. As he stood, he looked at his hands, which were completely shattered, yet reforming and contorting back into shape before his very eyes. Looming over Octavian, he didn't see any healing happening, not even at the stump of his neck. He wasn't sure if that was enough to kill him, given Octavian's claims of immortality, but he wasn't going to stay here and find out. Some part of him knew that this confrontation would have gone very differently, under alterations of even the slightest degree. A small weight was lifted from his chest when he heard the infant's cry from inside the longhouse, but he had no time to ensure its safety. He worried what he might do, walking into that blood-soaked house. The horizon was brightening, and a deep orange began flooding the edges of the sky. Simon bounded across the river, and ran through the jungle as fast as he could. Countless trees and startled beasts passed by him as he sped through the dense foliage, and flickered wildly around as they watched the shadows recede more and more. A sudden flash of yellow stopped him dead in his tracks, digging his heels into the earth as he paused his momentum, and beheld a single beam of sunlight that crossed between him and the rest of the jungle. He looked around and saw nothing that he recognized, just the same tree and bush over and over again extending without end into the distance. Simon knew that he shouldn't, but he was burning with curiosity at just how forbidden the sun really was to him, and how. The feeling was like standing in front of a tiger, and resolving to pet it on the head. It could either be one of the most exhilarating moments of his life, or the last. He inched forward towards the beam and noticed that the closer he got, or perhaps the more that time passed, his skin bubbled with that prickling feeling that had replaced his pain. Staying

steadfast, and taking a moment, he plunged his hand into the sunlight. Instantaneously, his hand erupted with a feeling like thousands of needles digging into his flesh at every inch of skin touched by the light. He pulled away, and stared in shock as he saw his hand was no longer his own, but like that of an old man's. The skin was wrinkled and his nails had grown, and his whole hand shook uncontrollably. It was as if time had accelerated, but concentrated entirely on that singular portion of his body. Simon had his answer to what would happen to him if the light consumed him entirely, and that would soon be the case if he didn't find somewhere to hide. The bushes couldn't be enough. Maybe if he gathered enough together they would keep the light out? No, that would take too much time. Time he didn't have. Simon looked down. At the base of a tree, he saw a snake slip silently into a burrow, and he could hear the squeaks of small things protesting within. As the little voices under the tree grew silent one by one, Simon knew what he had to do. He started digging.

That night, he awoke to the strange grayish haze of his hole. He could see his hands, his whole body for that matter, through the haze; and it all felt brand new, even the hand that had touched the sun. Simon took a few moments to reorient himself, and began to dig back upwards and emerged on the surface, trying his best to dust himself off. Simon realized it had been some time since he had paid any mind to his clothing, and to the state it was in, which was evidently ragged and filthy. But he couldn't fix that now. He had to find his way back to Claudia. The only thing to do was figure out how. He had no idea where he was, but he guessed that it must be quite a distance from Sarawak, given that headhunters seemed to roam here. Then he remembered the river he had crossed with Octavian. If he could find that, and travel opposite the direction of its flow, then maybe that could guide him closer to Sarawak. He knew it was unlikely, but it was the only idea he had. Trying his best to retrace his desperate steps, he sighed in relief as he began hearing the soft flow of a river. Simon emerged from the

treeline some distance downstream from the village, and his curiosity once again kicked in. Walking amongst the scene of last night's carnage, he found only rotting bodies, and dared not to go inside the longhouse. Instead, he walked around it, and a cold dread filled him when he saw that Octavian's body was missing.

Taking a moment to assess the situation and what he knew, Simon determined that there were two possibilities. In one, Octavian's body remained here until the sun rose completely, and the light washed his ruined corpse away, aging it until it was nothing but dust in the wind. In the other, Octavian healed from his injuries, escaped the village, and found some way to conceal himself from the sun; and Simon would be watching over his shoulder for eternity. He hoped the former to be true, of course, but even now he realized that hope had little to do with what really happened in the world. Simon continued to contemplate this way as he ran against the river all night long, watching out for any small inkling of civilization that would make itself known. As he lay in the dark, wet earth, after burying himself for the day once more, he could hear the sound of paddles breaching the river's surface, and voices speaking a tongue he did not know. The sounds trailed off with the flow of the river, and Simon knew he was getting closer. He rose early that night and continued his travel, when eventually the thirst struck him, and so he detoured into the jungle for a drink. After a few small birds and something that looked like a ferret gave him what he needed, he went onward until he saw another boat, rocking back and forth on the waters with three heartbeats in it. Finding no other option but to ask for directions, he called out. Some shouts later, a head popped up from the edge of the boat and stood up, mumbling something to another beside it.

"Sarawak!" Simon shouted. "I'm looking for Sarawak! Where is Sarawak!"

Eventually one of the passengers stood up and pointed up the river, shouting back something that Simon could not understand. Their heartbeats were rapid. He guessed that they were likely perturbed at seeing a mysterious white man wandering the jungle late at night alone. Simon liked the idea that they thought he was some spirit, and would tell stories about him to their friends and families. After thanking them, he disappeared into the night, and he could hear one of the passengers saying something with a frantic voice as he did, and he smiled. When he was lost in thought, mindlessly following the river, he stopped as he noticed a familiar scene. A small house, by a river, circumferenced by rice paddies. At last he had reached Sarawak, and stumbled upon the Rajah's home in a strange stroke of fate. For a brief moment, he considered going inside and paying his Highness a visit, but he needed to see Claudia. He would explain everything to her. What had happened to him, where he had been, what he was. It was likely that she would find it all hard to accept, but she was a woman of sheer grace, if anything. Simon made his way through the village, and found himself staring down the other end of the last road he had walked as a mortal man. He walked at a human pace this time, passing over the divot in the road that had tripped him, and then stopping in front of the dark and quiet villa, where Claudia awaited him. Fingering through his breast pocket, he found the stone that he had flipped that night to decide which way to go, and saw that all the tan dust that had made one side lighter than the other had been rubbed clean off, leaving the entire surface polished and perfectly dark. Simon dropped it back into his pocket, gave it a light pat, and stepped up to the villa door. When he entered, there was a lingering smell of mint in the air, just like the camphors. He checked room by room, until he came to Claudia's. There was a figure sleeping in the bed, and Simon crept up to it.

"Claudia?" He whispered. "Claudia? I'm back."

He gave her a light shake, and she sat up in bed, gasping. The voice that came from her was not Claudia's. She spoke that same Bornean dialect that escaped Simon's comprehension, and he stepped back in surprise. Had he entered the wrong villa? That was impossible, everything was exactly as he remembered it. Only, looking around the room, he realized that none of Claudia's personal effects were here. The minty freshness of the camphor sap was here, but neither this woman nor anything in the entire villa smelled like anyone or anything that Simon could recognize. She kept saying something to Simon, her voice getting louder and more frantic, and he knew that he had to do something.

"Please, calm yourself, I'm looking for my sister. Do you—"

The woman's voice rose almost to a yell. It was clear that she did not understand him. As he thought of what he should do, he began picking up her scent, and it distracted him. He could smell the sweat on her skin, the natural perfume of her body, and it had been a few nights since human blood had graced his palate. With little control over his own actions, Simon snatched the woman in his arms, muffling her screams with his hand as he bit deeply into her neck. Within a few minutes, she was silent and empty. She fell back limply into her bed, and as the verdant wave passed, Simon sat at the edge with his head in his hands. His sister was missing. The only man who might help him is the same one he had slighted with childish impatience, and now he had the death of yet another innocent on his conscience. Claudia couldn't have just left. They were supposed to stay in Borneo for weeks. Unless, she had thought him dead, and returned to England early in grief. It wasn't impossible, but it didn't feel right. She would have looked for him. She would have tried something. He would have done the same for her. As quietly as he could, Simon left the villa. As long as the night lasted, he would knock on doors until he found someone who knew something about Claudia. Many of the houses he tried did not

answer, until he pounded on one door, and a very tired looking man peeked out of the window beside it.

“English? Do you speak English?” Simon asked frantically.

“Ehhh...” the man croaked, “a little.”

“Thank God. Have you seen a fair-skinned woman, like me, come in or out of that villa recently?”

He pointed in its general direction.

“From there?” The man rubbed his eyes.

“Yes!”

“Oh, uhhh...fortnight ago? Some man went missing. There was searching for him.”

Simon couldn't believe it.

“A *fortnight*? Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

Simon thanked him for his time, and walked off. A fortnight ago? It couldn't be possible, he had only been gone for less than a single week. How could so much time have passed? It dawned on Simon that the only two moments in which he was entirely unaware of how much time had passed both occurred within the night Octavian had transformed him. The first was when Octavian knocked him out and took him to the grove, but couldn't have been more than a few hours at most, likely less given how fast Octavian was. The second was the time between Simon's transformation and when he awoke. Despite his ignorance of whatever had replaced his humanity, Simon knew his body and mind had undergone extensive changes, so any amount of time could have passed. It must have been then, Simon deduced. And that made Octavian a lying bastard as well as a child-eater. No wonder he didn't

want Simon to see Claudia, and filled his mind with the fear that he might accidentally kill her. What was his plan? How long would he try to keep him from her? Simon shook his head and tried to think of a way back to England, some way in which he could avoid the sun and as many people as possible. For many nights afterwards, Simon haunted the area surrounding the village, waiting for a ship to come to port at the docks. He used nearly every bit of his willpower to keep his diet restricted to the animals of the jungle, rather than the people of the village, and maintained a schedule that almost became comfortable, until one night. He could hear the maritime bells as a ship stopped into port, and sailors trailed in and out like ants, carrying boxes and bags. Simon knew he had to act quickly, so he carefully opened a crate he deemed large enough to accommodate him, and lowered himself inside. It was filled nearly to the brim with straw, which he soon discovered was meant to protect the Dayak-made ceramics he had just crushed. He waited in its confines, almost long enough to think he had picked the one crate that the ship wouldn't take with it, but when he smelled the savory, briny air of sailors who heaved him onto the deck, he was relieved. For months at sea, the crate and the bowels of the ship were his refuge, and the journey was another considerable test to his willpower. The ship was infested with rats, and Simon took it upon himself to act as exterminator, but he was woefully effective. He tried to keep a scant few alive so they might reproduce, but it proved too long of a wait. Eventually the rats ran out, and Simon's thirst raged within him like a storm, and one night he took a sailor down to the bowels with him. When the captain made a roll call the next morning, Simon discovered he had taken the crew's doctor. To his crewmates it seemed like he suddenly disappeared, and Simon overheard much of what they had to say about it. Some said he just went mad and jumped overboard, a pampered city kid not meant for the sea—and the captain was of this opinion—while others suspected something sinister, but they could never quite articulate what they meant. He could hear their quiet

prayers in the night as Simon took the time to calculate how long he could go before his need for human blood overrode his need to be a good man. The absolute limit was seven nights. He spent many of those nights praying to God as well, to give him the strength to overcome the temptation, and he begged for forgiveness knowing that he had made a deal with the Devil. Simon prayed more in those five months at sea than he ever did in his entire life, and there were some moments that he laughed to himself about it, at how ridiculous it was that he fasted and prostrated like a monk when his soul was in all likelihood already damned; how the monster these men feared prayed to the same Lord in the same hushed tones. He kept their names in his prayers, only knowing them by the grace of the morning roll call as the names that were repeated over and over without a reply. There was a point at which the names overwhelmed the prayer, and the repetition of them, still without reply, became his nightly custom.

“Josef, Elis, Thomas, Galang, James, Jonathan, Lewis.”

An unrefined hatred towards Octavian grew, and Simon blamed nearly everything wrong that had happened on him. He tempted him with power and immortality, he taught him how to kill, and instilled him with the insatiable thirst for blood; Octavian was the Devil in disguise, and all the evil that befell Sarawak would be pinned on him and him alone. Simon was innocent in all of this, he couldn't possibly be blamed, not even for a single death. He was tempted by a demon, yes, but sin is in the nature of mortals. Only, he wasn't mortal anymore. He didn't know where this soul would go, trapped in the same body, never to escape. Maybe it was its own form of Limbo. Maybe God was already punishing him. Maybe this was Hell.

Simon nearly leapt from his crate when he heard the ship's bell ring, and the commotion of the London harbor, but he remained perfectly still and quiet, buried among the straw and jagged

fragments of ceramic. The crate was lowered gently, and eventually carried into a warehouse, to await its journey elsewhere. That night, Simon made his escape, but he spent a few moments running and jumping around the docks, feeling the fresh sea air on his face. Not forgetting his mission, he threaded his way through the city streets of his childhood, until he came to the street just outside his family manor. He realized that he was still wearing the same clothes for nearly half a year, and hardly wanted to look so ragged when he finally saw Claudia again, so he took a detour. He found a nice shop that was closed for the night, and going around to the back, inelegantly tore the back door from its hinges, taking what looked fashionable and fitting. After washing himself in a nearby well, he donned what he had, and went back to the manor. Simon was about to knock on the door before he thought better of it, and went around the back to find Claudia's bedroom window. He scaled up the wall, and hopped over the iron railings of the small balcony and peeked inside through the glass. Simon covered his mouth as tears flowed from his eyes when he saw her figure sleeping in the bed, and fighting through them, he opened the window and slowly stepped inside. The room was strong with the smell of camphor sap, but also other things like jasmine and myrtle, and Claudia's own natural odor. All together, it took the cooling effect of the camphor and warmed it, reminding Simon of a sunny autumn breeze. As he stepped closer, the smell became more and more potent, drawing Simon's nose to Claudia's neck where it was strongest, like a bloodhound. He had to physically hold himself back when he realized where it was all going, and the tears began to flow again. It was all just a cruel joke. Octavian had kept information from him, but he did not lie when he told him the risks of seeing Claudia again. He was too weak to resist the temptation of her blood, and he didn't know why. The sailors hadn't provoked him so strongly, but then again, the sailors didn't smell so good. He had to distract himself, find somewhere or something or someone that wouldn't so utterly bewitch him. The

smell had another source, it was stronger with camphor, but it was close to what Claudia smelled like. On her vanity, there was a small brown bottle. It had a label, and it read: Chiaroscuro.

* * *

Simon nearly leapt back from the woman, who mumbled something indiscernible as she shuffled under the covers. He stood there, frozen solid, for moments that felt without end, running through all the memories that had rushed through him like a tidal wave. Simon hadn't thought of Octavian for nearly a century, of course, after having spent the rest of that time thinking about him nearly every night. Over the years, Simon had learned that vampires have only one of two reactions to being insulted; either they pretend like nothing happened, because they simply do not care, or they will go to the ends of the earth to find you. Knowing this, Simon reckoned that after their dispute, Octavian decided to move on to better things, or he was actually dead. Which would make Simon the only vampire he knew of to have killed another vampire. He met only a handful of others, and he found that it simply wasn't worth the trouble to get to know them, much less know them so well that he would want to kill them. Nonetheless, Simon didn't enjoy thinking about the others, much less Octavian. He had something infinitely more valuable to think about lying right in front of him, and she was dying.

Simon already knew that he had no intention of letting this woman go after he spent an entire lifetime watching Claudia from afar. He watched her put on an exhibition of her drawings from Borneo in his memory, he watched her meet her fiance, who eventually became her husband; he watched them fight and love each other as their children grew. Wonderful and terrible things happened

to them all, and such is the nature of a mortal life. Brighter than the sun and gone in the blink of an eye. Simon gave up ideas of God and the Devil and sin and salvation a long time ago, but as far as he and his memory were concerned, Claudia had never really left. She was just waiting, watching, like him. So here she finally was, dying, again, somehow. A thought like this had not entered Simon's mind for longer than he could remember, but he said to himself: *If God exists, he is cruel*. But, God has no right to be cruel, he is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving; it's us, the ones with their ignorant, impotent feet on the ground who have the right to be cruel. So, Simon, standing there, thought of the only thing he could do; the cruelest and most loving act he could think of.

He took Claudia's head into his hands, and said to her, "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

Slowly, her eyes opened, and she mumbled something again, fading in and out of consciousness. He kept talking to her through tears that hadn't flowed for centuries.

"You have to say yes, Claudia. You must say that you accept what I'm going to give you. Can you do that? Please."

Simon could see a flash of clarity come over her eyes, and she looked at him. A hand came up from underneath the covers and soft fingers caressed Simon's face. A tear rolled down his cheek.

"This isn't your time. Say that you accept. Please, say it."

Her mouth trembled as she took in sharper and sharper gasps of air, before she caught enough to breathe out, "I accept."