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## Lady Disdain

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Lady Disdain

Senior Project Submitted to  
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of Bard College

by  
Hunter Lustberg

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*For my mom, who taught me almost everything I know about how to be a person. I'm sorry I didn't call home more - please accept the following 222 pages as my excuse.*

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## 1. SEBASTIAN WARD.

Waking up hungover on the floor of a church was among the lowest points of Sebastian Ward's week. Until then, things had been going quite well for him, all the lower points were still to come. He tried to open his eyes, but quickly discovered that this was a poor decision. From the little light he'd allowed past his eyelids, his brain derived no images, only a throbbing pain. This awakened him to the twenty or so other odd aches which had settled about his body in the night. He convulsed on the floor and attempted to bury his head beneath the wooden boards. When his repeated nudging failed to convince them to move aside, and had nearly given him a nasty splinter, he decided to cover his head and torso with his suit jacket instead. After several motionless minutes, his headache subsided. This he counted as a small success, which momentarily stopped his craving for a swift death.

Sight was not an option. He would have to rely on his other senses. He peeled his lips open and sucked in the damp air from the pocket beneath his jacket. He tasted alcohol of some description, and the rancid sourness of his own dehydrated tongue. Taste was not helping him regain his sense of place, but also why would it? He tried to smell his way out, but the sweaty suit jacket was like a shieldwall against all other scents which might have been swirling around on the outside air. Even without its odorous obstruction, this tactic would only have helped if he'd blacked out on the floor of a bakery or a florist's shop. He then listened as hard as he could. Through the overwhelming silence he heard a dozen sounds which could have been a million things. There was a creaking about the boards in some unknown direction. A muffled tapping came from even farther off. Sebastian thought he could hear a tune playing somewhere far away but he was, in fact, delusional. And so he did something he had been trying very hard to avoid.

Sebastian had blacked out with his right arm bent beneath him. Moving that arm meant pain, and quite a bit more of it than he was willing to deal with considering he had only just stopped craving death. His left arm was being employed as a pillow to keep his head off the floorboards. In order to free it, he engaged his abs and lifted his head. Both actions he immediately regretted. He wiggled his arm free, and let his head drop back onto the floor.

Twenty minutes later when the pain had mostly subsided, he began to wiggle his arm out from under the enclosure. He took great caution not to lift the jacket too high, knowing that too much light would cause his brain to try and free itself through his ear. First he felt the rough wood of the floorboards with which he was already intimately familiar. He dragged the arm across the floor and hit something hard. Success! He moved his hand up the object, feeling the smoothness of the wood as it came to a level platform a couple feet off the ground. Some sort of bench? Continuing his explorations he felt another, similar object on his right side, this one facing away. Laying on the floor between two rows of bench-like-objects meant that he was either in a poorly furnished train car, or worse, a church.

Calculating his next move, Sebastian heard a startling noise. It started as a clicking, scratching sound. Someone was unlocking a door. His heart began to shake his narrow frame. Wherever he was, he was damn sure he wasn't supposed to be there, and as much as it had sounded like a good idea a few minutes ago, he didn't really want to die all that much. But the blood rushing to his head rekindled his headache. As he retracted his arm into the jacket-cave, he realized that whatever was coming his way, he wasn't going to be able to fight it.

A door opened somewhere in the room. Heavy feet trod across the threshold.

“Dear Lord, not again,” the man mumbled.

Sebastian heard the capital L and deduced that was a man of the cloth. He hoped this holy man would forgive him his trespasses. He had never paid much attention to the tenets of organized religion and vaguely remembered hearing that some denominations responded to trespassing with sanctioned and sanctified lethal force.

Unfortunately for Sebastian, it was then that his memories began to return.

“Child?” said the holy man, “Are you alive?”

Overwhelmed by a deluge of grief and love, and one thousand little miseries he didn't have names for, Sebastian could not think to respond logically. Instead, he answered with an agonized, jacket-muffled groan.

“Good, good. That's quite a relief.”

Sebastian heard the man depart through the haze of his flashback-induced fugue. He returned a few minutes later and placed something hard and heavy on the pew above Sebastian's head.

“I'll be in the rectory when you remember how to stand upright. Please do stop by before you head out. There's a pitcher of water on the pew beside you. Don't knock it over, it will damage the floor.”

The man stomped away again.

It was another full hour before Sebastian was done stewing in sweat and self-pity, and attempted once again to rejoin the mortal coil. He pulled the jacket away from his eyes in one swift motion. Headache. Pain. Anguish. He ignored these as best he could. He pulled himself up onto the pew. Lightning shot through his crushed arm.



Having his legs under him again felt unnatural, as though his body belonged to the floorboards and the nails that held them down. Sebastian looked about the simply furnished chapel. Rows of windows, high on each wall allowed in the cascades of warm light which had oppressed him for the better part of the morning. An uncomfortably compact aisle cleft its way through the even rows of pews from the door to the altar. On the far wall hung a wooden carving of the recently crucified Jesus. Sebastian could tell it was recent because the statue's eyes were still open and staring out into the congregation. Despite his fervent agnosticism, he'd seen many depictions of Christ in his work as Chief Curator for the Brooklyn Museum. The post-crucifixion ones with the eyes still open were his least favorite. They unsettled him. Sitting in this church he couldn't drive off the feeling that the tiny wooden Son of God was silently judging him from his spot above the altar.

“Stop giving me that look,” he pleaded. The sound of his own voice was startling. It was higher, more nasal than he remembered. He picked up the pitcher of water and began to slug it down. It was warm but it did the trick of banishing the acrid fuzziness from his mouth and easing the stinging in his throat.

As Sebastian stood his joints crackled and his knees stung. As he looked down, he noticed that his sweat had left a Sebastian shaped stain on the floor. Placing one foot before the other, he taught himself to walk again. He began to notice similar stains, speckling the floor between the pews. Some were bigger, some were smaller, all were vaguely man-shaped. Sebastian did not know what to make of this oddity, and did not stop to consider it for long. He was standing, that was a good start. He could walk, a further sign of progress. Now he had to find Elizabeth.

Her name was Elizabeth Hill, and her letter arrived in December. Sebastian remembered how it had smelled of rosewater and acetone. She was a distant relation of his wife, fallen on hard times, looking for work and lodging wherever such could be found. Diana had never heard the name before, but she had family all over the country, most of whom she'd never met.

In January they picked her up at Pennsylvania Station. She had caught a train from her hometown of Rameses, way out west. They drove her back to their apartment. It was three stories up, a block south of Central Park, with windows that allowed in all the steel-cold light and unholy noise of the big city. She started work immediately.

Sebastian fell in love with her darting blue eyes and cascading black hair, but mostly with an all encompassing helplessness he both pitied and adored. When he saw her struggling to wipe away the dense Manhattan grime from the molding, his affection for the girl would boil over and she'd catch him staring down at her, smiling unrestrainedly. And how she would smile back! It was a small gesture, but enough to keep Sebastian assured that she loved him with the same wholehearted and clandestine passion he felt towards her. He thought of her all day long, stumbling through his curatorial work, incapable of seeing the most crude representation of the female figure without superimposing the perfect features of the woman he loved. Not his wife. The other one. He wanted to fill every gallery of the Brooklyn Museum with paintings and sculptures commissioned to immortalize her youthful beauty. At night as he fell asleep, though he held Diana in his arms, Elizabeth occupied his thoughts. He prayed silently to a god he hadn't spoken to since Catholic School, begging to see her in his dreams, pleading that he might play a role in hers.

In February, Sebastian and Diana made plans to go out for dinner and catch *A Woman of the Sea*. Diana caught a nasty cold and couldn't make it out, but told her husband to take Elizabeth instead. It was too late to make dinner, but they could still catch the movie. He hid his elation well, and was thankful his wife had made it so easy. He left immediately to give Elizabeth the news.

"Have you ever seen Chaplin on the big screen?" he asked.

"I've never been to the moving pictures Mr. Ward," she replied, "My poor little town didn't have a theater, and it was a long way through the mountains to the nearest city so I haven't had the privilege. Oh, Mr. Ward I'm so very excited."

They walked to the theater on West 66th, leaving a half hour early so he could take her up a winding path through Central Park. When dusk fell, one could watch the lights of the city ignite, gold freckles on shadowed concrete, set against the plumb-blue sky. As they passed between the trees and protruding boulders, arms linked, all Sebastian's focus was on that small spot where their bodies met, where he could feel the tug of her arm through his coat sleeve. So intensely distracted, he failed to anticipate the unevenness of the path beneath him. Though he only stumbled slightly, his arm was locked with Elizabeth's, and the short downward tug was enough to make her lose her footing. She nearly fell flat, but came down at such an impossibly convenient angle as to land perfectly in Sebastian's arms. She was stunned and beautifully breathless, beaming up into her saviour's eyes. Holding her there, Sebastian was sure that half Manhattan could hear his shameful heart beat. He placed his young maid back on her feet, and they walked the rest of the way in complete silence, listening to the sounds of distant traffic.

In the soft seats of the theater, Sebastian reached out and took her hand in his. Their fingers intertwined, and she held on so tight that he thought his hand might break. On the screen before them, two beautiful women pantomimed love in flickering greyscale. It was a story of love and betrayal, of a woman leaving her fiancé, running away to the big city with the man her sister loved. Elizabeth was enraptured. All the walk home she talked about how magical it had been, and thanked Sebastian from the bottom of her heart.

In May, Diana made a trip up to Vermont to visit her mother. She made these trips often, given her mother's wavering health. Her condition had some long, scientific name Sebastian had learned and forgotten several times now. He had yet to meet his mother-in-law, though he was assured she was eager to visit as soon as her health would allow. Diana's mother was a pine tar heiress, possessed of a great deal of wealth, which she gave in generous portions to her daughter upon every visit as compensation for the trouble of travel and caretaking.

The night Diana left, Sebastian confessed his undying love for Elizabeth in an outpouring of starved affection. She was shocked at his confession, and shrunk into herself. She protested that Diana had cared for her well, that she could not betray her cousin. This only made Sebastian's heart soar even higher. In all his fantasies of this moment, he'd never imagined Elizabeth turning him down for Diana's sake. The pure and selfless act, especially in the face of obviously mutual love, reminded him that she was the most perfect woman he had ever met. He doubled down his efforts.

He took her out to the street and hailed a taxi. She followed along, speechless. They pulled up to the Brooklyn Museum, and Sebastian walked her to a side entrance, for which he had a key. Walking through the administrative wing, he showed her his office, told her how

difficult his days had been, trying to work while her visage occupied every corner and crevice of his mind. Then he took her through the museum proper. It was dark and empty and filled with the most beautiful paintings. When they came to the statue gallery, standing amongst the naked marble, he turned to her and took her hands in his.

“You’ve made my job as curator quite impossible Elizabeth,” his words filled the empty space. “How can I ever again see beauty in this flat canvas and lifeless stone? I have seen living beauty in your eyes and face and flesh, and no art can stand comparison.”

She leapt into his arms. They kissed, and Sebastian felt as though he might turn to stone.

Over the next two months, they continued their romance in secret. Elizabeth found maid’s work at the mansion of some wealthy politician up town. She told Sebastian it was to help keep her mind off of how much she missed him while he was at the museum. Sebastian himself was devoured by mad passion, having to content himself with clandestine glances, incapable of holding the woman he loved. Instead he held his wife, and thought of the woman he loved, sleeping in the next room over.

This agonizing life stretched on until one night, while Diana was out fetching supper, Elizabeth finally broke. She told Sebastian she could not continue living with them, and was going to begin working full time at the senator’s Mansion. It was too painful for her to see him with Diana. He demanded she tell him if there was any way in the world he could convince her to stay. She begged him to run away with her, like the Woman of the Sea. He agreed, and they hatched their plan.

It wasn’t until July that Diana went again to visit her mother, whose condition had taken a turn for the worse. Sebastian withdrew all the money in their bank account, and bought two

tickets on a transcontinental railway car. He considered writing a note to his wife, but as he went over it in his head, he couldn't get the words right. *Dearest Diana*, he scrawled across the image of paper in his mind. He immediately scribbled it out, crumpled it up and envisioned another blank sheet. *Dear Diana*. What then? Should he apologize? He wasn't particularly sorry. He truly loved Diana and he didn't want to hurt her, but she'd never understand how his heart yearned for Elizabeth. There were many things about him she didn't understand, and this irked him terribly. Now he was mad at her, wanted her to apologize. That wouldn't have sounded very good in a letter though. He considered explaining where they were going, so that she wouldn't worry, but he feared she might follow them. That sounded messy.

*Dear Diana*, he thought, *Don't follow me*. There it was: short, simple, intentional. He wrote it down sloppily on a scrap of stationary from his home office, and left it on the bed they had shared for two years.

After he and Elizabeth left the apartment, a strange gust blew through. It lifted the note off the bed and carried it out the window. Outside, it descended to the street where it became lodged in the awning of the apartment building next door. A nesting rock dove tore the note in two, carrying with it the *Dear Diana*, and dislodging the other half to again drift at the mercy of the wind.

Later that day, a young businessman walking down Seventh Avenue dropped his wallet, containing no small sum of money, onto the sidewalk. A short Bavarian man selling fried oysters out of a cart saw it flop its way out of his back pocket. The oyster-seller did not hesitate to abandon his post and a growing line of hungry pedestrians. He pushed his way through the foot traffic to retrieve the fallen wallet and return it to its owner, who was growing ever farther away,

walking at his absurd city pace. The oyster-seller chased him two blocks and an avenue, constantly just out of shouting distance amidst the noise of the traffic, until he was all but sure the man was purposefully running from him. As he stopped to catch his breath, a small shred of paper fluttered against his chest, pinioned there by a stubborn breeze. *Don't follow me*, it read. The oyster-seller looked up in disbelief, but the businessman was nowhere to be seen, lost in street smoke and the omnidirectional tides of humanity. He pocketed the wallet and returned to his cart.

Sebastian remembered leaving his apartment. He remembered the taxi ride to Pennsylvania Station. He remembered the train ride to Rameses. He remembered being stunned by the unimaginable vastness of the world outside the city, and at the power of the steam train to condense that vastness, and turn what would once have been an adventure into a mundane commute. He remembered the three days he'd spent in the first class car with Elizabeth in his arms. He remembered arriving on the platform in Rameses and seeing the town for the first time. It was a small town, at the edge of a long stretch of desert, tucked neatly beneath the Rockies. In Elizabeth's company, it was fit to be his new start. He remembered their night at the inn. The Spattered Rattler, it was called. Elizabeth knew the man who took their money and gave them their keys. Gareth was his name, an old friend from childhood. She introduced Sebastian as her husband while Gareth found them their keys and fetched him a drink, on the house. He remembered carrying their bags up to a cozy little room. He remembered feeling dizzy. He remembered Elizabeth taking him to her favorite spot in town, and the delight at walking down the street with her, hand in hand. He remembered stumbling on the way there. They stepped into

the quaint little church, squeezing down the aisles. He sat beside her in a shallow-seated pew. He remembered her telling him how beautiful the light was shining through the one stained glass window that hung above the altar. He remembered trying to tilt his head to the ceiling, but instead seeing the floor leap up at him.

And that's the last thing he remembered.

"Ah you're still alive," said the Friar as Sebastian stumbled into the rectory. "Do step into the washroom and get yourself cleaned up a bit." Seeing him for the first time, even hunched behind his desk, it struck Sebastian how bulky this man was. He was engulfed in a faded brown robe with a white cord tied around his waist.

"It's the strangest thing, Father," Sebastian spoke meekly. "I hadn't more than a small drink, and yet I find myself with a hangover like I guzzled a jug of moonshine."

"That's most likely from the blunt force to the head. You hit a pew on the way down."

Inquisitively, Sebastian ran his fingers over the back of his head, pulling them away when the light pressure reawakened a stinging, searing pain. He was dizzy already but nearly went back down when he saw the dried blood that had flaked off his hair and stuck to his hand.

"Father," protested Sebastian, "thank you for the water and the hospitality, but I have to go and find..."

"Elizabeth will be long gone by now, child," the Friar gave him a pitiful look from behind his scratched wooden desk.

"How do you know her name?" Sebastian asked.

"Please, go wash up, then I'll explain everything."



“Who are you?” it occurred to Sebastian to ask.

“I’m Friar Terance.”

“Oh. I’m Sebastian.”

Sebastian looked at himself in the cracked mirror. The way the glass fractured and bent made his reflection fold over on itself and lose parts of his face. His right eye was missing from the picture, along with a diagonal stretch across his cheek and forehead. He had bled a good deal from some spot on his face now obscured in the fissure. A smaller, perpendicular crack condensed the bulb of his nose into a strange cloven stub. He titled this sight, *Portrait of Cyclops, Disheveled*.

He splashed some water from a short wash basin across his bloodied face, and stepped out of the washroom just as the Friar reentered the rectory. The Friar towered over him, and was quite the imposing presence in his dark clerical attire.

"You bled on my floor," noted the Friar.

"I must have hit my head pretty hard on that bench," Sebastian replied.

"It's a pew."

"Bless you."

"Child, it's you who needs blessing. Now, please take a seat."

There was no other chair in the room, so the Friar took his out from behind his desk and placed it behind Sebastian.

“Are you going to tell me how you know Elizabeth? Do you know where she is?”

“Take a seat.” The chair was just as rigid as the pews. “Please, no matter how angry you are, do try your hardest not to break anything.”

“What’s going on?” Sebastian demanded.

The Friar leaned against his desk.

“In the past few months, a woman named Elizabeth Hill has been staying with you, cleaning your house, or tending to your garden perhaps.” he stated as a matter of fact.

“Now how the hell do you know that?”

“Mind your language,” the Friar glared at him, “you are in a house of God. Within the course of these few, sweet months, you and Elizabeth fell deeply in love with each other, and she convinced you to move out here to her charming little home town where you could live together in peaceful bliss.”

“Hold on now Father, it was my idea to come out West.”

“Yes, I’m sure you think so. To get away from your wife, I’ll bet?”

“Are you judging me Father?”

“God does the judging, child. I am but a vessel of His Holy Opinion.”

“How do you know all this? What are you trying to say?” Sebastian was stuck somewhere between rage and panic.

“Do you have your wallet on you?”

“What’s this about?” Sebastian searched his pockets one by one, but produced nothing. “I must have left it at the Inn. Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“My job here is not to preach His truth to my congregation, but rather lead them to discover it on their own. I see that will not work with you. Elizabeth is not real, Sebastian, you’ve been tricked. She stole from you back home then brought you here to take the rest of what you have and then she left you behind. She drugged your drink, or otherwise knocked you

out while your head was turned. You should count yourself lucky. Some have awoken in far sorrier states than you.”

“Some?” Sebastian croaked.

“This happens often. Those who would see her brought to justice never even know she’s here, and nobody’s ever managed to catch her once she slips away. How she always manages to slip you people in while I’m away is beyond me. I’m sure she has eyes about town.”

“Oh my god,” Sebastian whispered into the air. He began to shake. His shoulders leapt to his ears and his head began to rock back and forth. He convulsed in his chair, then stood and walked back into the washroom, shutting the door behind him. He screamed like a man unraveling.

Staring at himself in the mirror he could only think of his regrets. He’d lost his Elizabeth - harmless, helpless, Elizabeth. He couldn’t bring himself to see her as anything else. Diana’s face pushed its way into his mind. He imagined her coming home, reading his note and falling to pieces in grief. And it was all Elizabeth’s fault. She had hurt Diana, that much he understood, and for that he couldn’t forgive her. He sank to the floor, leaving a streak of sweat along the wall at his back. His life was ruined.

Several minutes later, the door opened. Sebastian emerged, eyes reddened from crying.

“I’ve ruined my life, Father,” he sighed, resigned. “What do I do?”

“You, like all those before you, have four options,” the Friar recited, “Option one. You can write home to your friends and family, explain or lie away how you wound up in this wretched state, and have them send you money for a ticket home. Although, I’d assume you’ve

already alienated whatever friends or family you might have had by running away with your false flame.”

It was true. Sebastian had no friends, no living family. All he had was Diana, and she wasn't likely to ever look him in the eye again.

“Option two?” he asked.

“Option two. You could go to work for Mr. Meade at The Rattler. Clean mugs, bus tables, show guests to their rooms. Work until you can buy the ticket yourself.”

“How long will that take?”

“Assuming Gareth gives you his standard rate and ticket prices don't go up, about two years. Twenty months if you're frugal.”

Sebastian turned a shade paler and was pushing translucence.

“Option three?”

“You could stay and join the Franciscan order. It gets very lonely all on my own out here. You'd get to call me brother instead of father, you'd get a free robe. Not to mention all the comfort of accepting the light of Christ into your life. I'm sure it could do you wonders.”

“Option four,” Sebastian demanded.

“Nobody ever takes option three,” the Friar sighed, “Option four. There's quite a hefty bounty on the notorious bandit leader Duke Bailey. He and his men have been camping up in the mountains causing trouble for the last seven years. You bring him into justice and you've got your ticket. There is... a bit of a catch.”

“Oh, you mean other than the fact that I, a curator who has never even sniffed a gun, would have to hike into the mountains and kill a bandit who...”

“There’s the rub, Sebastian. This isn’t a ‘dead or alive’ type of deal. You bring Bailey back breathing, or you forfeit the bounty.”

“Oh...”

Sebastian was surprised at the vitriol in the Friar’s words, and at the absurdity of the proposal. He considered it. He’d never had to capture anyone before. The prospect sounded messy, loud, way out of his standard line of work. Then again, if he succeeded, perhaps he could get home before Diana and salvage whatever was left of his old life. Perhaps all was not lost. Elizabeth had robbed him blind and he’d have to come up with a titanic lie to explain how she’d gotten access to their funds, but if that could be managed at least he wouldn’t need to claw his way back up from poverty alone. How hard could it really be to deal with this Duke Bailey guy? Besides, if he failed, at least he’d be dead.

“I’ll take the bounty,” he said.

This clearly surprised the Friar. “You’ll what?”

“I’ll go after this Duke Bailey fellow. With all due respect Father, the rest of your options... well I’d probably rather die.”

“It would appear I was wrong about you, son. I had taken you for the type that would readily give in to cowardice. Now I see that your real flaw is astoundingly poor judgement. It’s almost a divine miracle that Elizabeth manages to find you people. Ah well, Hell runneth over the day stupidity becomes sin.”

Before meeting the Friar, Sebastian had never felt the pull to attend church. Now, he felt a nagging desire to burn one down.

“Bailey and his gang frequent the abandoned gold mines up the northern side of the mountain pass. If you wish to bring him in, you’d best catch him unawares. If you encounter him on the road he’ll be with his men, likely setting up an ambush and armed to the teeth. Should you catch him where he eats and sleeps, he’ll likely only be armed to the chin.”

“This is the best edge you can give me, Father? How do you even know all of this?”

“He was once a child of mine. I was sad to see him stray and did my best to bring him back to God’s light. Now, I believe the best I can do is to help bring him to justice so he may not sin again.”

“Alright,” Sebastian inhaled deeply and realized he had not been breathing for a long time. The air felt good in his rehydrated mouth and made him pleasantly dizzy. He wanted the dizziness to grow and topple him so that he might fall through the dusty floorboards and awaken in his apartment, lying beside Elizabeth. No... beside Diana. No, Elizabeth? If he was going to fantasize he had better do it right. One on each side then. “I’ll be going then. Thank you for the water and advice.”

“Wait, child,” reaching into a fold in his robes, the Friar produced a small revolver. Sebastian recoiled. The Friar gave him a glare of disappointment. “Why in God’s name would I shoot you in my own church?” Holding it by the barrel, he offered it to Sebastian. “You hesitate my child, yet you have neither Bailey’s strength, nor his numbers, nor his wit. If you wish to come home alive, you must take him by surprise and pose a compelling threat.”

Sebastian wrapped his hand around what he was realizing would be his first and last line of defense. It was heavier than he thought it would be. The grip was engraved with the initials

'L.B.' He considered asking whose initials they were, but realized he didn't actually care. Instead he asked, "Why do you have this?"

"Rameses is no easy place to call home. Everyone and their mother has a gun here. And their Friar has three."

Sebastian dropped the gun into the pocket of his sweat-soaked suit jacket. "Thank you, Friar."

As Sebastian stepped out the narrow door of the church, his headache had almost receded. Then the church bells struck twelve, sending him back to the dusty ground. This relapse into agony was so intense, he barely noticed the crowd gathering at the train station, fascinated by the empty conductor's car which had creaked into town on its last few puffs of steam.

## 2. RORY REED.

Had such an accolade existed, Aurora Reed would have been the world champion at quietly seething. Some of her dearest friends had never seen her angry, yet noted a phenomenon where when she walked into a room, the air would grow hotter by ten degrees. In this case, her rage had turned a luxury coach car into a sauna. For two thousand miles of intercontinental railroad, Rory's gaze had been fixed on the world outside, yet she was so lost in an internal hellscape of violent fantasies that she could not recount a single moment of the journey. The target of her hatred was a man whose face she did not know, who in her daydreaming metamorphosed from a handsome, high-society gentleman to a horn-clad, pox-scarred devil. All she had of his true identity was a name: Sebastian Ward. She fixated on it, dissected it syllable by syllable until it became a curse.

Only once during that journey was her trance interrupted for reasons other than food and sleep, and that was when the watery-eyed, ticket-taking gentlemen burst through the door at the front of the cafe-car and hid behind an empty bench with his revolver drawn, shouting, "Bandits!" The car was thrown into chaos. Flustered passengers leapt to their feet horrified before realizing they had nowhere to go and slinking down as far as possible into their seats. The excitable fainted, the exasperated complained and the experienced took out spare wallets and pocketbooks packed for the sole purpose of handing over to bandits. Peering over the back of the seat in front of her, Rory watched the ticket-taker's hands shake, clasped tightly around the gun.

"Christ, is it too heavy for you?" She snapped.

"Excuse me, Miss?"



“Give me that.” She did not wait for an answer, and he did not stop her from lifting it out of his hands. The moment she’d heard the word *Bandits*, her anger was given direction. Having sat useless since New York, there was finally someone standing between herself and the man she intended to utterly destroy. She rose from her seat, stepped out into the aisle and marched for the door. Water-Eyes tried his best to dissuade her from playing the hero.

“Miss, you can’t leave the car while the train is moving!”

The glare she responded with made him realize she was not a hero, but a lit stick of dynamite. He was thankful the bandits had come along in time to prevent her from exploding on himself or one of the other passengers.

She passed between the cars as an aged and scruffy bandit blocked off the aisle before her. She raised her gun.

“Excuse me, Miss,” he spat through missing teeth, “but you’re in my way.”

“Excuse me, Sir, but you’re in mine.”

“No need to keep that thing aimed at me ma’am, I don’t shoot women.”

“Oh. Then this isn’t a real standoff,” and she shot him through his hand. His gun fell down between the cars and disappeared fleeting tracks. He screamed and grabbed at his wrist with his good hand. Rory stepped forward and pushed him aside, onto the laps of an elderly couple. The two maintained perfect composure, seemingly unbothered by the man’s flailing and gushing of blood which would surely ruin their traveling clothes. They counted themselves lucky to have such an unbelievable story to tell their grandchildren when they arrived in San Francisco.

The screaming at the back of the car alerted the ruffian at the front, who was collecting wallets and watches in a large, brown sack. He had no qualms about shooting women, but he also

had shit aim. His bullet punched a hole in the back wall of the coach, flying right between the heads of the elderly couple, who turned to face each other and smiled at their good luck. By the time they turned back to the crisis unfolding before them, the man who had fired the shot had been dispatched by Rory's unerring aim. The passengers aboard the coach cheered for their saviour. She did not hear them. Her mission took her through to the next car.

Within two minutes, word reached the conductor's car of a beautiful demon on a warpath, dropping bandits as she went. They retreated, holding her off just as long as they could. As the last of them crowded in, their leader grabbed hold of the conductor and tossed him into the first passenger car. Rory arrived just in time to see the adrenaline-dazed man stumble to his feet. By the time she'd pushed past him, she found herself staring across a growing chasm at the man who had ruined her bad day. The cars unhooked, Duke Bailey and the surviving members of his gang were drifting out of her reach. He was a monumental man, ducking under the door frame to catch a glimpse of the human hurricane who had taken out six of his men and put an end to his raid. The last thing she saw before he shrunk out of sight was his smile. For the first time in days, Rory found herself smiling back.

By the time the ringing in her ears had stopped, so too had the train. And as the general elation at Rory's victory died down, the passengers began to understand that they were stranded in a long stretch of desert, several hours walk from the nearest town. It was Rory who spotted the bandits' saddled horses which had come to a stop beside the track. Used to following the vehicle until their owners needed an escape, the stalled locomotive proved too confusing for simple equine logic, and so they had resolved to stand there until things started to make sense again.

While there weren't enough to get all the passengers to safety, the herd would suffice for the elderly and the ailing, who could send back help for the rest. Most of them had never ridden horses before and were hesitant to approach the creatures. The one exception was an inexplicably happy couple, unphased by the blood soaking their clothes and freckling their faces. Before long, the party made off down the tracks with all but one of the horses. The largest of them, a golden behemoth which could only have belonged to the bandits' leader, Rory took for herself. Nobody aboard the train cared to argue.

If she had a chance of finding the criminal mastermind Sebastian Ward out in the vastness of the west, her best chance was amongst his fellow lowlifes. Once the other riders were out of sight, she climbed atop the Turkomen and ordered it to take her home. As it raced towards the mountains, she was confident it understood her.

Though the remaining passengers were sad to see their savior disappear into the desert, they were nonetheless relieved when the air began to cool.

There's a simple reason for Aurora Reed's misconception that Sebastian Ward was a prodigious leader of the criminal underworld: Elizabeth Hill had told her so. The young woman had showed up on their doorstep one day seeking work. She claimed to be an ardent Democrat who admired Rory's husband for his political career, and until women were allowed to be clerks, she was content to serve his household. Before letting her in the door, Rory warned Elizabeth that her approach was flawed.

"William feels deep distrust for political women. We have an opening for a maid, but if we take you on you must get it out of your head that he will ever find your appreciation to be

anything more than novel. And you must, of course, be capable. Come inside and we'll see what you can do. We'll pay you for the day's work and if you impress, we'll have you back tomorrow."

Elizabeth was brought into a long neglected guest-bedroom tucked at the end of the second-floor corridor. A particularly noisome guest had stayed there several weeks prior, a former business partner of William's. He had been the most offensive presence to have ever stepped foot into the Bradwell residence, and since his departure, the sealed black door of the guest-room was one of many sights which caused Rory's blood to boil. Standing inside with the prospective maid, she was on the verge of a violent eruption, and the air became uncomfortably hot.

"Clean," was the only instruction she gave.

Never had Rory seen such adept and efficient work. Every task given was accomplished beyond expectation. It was difficult in the presence of such perfect skill for Rory to maintain her usual apathetic facade. She was amused, then astonished, then slightly suspicious, then astounded again. When Elizabeth was done, the room was spotless. There was not so much as a scuff on the moulding.

And so the new maid kept quiet and to herself. Such absolute obedience combined with such profound capability annoyed Rory. She considered docility a sign of wasted potential, and having Elizabeth around was almost unbearable. That is, until the slight woman began to challenge her husband.

William was notoriously unkind to the eleven maids, cooks, butlers and attendants that worked at his uptown estate. He expected of them a time commitment for which most employers

would provide lodging. Though they were at work before he woke up and long after he went to sleep, he couldn't conceive of allowing someone so far below him to rest under his roof. He would often go far out of his way to make their lives harder. He'd leave small spills to fester into putrid stains before alerting a maid. Each of them was encouraged to report their coworkers for taking unnecessary bathroom breaks or sitting for a task which could be done on one's feet. They would be rewarded financially for their vigilance. "There is no greater threat to the health of our nation than class solidarity," was the central pillar of William's philosophy.

Rory couldn't stand her husband's politics, but never cared enough to challenge them. He was, oddly enough, the only person Rory disliked. She hated plenty. These were her enemies, and she dreamed of painful deaths for them and those they loved. There were also those she'd never met. William was special in his ability to frustrate her without invoking outright rage. Perhaps it was something about his unabashed awfulness, completely devoid of the pretense of moral relativism. Perhaps it was something about the way he dressed. Regardless, it was for this quality she chose to marry him.

When things began going wrong for William shortly after Elizabeth arrived, Rory never suspected the cause could be the most utterly subservient individual she had ever met. Things crept about his office that he couldn't remember having moved. Doors that had always opened smoothly would stick, and he would slam into them during the morning rush. Important correspondence would go missing at inopportune times, then show up much later where he had already searched. As much as he wanted to blame someone else, an enemy and the architect of his misfortune, he could not rule out the possibility that he, himself was slipping. He was

constantly mired in misplaced loathing, always on the precipice of real suspicion, and it drove him mad.

Rory, the only person on earth at whom William would never direct his otherwise universal cruelty, took quiet pleasure in watching him dissolve. She took it to be final proof that the world was just. This was until she stepped into her husband's office while he was away and found the new maid moving an engraved ivory letter opener to the other side of his desk. Elizabeth looked up from her mischief without remorse or guilt, and that was when Rory fell in love.

"Open the bottom drawer on the left," she said without emotion. Elizabeth did. "Take the silver key. Do you see it?" Elizabeth held it up. "Now, close the drawer and come with me."

Elizabeth followed, walking with obedient dignity. They descended through the house, first to the foyer, then into the cellar. Access to the cellar was usually reserved for the cooking staff, due to William's certainty that servants are, by nature, inclined to steal booze. At the top of the stairs Elizabeth stopped, and Rory turned back to ask why she would not follow.

"Well, I'm not allowed into the cellar. Mr. Bradwell would be very cross if he found out."

Rory began to laugh, then caught herself. It had been a while since she'd laughed. The sound was alien. A smile bubbled up on Elizabeth's face and then they were both laughing, overwhelmed with that special mirth that is born of unspoken understandings, that feeds on its own momentum as it bounces back and forth between two matched wits, until it shakes the foundations of the house. It was a laugh that drew the other staff to spy, peeking around corners to make sure neither woman would suffocate on their own joy.

When the two had recovered and left the narrow stairway into the cellar, they walked side by side, stepping between shelves of expensive wines. Across the dim and tepid chamber, they arrived at a locked door. Rory gestured to the key still hiding in Elizabeth's palm. The maid twisted it in the lock and tried to push through, but the door was stuck in its frame. Rory motioned for her to step aside, and cleared their way with a well-placed kick.

Rory stepped through first and pulled a switch on the wall. Dim lights flickered on as Elizabeth ducked inside, illuminating a long room with a sloped floor. The women looked out over the backs of several rows of padded chairs to a blank white screen. Beside them, a large machine collected dust on all its long-silent limbs and wheels.

"A theater?" Elizabeth asked, fascinated by the secret room.

"I had it built when I moved in with William. I've always loved the movies, but could never stand missing details. So I'd go out to watch them again and again, and eventually I realized it would be easier to study them if I had them all nearby. Have you ever seen one of Chaplin's works?" Rory passed Elizabeth and opened a cabinet in the corner of the room. She began to search through neat stacks of film reels.

"Before my father passed, he would take my mother and I out to the moving pictures every month. I've seen all there is to see of Chaplin, even his new one. It looks like nobody's been down here in a while. Why was it all locked up?"

"William couldn't stand the thought of ghosts in the house. That's what he thinks of movies, that they're ghosts, caught inside the light, reliving moments of their lives. Or at least that's what he told me. I think he just couldn't stand the way they made me laugh. I'd almost gotten through all the Chaplins when he locked it down."

“What do you have left?”

Rory pulled from amongst the stacks a reel sealed with tape. “*Her Friend the Bandit*,” she read as she broke the seal.

They watched the movie side by side, their laughter echoing off the walls of the theater, making it seem as though they were sitting in a packed audience. When the movie came to an end they talked at length about every little detail and all their favorite moments. When at last they paused to take a breath, Elizabeth grabbed Rory’s hand and looked her in the eyes.

“Miss Bradwell...”

“If you must call me Miss, I will be Miss Aurora Reed. But I think I’d prefer if you called me Rory.”

“Rory... Why are you showing me such kindness? You caught me doing something we both know I wasn’t supposed to do. When you brought me down here, I thought I was in for some kind of nasty punishment. But instead... well I don’t think I’ve laughed this much in months.”

“Nothing would anger my husband more than his wife being friends with the maid, and it seems that we both have an interest in angering my husband. Besides, I’ve always wanted a friend to see the movies with.”

“Is that...” Elizabeth trailed off, blushing vividly, “Pardon me, Miss... Rory.”

“Tell me, Elizabeth.”

“Well... is that all you want? A friend to watch the movies with?”

Rory’s cheeks glowed to match Elizabeth’s. It was all the answer that was needed.



Their romance began in a burst, all at once, but it was near impossible to sustain. In a house bustling with servants and maids trained to tattle, every stolen kiss put them both in incredible danger. Had William found out, Rory knew Elizabeth would have disappeared. The Senator was not a jealous man, though he lived his life in fear of scandal. The scandal this secret love could spawn would surely destroy his career.

The two awaited the days when William left for his offices downtown, when they could do as they pleased in the safety and secrecy of the underground cinema. They spoke their dreams aloud, confident that anyone with an ear against the door couldn't possibly hear them over the record player blasting accompaniment as the projector rolled on. They spoke of meeting in disguise at clubs where men danced in dresses and two women in eachothers arms would be no more than a part of the crowd. But as much as these places were bastions of acceptance and freedom, so too were they fascinations for New York high society. Rory could not be sure she would not be recognized. They dreamed of getting away from the city and its many prying eyes and chattering tongues, though they knew William would hire someone to find them. Every time they escaped to the cinema and floated off into dreams, they always landed right back in that dark corner of the cellar, hiding in the only place they could.

When Elizabeth didn't show up to work one day, Rory's heart leapt into her throat. William must have found them out, she was so sure of it. He had already left for work, she couldn't confront him. Instead she paced about, tearing at the skin on her palms until they were red and raw. She wandered through every room in the house, looking for a distraction, which is how she found the note. It was in the theater, resting on the seat they liked to share. It explained everything. Elizabeth had been puppeted from the beginning by the criminal ring-leader

Sebastian Ward. She was only one of many who he'd blackmailed into working for him. She was brought to New York to infiltrate the Senator's mansion and rob William blind, but found such happiness there that she could never bring herself to hurt Rory. The note explained, vaguely, that for this refusal of Mr. Ward's demands, she was being taken back to Rameses, out West, to prove her value to him. It ended on notes of regret and gratitude, and a request that Rory not attempt to seek her out, for both of their safety. It was signed, "With all the love I have, Elizabeth."

Just before the heat radiating off of her started melting the paint and warping the floorboards, Rory stormed out of her house with murderous intent, a single suitcase, and most of the savings William would never entrust to a bank. She was going to Rameses.

After a long trot through miles of desert, Rory's bet paid off. The monstrous horse she'd taken from the bandits had carried her to a narrow footpath at the base of the mountain and begun its winding ascent. Though the sun had set and the desert relinquished the last of its daylight blaze, she was able to keep herself, and the beast, warm. Rory had resumed her steep downwards spiral and once again become a radiant, self-sustaining furnace. Translated from a series of violent images into English words and slowed to an understandable pace, her cycle of rage went something like this: "If the bandits know Sebastian Ward, I'll kill them one at a time until someone tells me where he's hiding. If they don't know Sebastian Ward, their train stunt slowed me down, an inconvenience for which they must be killed one at a time. If the bandits know Sebastian Ward..."

Rory wasn't sure how she'd accomplish this, but she was determined to try.

The horse rounded the ridge above the old silver mine. She brought him to a halt before they could be spotted by the gaunt bandit guarding the prospector's house. Dismounting, she rummaged through the beast's saddlebags, and withdrew a revolver she'd taken from one of the bandits on the train. Quietly, she descended the slope to the mining complex.

Hearing a clattering noise, the guard drew his weapon and aimed it into the darkness. He slowly abandoned his post to investigate. Reaching the source of the noise, he looked toward the ground, and found a stone he was sure hadn't been there before. You see, in his long and uneventful daytime shifts he'd memorized the location, size and general shape of every stone within sight of the prospector's house. Then, out of boredom, he also memorized where each stone would be if someone were to pick them up and reflect them across an invisible line beaming outwards from the center of the door. This rock was not in its original location, nor would any rock have wound up where this one was, had someone reflected all of them over the invisible line. Besides, another rock (about three and three fourths feet to the south east of this mystery rock) was in exactly the location it was supposed to be. Feeling the cold metal Rory's revolver to his temple, he understood at once how the rock got there, and felt great relief.

The dry and frigid air that grasped the darkened desert didn't dare to enter the prospector's house. A small fire and the collective heat and sweat of twenty long-unwashed men turned the room into a bunker of warmth, humidity, light and odor. Under buckling beams and a cracked ceiling sat twenty-two disheveled bandits, enjoying what meager rations they could justify after the day's failure. A penetrating note of collective self-pity rang above the silence which was otherwise disturbed only by the odd cough or the scraping of forks and spoons against the insides of cans. Or, the agonized groans of the bound man in the corner of the room. Amidst

this imperfect silence, the door swinging open was a cannon blast. The bandit leader's gaze snapped up from the fire, though his posture remained relaxed. Every one of his men leapt to their feet, threw down their half-empty cans of beans, and drew their weapons at the beautiful intruder and her hostage.

"Goddamnit," he said, "Nealand, you've only got one job. Sit outside and stare into the darkness. If something moves, shoot it. If that's too hard, call me, I'll shoot it. Are you alright?"

Nealand gave a panicked nod.

Rory looked around the prospector's house, down the barrels of the twenty something small arms aimed in her direction. She was defenseless, her only weapon pressed against Nealand. She considered that anyone stupid enough to be taken hostage may not have been someone a bloodthirsty gang of bandits wanted back. Then she realized something. She saw it in slight tremors, in darting eyes and rigid postures. They were scared of her.

"Alright, enough. Enough!" Their leader stood and shouted out, "We've lost enough men today. Put your weapons down." He looked towards Rory, trying with all his might to figure her out. "Madam, today you killed six of my men, and just now," he gestured at the discarded beans which now oozed at a slow pace across the floor, "have ruined the supper of another twenty. I would be well within my rights to seek revenge and I reserve the right to do so at my discretion, at a later juncture. But for now, let's say you owe me one. Or six. Now, come sit down and tell me who the hell you are and what the fuck you're doing in my house."

Rory understood she may have been stumbling into a trap. Regardless, she would have looked silly just turning around to leave, and they might have had the information she needed. If she couldn't catch the fly with vinegar... She released Nealand, who scuttled across the room

and sank to the floor, heaving from fear. She glared at one of the bandits on her side of the fire. He quickly vacated his chair. She took her seat across from their leader. He nodded and each man lowered their guns, some returning to whatever dinner they could salvage off the grimey floor.

“I’m Duke Bailey. As you could likely tell, I’m the leader of this disreputable disorganization of like-minded lowlifes. And who might you be?”

“Aurora Reed. My friends call me Rory.”

“And what might I call you?”

“Let’s see how dinner goes and I’ll let you know.”

Bailey gave that same wide eyed grin Rory had seen between the disconnected train cars. He glanced briefly over at Nealand, still recovering from the shock. The scrawny man crawled into an unlit adjoining room and returned with an opened can of beans and a lightly disfigured fork. He held his breath as he handed them over to Rory, who thanked him sincerely.

“First question: how’d you find us up here in our little mountain hideaway?”

“Took one of your horses, the massive golden creature. He brought me right up.”

“You brought back Conrade! Well that’s a mighty favor you’ve done me. Now you only owe me five more.”

“Mhm.”

“Second question: did someone send you to disrupt our little operation on the train, or are you just a stroke of malicious happenstance?”

“Nobody sent me. You caught me on a bad day is all. I’m afraid the crossing of our paths was pure bad luck on your part.”

“Miss, I believe that remains to be seen.”

“I killed six of your men today, and you're flirting with me?”

“Skill recognizes skill, and can't help but find it attractive. ‘Sides, if you'd killed one of *my* men, you'd already be dead. Those poor bastards you shot on the train were freelancers, joined up three days ago. They were all escapees from San Elsen Prison, looking for work, and I needed the extra hands on that train to take care of the guards.”

“Little did you know...”

“The guards weren't the problem. There was a devil on the train.”

“You flatter me, Mr. Bailey.”

“Such is my intent. Third question: if nobody sent you, why did you come seeking us out? You saw us lot escaping, must have known you were vastly outgunned. And yet here you are, in my house, alone.”

“I'm on a mission of sorts. One with which I would appreciate your help. I'm looking for Sebastian Ward, a master criminal who would have arrived in Rameses by way of train two days ago.”

“I'm afraid I don't know the man you're looking for. If there were a legendary criminal passing through town you'd better believe I'd know it. And I ain't never heard that name in my life.”

Rory was starting to get frustrated, and the fire at the center of the room burned hotter.

“Perhaps your information isn't as good as you thought.”

“I could say the same to you. Describe to me this Mr. Ward. Perhaps I'll know his face.”

“I... all I have is the name.”

“Well what's he done that got you hunting him down?”

“He’s an extortionist, and he’s sunk his claws into... a dear friend of mine.”

“I know the type, but unfortunately not the man.”

Rory believed him.

“Who’s the fellow in the corner?” She directed her gaze at the disheveled mess slumped in a heap of rope at the edge of the firelight.

“We’re not entirely sure. He tried to jump us on the way back from the train job. Had a revolver on him, though he didn’t know butt from barrel. We knocked him over the head and tossed him in the corner. When he wakes up we’ll see what he wants or if there’s anyone’d be willing to pay some money to see him safely escorted home.”

“And if no one cares to pay?”

“Then we’ll cut him loose in the desert, else leave him tied to the tracks. Depends how good an excuse he’s got for trying to mess with me and mine.” The other bandits snarled and spit in his direction. Rory wondered if they felt the same rage towards her. If so, they gave no indication of it. As the beans disappeared and the beer came out, Rory and Bailey chatted away. The other bandits chuckled along when Rory would crack a joke at their leader's expense, and applaud uproariously when he replied with some flirtatious quip. She realized then why they did not despise her, even after she’d ruined their heist and their dinners. They were like an extension of Bailey’s own will. They felt what he felt, hated what he hated, liked what he liked... and he liked Rory. She had come West in search of an enemy. Perhaps though, she had made an ally.

### 3. WILLIAM BRADWELL.

Senator William Bradwell was not actually a senator - at least, not anymore. Three and a half years prior he had been ousted by the now-incumbent Quinn Campbell, who studied Bradwell's weakness and used it against him. Bradwell, for all his power over those around him, lacked the rhetorical skill, charisma and know-how to win his campaign on the modern front of radio broadcasting. For a man whose unique talents meant never being denied anything, the loss meant the complete dissolution of his pride. In his offices in New York City, the clerks and staff still called him Senator, not because he made them, but because every time they laid eyes on him, they were incapable of understanding how he could be anything else. On a Thursday, shortly after the disappearances of his wife and maid, a clerk entered into his downtown office to announce the arrival of a woman he had never seen before.

In the seconds after, three things occurred to the clerk. The first was that the dictionary flying past his head was far too hefty to be thrown in such a graceful and controlled arc. The second was that such a magnificent throw could only be achieved by the immaculate Senator William Bradwell. The third was that upon impact with the wall behind him, the unsteady tome would explode into six-hundred and eighty nine individual pages, which he himself would need to alphabetize and rebind for the second time this month. The third realization would have upset him to no end had the prior two not heightened his deep appreciation for the man that had almost decapitated him with a book. While the papers still hung in the air, the clerk was almost able to muster the smallest glimmer of anger. But when they fell away and his vision was cleared, the Senator's smiling face made him feel guilty for even that spark of contentious emotion.



The Senator knew that his clerk was enraptured. Nearly all that stepped into the Senator's presence fell victim to his charms. It was the power of a lost art passed down through generations of Bradwell men, one he had been honing since age six. Senator William Bradwell was the best dressed person one could ever hope to meet. Two cavernous closets in his uptown house contained legions of bespoke suits, shoes for any possible occasion and every style of headwear that would become popular within the next ten years. To Bradwell, fashion was no abstract set of societal rules. It was an art to practice, a tool to use, a map to follow and a wild stallion to break. Equal care must be placed in adhering to it and in shaping it, with any given outfit, on any given day. Such minute details must be taken into account as the warmth of the day's light and the humidity in the air. Most importantly, once an outfit was chosen, it must be worn with confidence, not to be changed or altered unless circumstances made change unavoidable. Generations of Bradwell men learned and practiced this art. It helped them compensate for their anger management problems.

Today's outburst was the result of a mistake on the Clerk's part, over which the Senator was not just enraged, but genuinely fearful. Two days ago William Bradwell had informed him that a woman would be coming to the office soon. This alone should have alerted the clerk to the importance of her visit, as William abhorred the thought of women in politics, and rarely allowed them into his office. He had instructed the clerk to send her straight up, rather than have her sign in and wait in the lobby until she was sent for. Yet the clerk was here, in his office, announcing the woman's arrival and checking if Bradwell was ready for company. To make matters worse he'd even had her sign in.

“Leave this mess,” the Senator thundered, “Bring her up here now.” He took a seat behind his gigantic maplewood desk, folded his hands over his lap and impersonated a more collected man.

Lies are a politician’s most useful tool and most dangerous foil. If kept within their own neat lines they can open doors, win battles, bring crises to a halt. If allowed to become knotted, they could consume one so thoroughly as to drag them down from greatest heights to most abysmal depths. Finding himself entangled in such a knot of lies, William Bradwell always opted for the Gordian solution. And here she was, stepping through the door into his office.

“Mr. Bradwell,” she greeted him with a grin, “How wonderful it is to finally make your acquaintance.” The woman looked down at the heap of papers she had just walked over, but did not mention it.

It had been a long time since William had heard himself referred to as anything other than Senator. He almost winced at the shame of it. “Miss Arté. The pleasure’s all mine. Though it is a shame such unpleasant circumstances brought us together.”

“Unpleasant circumstances bring me to most of my clients, Senator.”

“I’d imagine so. Tell me, how did a woman manage to become such a successful assassin?”

Miss Arté bristled. “Are we safe to discuss business openly?”

“When I moved my offices here I had the walls reinforced to make them soundproof. You never know who’s a spy.”

“How do you know I’m not a spy?”

“Women do not have a good track record as spies. Take those lovely female patriots of the Great War... Edith Caville, Louise de Bettignies, Gabrielle Petit... People don't take you seriously, until they have to kill you.”

“We make great assassins for that same reason. People don't take us seriously, until we've killed them. But you clearly have a strong opinion of women. I'm curious as to why you've decided to hire me.”

“It's a woman I need killed. Hiring a man to kill her would be... distasteful. A decade ago when I first came into office I'd never have considered working with you, but now, despite my best efforts, you have power with which you can do far more damage than the taking of a single life.”

“And how sweet it felt using that power to remove you from office,” The assassin smirked. “Do not be mistaken, Mr. Bradwell, I am here to work for you, not with you. The work I do is done alone.”

“I intend to pay you handsomely, send you thousands of miles away, and ask you to kill someone who has wronged me gravely. I will not have you working for me with no means to prove your efficacy and seeing as I can't have you marching back into my offices carrying a severed head on a silver plate, I expect to travel by your side to see the job done well.”

“Then perhaps it's best you find someone else to do your work.”

William ignored this and pushed on with the grim business.

“Her name is Elizabeth Hill.”

The assassin opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She narrowed her eyes at him, an incredibly minor mistake that made the Senator ever so curious.

“Does that name mean something to you?” he asked.

“Should it? What has she done that made you come to me.”

“She fleeced me. A great deal of money disappeared from my house while she was in my employ as a maid. That, and I have reason to believe she’s been seducing my wife. Now I don’t take kindly to those who steal from me, usually I’d have their knees capped or their tongues taken. But my wife running off with another woman, a poor one no less... Well, that’s a threat to my career which can only be answered one way. So now that you know the personal nature of this matter and the stakes of making sure it is resolved hastily, what say we come up with some reasonable fee in addition to your usual rates and you let me tag along with you and make damn sure you do your job right.”

“Where exactly would we be going?”

“Rameses, Nevada. Never heard of the place in my life, but according to my research and a broken little ticket taker in Pennsylvania Station, it’s the dusty little corner of nowhere to which my wife has flown.”

“And you believe when we find your wife we’ll also find Elizabeth?”

“Aurora only bought one ticket, for herself. Either Elizabeth purchased her own under a pseudonym or left on a different train. In any case, I believe they intend to run away together, start a new life far from here. Not in Rameses either. My wife is not naive enough to think I wouldn’t seek her out, which means the train was only the first leg of the journey. If we’re to find her, we’ll need to get going before their trail goes cold.”

“When do you intend to leave?”

“As early as the last train tonight, as soon as I’m through with my business here. Is that enough time for you to pack for our little adventure?”

The assassin fell silent. The Senator studied her, as he often did to anyone with whom he conducted business. In the depth of her breathing, the quick darting of her eyes about the room, he sensed somehow that this matter was personal to her as well. How had Elizabeth earned the attention of the murderess for hire? Asking outright would get him nowhere. He would have to find a way to extract the information when the opportunity arose.

“That will do. Where will we meet?” She seemed resolute.

“Here. I will have my chauffeur take us to the station. Be here by half-past six.”

“If I accept this job, then I will see you tonight.”

“There is still the matter of your payment to work out.”

“We can discuss this on the train.” She turned towards the door, eager to leave.

“No ma’am, that is not how I operate. We work out the details here and now.”

“My rate is ten thousand. I’ll add another five hundred for every life I have to take to get to your mark. I do not kill unless I absolutely must, so there’s no need to worry about me running up your tab. I will accept payment after the job is done. I’m leaving. Don’t have me followed, or you’ll be down a henchman, and an assassin.”

William appreciated her directness. Though he was disconcerted at the thought of working with a woman, he was pleased to see she could at least imitate the cold efficiency of a man. The rate was a tad exorbitant, but money was not an object when it came to revenge. He stopped her right before she walked out.

“Miss Arté, one last thing. If you have need of any of the tools to aid in Ms. Hill’s destruction...”

“I assure you Mr. Bradwell, I have all the tools I need.” And she stepped out without another word.

William sighed into the empty air. “Suit yourself.”

The Senator retreated to his desk, but did not sit down. Instead, he picked up his letter opener, grabbed it by the blade, and began to twist. Gently, he unscrewed the ivory handle, and slid it off, revealing a thin metal key. He had always been fond of secrets and hidden things. They made him feel a power unlike anything else, even beyond that of taking his seat in the senate chamber. He marched over to the grand bookshelf that clung to the wall of his office, half of the books on which had been hollowed out to make room for sensitive documents of great value to himself or others who he needed to control. Kneeling down, blade in hand, he pushed the fragile key into a hidden keyhole behind the second lowest shelf of books. He turned it fully two times, then retracted it and stepped back.

Entirely silent but for a subtle clicking, the bookcase receded into the wall, and swung back to reveal a warmly lit, hexagonal room covered in fine woods and velvets. On every surface where one could be placed, hung or mounted, there was a firearm in pristine condition. They were sorted by purpose, with small arms sprawled neatly on low shelves, over drawers of ammunition. Above the small arms on their respective walls were all manner of shotguns, repeaters, rifles, and even a wall of swords and other sharp objects. It was the most varied private arsenal in New York City, and William was more proud of it than anything else he had built. He always imagined dying here in some last-stand shootout as the lower floors of the building were

stormed by men of lesser worth. He knew that he was too dangerous to be left alive, that someday his political enemies would find a way to gun him down. His very existence was too dangerous to the world they were trying to create, and he could not stand alone against the tides of social change. He would cling to that rocky precipice that was the moral high ground until those tides rose too high and rushed too fast, and finally swept him away. He contented himself with the thought that, when they did come for him - the feminists and the communists and the unionizers - he would take out as many as he could. In his fantasies, it did not always happen here in his office. Sometimes it was a great chase under the constellations of Grand Central, shooting wildly into the encroaching horde of proles pouring out of every passageway, then fighting with his fists when the ammo ran out until they overwhelmed him. Sometimes it was a caesarian betrayal on the steps of the great white Capitol, where after every stab he would arise and fight back as long as his anger would carry him on, before relaxing into a river of his and his murderers' blood and dying a glorious martyr. In these final acts of violence, he intended to leave the world a better place - to cleanse it if only slightly. This would be a good death.

He made his selections, rousing them gently from their extended slumber. It had been too long since they were sealed in this secret chamber. He sat with each of them, dusting them with a cotton cloth, cleaning out the barrels, oiling the stocks to preserve a healthy shine. Cleaning his weapons was the only time William Bradwell felt a vague understanding of why a person might want to have a child. He was consumed by the tenderness of this maintenance. When all his toys were fit for play, he packed them away in a padded, waterproof case which was sealed with two hefty padlocks, the codes to which were 1215 and 1776. With his babies tucked away to rest, the case stowed under his desk and the arsenal hidden away once more, William was ready to return

home and pack his bags. As he marched out of his offices, the clerk offered to call his chauffeur, but William didn't respond. The long walk home would help him sort his thoughts.

To William, New York City was an appetite suppressant. It endorsed a diet of coffee and rare, desynchronized meals. Everything outside the doors of his office and his mansion repulsed him: the odors, the smoke, the visible grime on every inch of concrete, but most of all the people. He'd devised ways to make them suffer for ruining his commute simply by virtue of their presence on the same streets he walked.

William saw an old woman sitting on the sidewalk, collecting coins in an old can. The woman repelled the ever shifting tides of city foot traffic which swerved and swung to avoid crossing too close, and gazed up into the windows of all the nearby buildings, having rather been perceived as tourists than locked eyes with a beggar they had no intent to help. Had they not made every effort to avoid looking in her direction, they would have seen her head slumped over, her tired eyes half closed, unworried about guarding the few green pennies at the bottom of her can. She had something tucked under her shoulder, the shape and size of a doll, but so caked in city filth that it was impossible to tell for sure. The Senator quickly produced his wallet and withdrew a small stack of five dollar notes. They were newly minted, unwrinkled and unripped. He held them over the bean can until the woman made the effort to lift her head and meet his stare. She gasped at the sight of the money.

“You look like you could use this more than I could,” he said to her.

“Oh my... thank god for people like you sir. ”

She looked to be on the verge of tears. This was as William intended.



“I wish I could just give it to you ma’am. Unfortunately, I have a personal philosophy which I practice in my politics, and must therefore consider in all actions I take in life. I do not believe any citizen of this great country is above an honest day’s work for their money.”

“Sir... I’ve burns, all up my arms. They make it so painful to work. The factories won’t take a woman that can’t lift her arms more than a half-hour. I tried to work a switchboard but my hands would start to shake and I couldn’t connect the jacks.”

“Even so ma’am, for a dollar to pass hands without some item or service being provided in return would be a shame and a disservice to both parties.”

She scowled at him, “If you mean to solicit...”

“No ma’am. I apologize if I’ve given you the wrong idea. You are quite obviously incapable of providing any desirable service. But it seems you still have goods that might be fit for an exchange.” With one hand still holding the money above the can, he used the other to gesture towards the woman’s doll. Her face wrinkled in pain.

“I can’t. I can’t give this away. It’s all I have left that was my daughters. Our apartment burned to the ground and she...”

“Now ma’am I can see it’s very important to you but I promise it means very little to me. I don’t need the story to go along with it.”

“Leave me alone. I don’t know who you are but I hate you. Tormenting me like this... how dare you?”

“Suit yourself.” He remained silent, crouched in front of her. He removed his wallet from his pocket again, but instead of putting the money away as she thought he would, he drew another five notes and held a full one hundred dollars above the can.

The woman looked at the money, and then at William with as much spite as could fit between her two gaunt cheeks. She handed him the doll. He pinched it between his thumb and index finger, holding it by the foot, and let the hundred dollars fall atop the pennies at the bottom of the can.

“Pleasure doing business,” he smiled at her. As he walked away he could hear her sobbing above the noises of the foot traffic. Once he’d gotten a couple blocks’ distance, he dropped the charred doll into the nearest trash can. He realized he would have to scrub those two fingers to the bone to get off all the filth they had accrued on that short journey. He didn’t mind though. He’d gotten his money’s worth.

#### 4. DIANA SOMMERFIELD-WARD.

The assassin's real name was, of course, Diana Sommerfield-Ward. There were two and a half people in the world, including Diana herself, that knew her occupation. One was her mother, who had taught her to shoot and couldn't tell pine tar from olive oil. The other was Elizabeth Hill, who was half-certain Diana was an assassin, but didn't think it sensible to ask outright.

Diana was experiencing a new emotion that wavered between perplexed and verklempt. She struggled daily to maintain a delicate work-family balance, one it seemed the ex-Senator was unwittingly keen on upsetting. The orderly picture of her life was turning out to be a jigsaw puzzle, whose pieces were popping out of place faster than she could fit them back together. No, she was not used to this feeling at all.

She'd initially found it odd when Elizabeth had decided to take a second job. She could barely manage the one she had. Now it all made sense, though. This wasn't an isolated offence, it was a modus operandi, and the ex-Senator was a mark. But why had this once-familiar woman come for her and Sebastian. Surely a curator's wages weren't enough to make him the target of such a complex robbery.

Above all this confusion, the one question that was twisting her stomach into knots, making it hard to breathe, occupying every corner of her combusting mind: was Sebastian okay?

Diana loved Sebastian more than she loved anything or anyone, to the confusion of many who knew her. She had met him in the Brooklyn Museum, standing under a great wall of sketches by Gustav Klimt. Both were on the job. Sebastian was analyzing the positions of the sketches on the wall. They were aligned roughly at head height. Diana was tracking the son of a

shipping mogul who had been acquitted after an obvious insurance fraud scheme. Two ships had been lost to the icy North-Atlantic with none of their usual cargo but all of their usual crew. She was keeping track of him out of the corner of her eye when a well dressed man, never turning to look at her, asked, “what do you think of the wall?”

“Excuse me?” She was caught off guard, “Oh, um, I’ve never seen Klimt’s work before. But I like it, I suppose.”

“Not the work, the wall as a whole. All of these sketches, hung at the same height, lined up, so orderly. It’s all very logical this way, I suppose. Why make the patrons crane their neck to see the art?”

“I don’t imagine they’re placed to bring out the best in the wall.”

“My thoughts exactly! Imagine, for a minute, that they were brought closer together - the sketches - displayed in a tall cluster rather than one long row. The negative space is just as much a piece of the art as the lines and the shading, and our wall should be just as much a part of the exhibit as the Klimt. As empty paper directs the vision towards the object so should the empty wall highlight the sketch.”

“And if the patrons have to crane their neck to see the art?” Diana quipped.

He finally turned to look at her, “Well, then they too can suffer for art. Sebastian Ward, curator.” He reached out a hand to shake hers. She took it and gave him the firmest shake he’d ever felt. “You’re very beautiful.”

“Diana Sommerfield, patron. You’re very forward.” She hadn’t intended to give her full name. She wasn’t often caught off guard.

“Pardon me, madam. I’m in the habit of recognizing great beauty rather than shying away from it. Necessary practice for the job.” He was completely earnest.

“No harm in that, I suppose. I do see what you mean about the wall. It is all a tad... boring lined up this way.”

“Ah but Ms. Sommerfield, we’re in an art museum! Boring is tradition. We draw the greatest crowds by taking these magnificent, magical designs and displaying them in the most banal manner conceivable. Ah, pardon me again, exclaiming the frustrations of my job to a stranger. I do love it here, truly. Getting to walk these halls each day, amongst artifacts of divine inspiration, it is truly a privilege.” Diana gazed up at the art on the wall, and at the wall itself, truly seeing it now. She realized then what she would come to love most about the man beside her. He had a way of imparting on others the lens of beauty through which he saw the world, and the drive to bring that beauty to the spaces in which it was absent or dwindling. Suddenly she was envisioning the paintings on the wall shifting in space, falling out of their perfect alignment, becoming caught in each other's gravity. She saw the wall as he did, and told him as much.

“I appreciate that. It isn’t often my musings are indulged. I’d love to repay the favor. The café here recently acquired a new chef who seems to have come to the profession out of a desire to legally commit mass poisonings. But I’m off work at six o’clock if you’d like to get dinner.”

At the mention of mass poisonings, Diana realized her mark had left the room. To Sebastian’s disappointment, she pardoned herself and fled the exhibit. Flitting between galleries desperately searching for the escaped heir, her mind was still half occupied by the wall of misplaced Klimts and the man who wished to rectify their tidy disunity. She did not like to linger

too long at her hunting grounds, but it seemed if she were to encounter this spectacular man again, she would need to return to the scene of a crime she had yet to commit.

The next time Diana encountered Sebastian was precisely a week later, the day before the reopening of the Klimt exhibition. She saw him first, from the adjacent gallery, his gaze once again fixed on the wall. As she approached the roped off room, a security guard explained that the exhibit was closed to the public until further notice. Sebastian heard this and turned in her direction. His face lit up immediately.

“It’s okay, you can let her through.”

Diana stepped around the rope barricade and into the gallery room. The sketches were hanging in one tall cluster. The remaining walls of the gallery were empty, except for the unaccompanied placards.

“Mr. Ward,” she greeted him, “I see you’ve finally had your way with the Klimt.”

“Ms. Sommerfield, how lovely it is to see you again. I wish I could take credit for this masterpiece but... well it’s been the most peculiar week.”

“Please, do tell.”

“The full story is a tad gruesome.”

“I’ve always been more comfortable than most with things grim and grotesque.”

He smiled, wide eyed in disbelief of all he was about to say. He told her of how the day they had met, not long after she had departed his company, the museum was forced to close early due to the spontaneous asphyxiation of an otherwise healthful young man. The museum remained closed for nearly a week under the pressure of the deceased’s father, who insisted on two separate investigations into the mysterious circumstances of his son’s death. Apparently,

someone had snuck into the closed building amongst the chaotic clashings of law enforcement and private investigators to rearrange the gallery precisely as he had envisioned it for so many months.

To Sebastian's surprise, Diana did not seem shocked at any of this.

"Perhaps our vigilante redecorator was listening in on our conversation last week."

"Perhaps indeed." He paused to revel in the beauty of the empty space. "The neck does get sore looking at higher sketches."

"Is it worth it? Suffering for this art?"

"Oh, I'd say."

"Thank you for inviting me in so we might bear it together."

"Of course, Ms. Sommerfield. A shame the public will never get to see it. My superiors want the gallery restored immediately. I've been procrastinating as long as I can."

She was not sad to hear that her hard work would be undone. It had achieved the desired effect.

"Mr. Ward, when you've finished with that, perhaps you can make good on your offer from our last encounter and take me to dinner."

"There's all the motivation I need."

Entering their apartment, Diana was relieved to see that everything had been left in its rightful place. There were no signs of conflict or struggle. Nothing obvious had been stolen. None of this brought her comfort. Sebastian was gone.

This early in the day he should have been at work. She rushed to the phone and dialed his office. No answer. She flipped through his address book, called his supervisor. But Sebastian hadn't been to work in days, nobody had been answering his calls. Diana thanked the supervisor for his time and hung up before the ringing and beating in her ears grew loud enough to stop her hearing him at all.

She packed her bags in a blind panic, fitfully fantasizing about all the things which could have happened to Sebastian. He must have caught Elizabeth stealing from them and tried to stop her. He must have confronted her, tried to talk her out of it, completely ignorant to the possibility that it wasn't just petty larceny, that he was dealing with someone with the knowhow to cheat a man like William Bradwell out of his money and wife. Diana knew the way he thought, his ignorance to the cruelty of which some people were capable. It was precisely why she had chosen to keep her profession a secret. She had actually been meaning to tell him but it never seemed to come up in conversation. It would have meant unthreading a tapestry of lies she had been carefully weaving for his sake alone. She couldn't know how he would respond.

Of course, she couldn't give up being an assassin either. It was what she was best at, what she'd known she would become since childhood (hers was not a protective upbringing). It made her feel a rush to track down a mark. The research involved - mobilizing her informants, staking out routines, noting vulnerabilities in schedules - it made the trickiest jobs the most fulfilling. Though she never stuck around to watch her marks die, there was always a rush the moment she knew she'd done her job and done it well. The money was nothing to be scoffed at either. The life it afforded her and Sebastian was miles better than they could ever have achieved on the museum's wages alone. The pine-tar excuse had been her mother's idea.



All of this brought Diana back to the awful possibility she couldn't quite rule out. While women-in-crime was an ever expanding field, the likelihood of two living in the same household together for six months without either ever catching onto the other's activities just didn't add up. Elizabeth had come to them claiming to be a relation of Diana's. She had a large enough and distant enough family to make this unverifiable. Elizabeth must have known this. What if Sebastian had been caught up in a plot to exact revenge on an assassin who, by the law of averages alone, was bound to be caught eventually? What if Diana was Elizabeth's target?

It was all too strange, too unreal. She sat down on the floor and began to meditate. It was a technique she had learned from her mother, meant to settle the mind before jobs which required unparalleled focus. She had taken to it more than any of her siblings, and it had come in handy many times throughout her career. She desperately hoped it would work now.

First she focused on the breath coming into her body, felt it travelling through her nose, down into her lungs. She envisioned the exchange of new and spent air. The eternal discord of traffic outside her window drifted further and further away, as the rushing of blood through her ears and the beating of her heart grew louder and louder. Though her eyes were open, she saw nothing past the end of her nose. As her breathing slowed, so too did her perception of time.

Within minutes she was completely detached from the world around her, and it was time to begin flexing her muscles. First she took control of her heart. She could hear and feel it beating within her chest. She slowed it as much as she could without putting herself in danger, pulsing it intentionally every couple seconds, each of which felt like a minute. She then increased her heart rate. Though it felt normal in her altered perception of time, it beat as though she were running for her life. She did not like to do this long. She thought down her body, head

to toe, increasing and decreasing sensation in each of her limbs. She felt them grow numb and then come back tingling and stinging, and then grow numb again. Diana brought herself slowly back into the world around her. Only a few minutes had passed, though it felt as though an hour had gone by. She was completely calm, still entirely aware of the gravity of her situation.

She floated back onto her feet, and made her way out the front door and upstairs to the apartment immediately above her own. She removed the key from her pocket and stepped into her private laboratory. She had never been quite sure about keeping work so close to home, but the convenience of it was perfect. It also meant she was never awoken at two in the morning by the violent stomping of upstairs neighbors, a luxury in the city. She bought the place with her own money under one of her brothers' names, and was careful never to give the super a reason to pay a visit. If someone had walked in, they would have been impressed by how beautifully the place was furnished. If they had begun to search the cabinets, closets, drawers and furniture, they would have discovered a veritable chemistry lab and a stockpile of rare chemicals. Diana had always been more keen on alchemy than shooting or slicing. She was always challenging herself to discover new and more ghastly tinctures, potions and elixirs.

Her favorite so far was a little pill which she stored in double-sealed glass vials in the cabinets above the kitchen sink. It had taken her ages to perfect, and nearly killed her in the process. For all her trouble, she had acquired the perfect murder weapon. It was a slow-acting, aerosolized, asphyxiant, entirely invisible to the naked eye and dense enough to be applied specifically even in crowded environments. Her days of poisoning drinks were over. Once she crushed the capsule between her teeth all she had to do was breathe on her victim and within ten minutes they would be dead, their lungs having crystalized. She had used this method on the

shipping-baron at the Brooklyn Museum. Afterward, she would enter a semi-meditative state which would allow her to slow her breathing, and the effectiveness of the poison on her own lungs, until she could reach a safe location to inhale a neutralizing agent. So long as she was quick about this, she would suffer no long term repercussions aside from an occasional dry cough. She gladly accepted the manageable risk, since no one could catch an assassin who kills with poisoned breath.

She took a dozen of these vials and stored them in a special case she had constructed for securely carrying her work equipment. Along with these, she took two glass bottles of the neutralizing agent - more than enough to see her through this trip. In another section of the case, she packed away her more traditional poisons, those which worked when consumed or applied topically. She had remedies for these as well. This was another reason she liked poisons. One could not so easily heal a bullet wound or a gash from a blade.

She returned to the apartment below and packed her clothes.

She arrived back at the former Senator's offices half an hour early, all of her things gathered into a large red and black suitcase. She hoped her employer would see this as professional punctuality and not evidence of a personal attachment to this job. Bradwell had blindsided her when he'd first mentioned Elizabeth's name, and she feared her reaction had already aroused suspicion. This was a dangerous job, but she had to accept. While she sat waiting, fear for her beloved husband seeped back into her mind. She hated this powerlessness.

William stepped into the lobby of his offices with two bags of his own. Waving curtly at her, he stepped up to the front desk and had a clerk summon his chauffeur. Wordlessly, the

former senator and the assassin stepped outside. A midnight black Phantom pulled up to the curb, and a tall man with a twisted moustache stepped out from the driver's seat to help them with their luggage.

As the train pulled away from the platform, the former Senator attempted conversation. By that point though, his words reached her as if they were being carried across a calm lake from miles away. She was alone, deep inside her mind. She couldn't shake the feeling that someone was in there with her. She scanned up and down her body, sensed the blood rushing through her veins and the electric signals pulsing to every muscle. Physically, nothing was out of place. Still, something was different. She was cohabitating. Something was in there with her. It had great sharp teeth and glowing eyes and it grew simply by being acknowledged. It's name was fear, and Diana was finally making it's acquaintance.

## 5. SEBASTIAN WARD.

Sebastian awoke with a new contender for the worst headache of his life. One of these days he'd have to make a point of *intentionally* getting some sleep. As he settled back into his skin, he took in his new surroundings. It was a long room, dark but for the wispy rays of morning light piercing the cracks in the walls and gaps in the doorframe. By that light he saw twenty man-shaped piles of strewn bedding, which he guessed contained twenty man-shaped men. There weren't this many when he'd encountered them on the path - eight at first, then sixteen very briefly after he'd been struck on the head. A pain in his shoulders alerted him to the fact that his hands were bound behind his back. He tugged at them slightly before the clouds began to gather in his head and he felt consciousness slip away from him again. He considered fighting it, before realizing he didn't want to.

When next his eyes fluttered open, the room was brighter, the man-shapes had departed, and the headache had slightly subsided. The ropes were still as tight as they had ever been. Sebastian had never been tied up before. Lucky for him, he was very bad at it. His unconscious wiggling had caused some difficulty for the man that had bound him, and prevented the knots from being fully tightened. In three minutes of blind fiddling he had shaken himself free. The first thing he did was pat down his jacket, hoping to feel that unfamiliar lump that was the Friar's revolver. His heart sunk at the gun's absence, the final vestige of his original plan wilting away. The first step in devising a new plan was choosing an end goal. Sebastian decided on survival, though that seemed idealistic. He stood up from his nest of offcast ropes and wobbled his way over to the door.

Peering out through the cracks in the old wood, he saw the entire camp of bandits bustling around, doing a wide variety of household chores. Over a wide metal tub, two young men worked at scrubbing clean large piles of laundry. Another received the damp garments and hung them up to dry on long lines stretching between the buildings of what appeared to be an old mining complex. It looked as though they were washing the clothes of the entire camp. Another team was setting out spoons and bowls while a large cauldron of gorgeously fragrant stew boiled away behind them. Others skinned and butchered scruffy horned beasts in a tent farther off. Two or three circled the camp on guard duty. What struck Sebastian most about all of it was how perfectly coordinated it all seemed. All these ruffians, so prone to violence and keen on danger, seemingly content to sit around camp and do chores. It was like a vaudeville act, everyone a moment away from bursting into song. It didn't seem right.

Suddenly, the floor and ceiling switched themselves around as dark clouds crept back into Sebastian's head. By the time gravity righted itself, he had fallen forward, through the double doors and into the bizarre scene outside. His eyes adjusted to the light, only to reveal at least a dozen guns pointed in his direction, the men holding them having abandoned their chores and resumed their banditry. Not the launderers though. They just watched and washed. "Y'all got enough guns on this one? 'Kay, we're gonna keep workin' here."

Among this crowd of antagonists, Sebastian saw the enormous man who had knocked him out after the failed ambush. The revolver in his hand was the Friar's.

"Morning, sunshine," he growled.

"Good morning," croaked the curator. "I was just..."

"Leaving?"

“Hmm? No! Oh no. For sure, not that.”

“Good. Cause I have a *lot* of questions for you. First of which is: who the hell are you? No wallet, no identification, no possessions but the clothes on your back and this here revolver.”

“Um... my name's Sebastian. Ward.”

At that, the bandits bristled, looking back and forth amongst themselves and their leader as though they'd heard his name before. And then they started to laugh. It was a raucous, joyous, knee slapping laughter that shook the camp and sent vibrations through the water in the washtub. Just like that all the guns were down and holstered.

“It seems someone was mistaken about you Mr. Ward. Ghenny, please restrain him and have him saddled up on a horse. Boys, I'm headed into town. You know what that means. And you,” he looked down skeptically at Sebastian, “we'll continue this conversation on the trip into Rameses. Lordy me, *master criminal*. They must be giving anyone that title nowadays.”

Sebastian wiggled once more as the bandit Ghenny wrenched his arms into tighter binds. It wasn't until he was tossed over the back of a black and white colt that he realized just how far he'd been bent out of shape. The dark clouds were constantly pushing inwards from the corners of his mind and pulling him back towards sleep. The bandit leader's smooth, resonant voice awoke him from daydreams and self-pity.

“Mr. Ward,” he said as he unhitched the colt, “My name is Duke Bailey, but I'm sure you know that already seeing as you were sent here to kill or capture me. Right now we're heading into town so that I can get some questions answered. I don't care to spend time in Rameses and Rameses doesn't much care to have me around, so the more of my questions you answer now, the less shooting is likely to happen later. Now, I do apologize for hitting you so hard on the

head, you went down much easier than I expected. That being said you did approach me with a lethal weapon so I'd say I let you off easy, and I hope we can get past this with no hard feelings."

"Apology accepted, Mr. Bailey. I'm sorry I came at you with a gun," Sebast

"Please, call me Duke. Apology also accepted. See? We're off to such a great start."

Duke Bailey led the colt through the mining complex and out through the front gate while Sebastian bobbed on its back. Two men were standing guard in the gatehouse, and they saluted their leader as he walked by.

"This is a remarkable organization you've got going here, Duke."

"Means the world to hear it. These men are my pride and joy."

"I don't mean to change the subject so abruptly, but is there any chance we could finish this journey with me not tied up? I'd love to sit upright on this horse, or even walk. This is a bit rough on the ribs."

"How about you answer my questions and once I get a better sense of what kind of person you are I'll consider your proposal. I don't mean to be cruel. I may forgive you for your attempt on my life but that doesn't mean I'll be letting my guard down around you just yet."

"That's understandable. Ask away."

"First things first, Mr. Ward..."

"Call me Sebastian, please. I think it'll make the whole captor, captive thing a little less odd."

"Alright, Sebastian. Where did you get this gun?"

"It was given to me. The town Friar sent me your way, on a bounty. I'm not usually the bounty hunting type. I was desperate."



“Could’ve fooled me,” Bailey quipped. “I’ve been looking for this gun for two years. It means a great deal to me. Suppose I shouldn’t be surprised it was in the Friar’s care. I myself was placed in the Friar’s care for a time when I was a child. He always thought I’d turn out to inherit some of my mother’s knack for criminality. Didn’t see that his suspicion was driving me right into the footprints she’d left in the sand. She was a bounty hunter, like you, but good at it. The legendary Lilly Bailey.”

“L.B.” Sebastian recalled the engraving, “So that’s her gun.”

“Was her gun. She gave it to me ‘fore she went on the run. Thought I’d lost it, but now I see it was stolen from me. Maybe the Friar was upset that I got to keep some piece of her and he didn’t. Maybe he thought the thing’d turn me bad. Guess he didn’t know I could turn bad just fine on my own.”

“Why’d he care so much about this bounty hunter...” looking up at Bailey, he finally realized why the bandit looked familiar. “Oh.”

“The Father’s my father.”

Then it all clicked, why he’d been sent on this hopeless escapade. “Father Terrance knew I couldn’t catch you,” Sebastian grumbled, “He gave me the gun as bait so that you would come to him.”

“Mr. Ward, you’re a regular sleuth. What brought a man as sharp as you to a dead little town like Rameses?”

“A woman,” was all his dignity allowed him to muster. The bandit began to laugh.

“Shit, you’re one of Lizzie’s marks then? Poor bastard. What palace did she drag you out of?”

“You know Elizabeth?”

He laughed at this. “I am deeply saddened to hear she passed through town and didn’t drop by to say hello. Guess that means her plans are coming together after all.”

“You two are friends?”

“Once upon a time, we were lovers.”

“So she robbed you too?” For a second, Sebastian almost felt smug.

“She could have if she’d wanted to. Hell, I could’ve robbed her too. Never happened though. Professional courtesy.” The bandit looked as close to wistful as he ever had, “My dear Lady Disdain. Where’d you have to fly so fast that you didn’t even have time to stop by for a drink.”

Sebastian felt himself getting hot. There was a silence for a time while Sebastian watched Bailey from the back of the colt. Though he now could see the Friar’s features in Bailey’s face, there was something else that was familiar about him. It troubled Sebastian that he couldn’t place it.

“What do you do Sebastian?” The bandit looked puzzled.

“I’m the head curator for the Brooklyn Museum,” he replied with some confidence.

“That a well paying job?”

“I suppose. It affords me a nice little place in the city. Why do you ask?”

“Well Lizzie tends to go after high profile marks, those she stands to make a lot of money off of, or otherwise those she needs to knock down a peg. I’m just trying to figure out what made her choose you.”

Somehow this comforted Sebastian. Perhaps there was some real connection between himself and Elizabeth at some point. Perhaps he really was special to her, even if not as much as she was to him. “Do you think you could untie me now?”

“Promise you’re not gonna cause any more trouble?”

“Yeah absolutely.”

Duke Bailey walked over to the horse intending to make good on his word. Sebastian stopped him in his tracks by shrugging off the tightly wound ropes and pulling himself up to a sitting position atop the colt.

“Alright,” Bailey was clearly distraught, “You wanna tell me how you did that? Ghenny’s the best we’ve got for knots and ropes and you just shrugged off his work like a bathrobe.”

Sebastian didn’t have an answer, he was just bad at being tied up. “I don’t know. I didn’t really try too hard. I’ve been out of the ropes since we left the camp but I figured I might as well get your permission first so you didn’t shoot me for escaping or just tie me up again.”

“You’re a man of some inexplicable talents Sebastian. Under different circumstances I’d ask you if you wanted to join up.”

“I don’t think I’d be too good at what you do.”

“You never know what you’re capable of unless you try. And most of my men started off looking less hopeful than you. Anyone’s welcome in my gang, it’s just a matter of finding where they belong.”

Listening to Duke Bailey talk with such sentiment about his gang almost made Sebastian want to join them. But under it all he was still set on getting back to his wife.

“I’ve got a question for you now, Duke.”

“Ask away.”

“Why am I on such a tiny horse?”

## 6. RORY REED.

In the early hours of the morning, Aurora Reed had made her way into Rameses atop the bandit leader's giant golden horse. Duke Bailey had agreed to let her borrow it while she searched for answers in town. It was, after all, one of the only respectable horses the bandits had left, and Bailey refused to let his new friend walk into town on her own. What Rory soon realized was that the horse, much like its owner, had a reputation, and the very sight of its shimmering coat was enough to make the townspeople look on with a suspicious respect. She decided she would use this to her advantage in her search for the master criminal Sebastian Ward, and her stolen love Elizabeth Hill.

Bailey had given her some small slivers of advice on where to begin her search, and seeing as this was her first manhunt, she was accepting all the help she could get. She stepped into the sheriff's office, so early in the morning that the sheriff hadn't yet arrived there himself. When he finally made it out, he found Rory leaning against the front door, blocking his way.

"Sheriff Jedediah Peck? I'm looking for a man whom I believe you have some knowledge of."

He eyed her suspiciously, recognizing her metropolitan lilt. It wasn't often city-goers came to Rameses and when they did, they tended to cause trouble. Rory could see the distrust in his eyes, and decided to push on rather than give him time to fester in it.

"His name is Sebastian Ward. Likely traveling in the company of a woman he's been exploiting and manipulating for some time. He's incredibly dangerous and I'm here to see him brought to justice. We're on the same side."

"And you are?"

“My name is Aurora Bradwell,” she said. “Wife to former Senator William Bradwell.”

The sheriff’s brows shot up into the air. He’d heard the name before. Rory hated using her husband’s name, but it never failed to open doors.

“Come inside,” he gestured past her, “and I’ll see what I can do for you.”

The sheriff’s office was sparsely furnished, with a couple of empty cages in the back. On the wall beside the front door was a board of wanted posters with ungenerous depictions of Bailey and several of his men. The sheriff sat down behind the desk and folded his arms.

“I recognize that horse of yours, Mrs. Bradwell. You lifted that off a man who’d been a thorn in my side for half a decade now. And from what I’ve heard, you saved an entire train full of civilians in the process. For that I’m in your debt. Tell me about this master criminal.”

“I’ve already told you all I know.”

“Well that ain’t much to go on is it? What made you think to look here?”

“I received a letter from my friend, a victim of his. She told me they’d be heading here.”

“Well couldn’t he have just as easily written that to throw you off her trail?”

“It was in her handwriting.”

“Maybe he dictated.”

The room grew unnaturally hot. Had anyone been leaning against the metal bars of the cages, they would have been left with a nasty burn.

“Listen, Peck. It may not be a great lead but it’s all I have. I’m looking for someone with a history of criminality and exploitation, who to my best knowledge is or was right here in your town. Now why don’t you do your job and tell me what you know about Sebastian Ward before I do something that’ll get me up on that board over there.”

The sheriff would have laughed if he were any less frightened. “You’re one serious bearcat, Miss Bradwell. Sebastian Ward. Sounds familiar but I can’t quite place it. Think I heard that name down at the Rattler a couple nights back but I’ll be damned if I can remember who from. Hope I’m not sending you out on a goose chase. For both our sakes.”

“Your help is appreciated.”

She stepped outside and unhitched her horse. She wondered if it had a name.

The Spattered Rattler’s exterior was oddly welcoming, lacking the wear and degradation that affected most of the rest of the town.

She pushed her way through the batwing doors, into the tavern which was already bustling. Inside she was immediately greeted by the Inn’s namesake: a coiled, taxidermied rattlesnake with a horrifically reconstructed face and a little top-hat. She looked into its glassy eyes and hoped that whoever was responsible for giving it such eerily human facial features had been punished to the fullest extent of the law.

When the patrons saw Rory, they began to applaud. Even the man behind the bar tipped his hat. Though she didn’t recognize most of them, they all remembered her storming up the train in a blind rage, saving them from the bandits. She wondered what she would tell them if they asked where she had spent the night. She smiled at the admiration that saturated the room. As the shut-in wife of a widely hated man, it was not often she was applauded as a hero.

The man behind the bar looked like he belonged in a castle, not serving drinks in the sweltering American West. He had smooth, black hair that ran down to his shoulders. He wore a top hat, which was just slightly too tall to be in fashion. A well groomed beard and twisted

moustache adorned his face. He locked eyes with her as she approached, clapping with passive fascination at the folk hero who'd entered his place of business.

"My name's Rory Reed," she said, confident that the man before her was not of the type to place much stock in her husband's position.

"I know exactly who you are. You're the Deadeye Dame of Rameses Stretch. Don't suppose you'd like a drink? It's a bit early I know, but any one of these folks would gladly cover your tab."

"No. Thank you. I'm actually looking for someone and was hoping you could point me in a direction."

"Don't slow down do you? Name's Garret Meade, owner of the establishment. Who can I help you find?"

She told him as much as she'd told the sheriff.

"My, oh my. And Jebediah sent you here did he? To save you from future disappointment, don't put a lot of faith in the things Jeb tells you he did or heard when he was drunk. Man gets carried out of here on the regular. Not a good look for a sheriff, if you ask me."

"Was there or wasn't there talk of a Sebastian Ward in your tavern?"

"A lot gets talked about in here."

As the conversation between the Deadeye and the Barman continued, the room became an airless oven. The patrons longed for last night's chill to return and make them clutch their bare arms for warmth. Even the snake began to sweat. The one prolific day drinker in the crowd swore aloud that his beer was starting to boil, and though he was correct, everyone thought it was



probably time to cut him off. An elderly couple sitting in the corner smiled gleefully as they wiped the sweat from each other's brows and wondered at the magical climate of this town.

Rory had finally had it. She slammed a fist down on the bar, with her other hand on the gun holstered at her hip, and demanded her give her a straight answer.

He smiled at her, wide-eyed. The outburst amused him. He was taunting her, trying to get a glimpse of what the passengers on the train had seen the day before. He wanted to meet the Deadeye Dame, not Aurora Reed. So she indulged him. She pulled the revolver from the holster, and to the collective horror of the patrons, aimed just to the right of Gareth Meade's head. Overflowing with rage, she fanned the gun, landing five perfect shots on the bottles that lined the wall behind him. They exploded into clouds of shattered glass and booze. She spun around and, as everyone ducked for cover, fired a final shot which tore the hat off the unsuspecting snake. Bits of fabric and perspiration burst into the air. When she turned to look across the bar, Gareth was clapping just as he had been when she walked in, first slowly, then picking up speed and enthusiasm. Soon he was waving his arms around the room, gesturing for others to join in the applause. The patrons emerged from behind chairs and beneath tables, and cheered wildly for the very woman they'd been hiding from. Gareth stepped out from behind the bar and shouted, "Brava, brava! The Deadeye Dame of Rameses Stretch!" He grinned at his good work, having successfully turned her into a carnival attraction. She despised the man, but couldn't deny her love for the wild, frothing admiration he had evoked. She smiled back.

"I suppose they'll be covering my tab?" she asked, gesturing at the bottles she'd destroyed.

“Look at ‘em,” he whispered over the roar, “it’s barely nine in the morning but that’s a crowd in the mood to drink. You’ve covered your own tab. And yes, there was talk of the man you’re looking for. A couple nights back, the Friar was in, drinking away, talking about some sap by that name he’d scraped off the floor of his church. Doesn’t sound much like the master criminal you’re looking for, but he’s got the name. I’d start there.”

“The Friar? Drinking?” she was suspicious of his every word.

“Ms. Reed, you’re out west now. Everyone and their mother comes in here and has a drink on a Friday night. And their Friar has three.”

“Thank you, Mr. Meade.”

“No,” he looked around at the crowd of people, approaching the bar for a drink or hoping to have a word with Rory, “Thank you.”

She left without addressing the swarm of fans approaching to sing her praises, buy her a drink, offer her a job or propose marriage.

Her walk to the Friar’s rectory allowed her to get a clear look at town.

Rameses was nestled in a woefully inhospitable corner of desert where the transcontinental rail pierced the mountains to the west. These mountains made the nights in Rameses uncomfortably long, tucking away the sun long before its light abandoned the cities on the coast. Main Street held everything of any importance to a visitor: the sheriff’s office, the chapel, the Spattered Rattler, the general store, and a slew of residences owned by the crumbs of the town’s upper-crust. To the north, Main Street became the mountain road, connecting Rameses with the mines that had once brought the town life and now housed those whose presence spelled death. To the south sat the train station. First Street ran parallel Main, and was

named with the assumption that Rameses would eventually have more streets. It was a narrow road of stacked hovels, built quickly and haphazardly to accommodate an influx of gold-rushers. First street also housed the old town hall which had been abandoned three decades ago when Sheriff Zachary Peck ran uncontested for town Mayor and lost after receiving only one vote, from himself. The other two votes cast were write-ins for the town's two remaining horses, which denied Peck the majority. As a lame-duck in a town approaching anarchy, Peck mandated the horses be sold. The only other notable building on First Street was a long disused stable, which now housed the horses the bandits had left behind.

The Spattered Rattler and the Friar's chapel were on opposite ends of Main Street, giving Rory and her horse the opportunity to take in all the sights and sounds the town could offer. She was underwhelmed.

The chapel was no less dilapidated than the rest of the town, its high facades covered in chipped blue paint and its steepled cross loose and acting as a weathervane. Beside the building was a small, unfenced graveyard. Rory hitched her horse. Glancing off to her left she saw the train that had almost brought her to Rameses, now reunited with its bandit-severed locomotive, being prepared for the last leg of its delayed journey towards San Francisco. She was surprised to have encountered resistance so early in her journey, and though she didn't expect to find any use for it in the chapel, reloaded her revolver just to avoid a similar surprise.

Just through the carved double doors, she found the man she was looking for. He was kneeling in prayer at the altar, though he didn't seem invested. At Rory's entrance he leapt to his feet and turned around. His brow furrowed. He had been expecting someone else. The bottom of his robes were dusted with sand and dirt, and his brow dripped sweat.

“Friar. I’m looking for someone, and I believe you may be able to help.”

“Is that someone Jesus Christ?”

“No.”

“Never is. Richard Terrance, town Friar. I’ll help as best I can, though I should warn you I’m expecting company and may be drawn away. Who is it you’re looking for? Though few souls pass through these doors, I know the people of Rameses well.”

“His name is Sebastian Ward. I was told you know of him.”

The Friar’s calm gaze twisted into a curious stare, and Rory knew she was going to have to answer more questions before hers was addressed.

“And who might you be, to have come looking for him?”

“My name is Aurora Bradwell, I’ve come a long way to find him. He’s a thief, and an exploiter of women. I intend to make him pay.”

“Though all sinners must be rightly punished, perhaps it is best you leave this man’s punishment in the hands of the Lord.”

From the look on her face he knew she would not.

The Friar sighed, “I do know a man by that name, and I believe I know the sins of which you speak. He passed through those same doors not twenty four hours prior. Though I’ve not a clue-”

The door clattered open and a young man ran breathlessly into the chapel.

“Father Terry!” he said, “He’s here!”

Friar's curious countenance fell stern and cold.

“Thank you Stanley. Pardon me, child. Company has arrived.”

He departed for the rectory as the room grew hot behind him. When Rory turned to leave, the child was gone. She left the chapel, hoping to see who could have caused such commotion. Main Street was coming alive as the town's tired denizens stumbled out of their houses. Walking down the mountain path, discernible by his humongous silhouette, was Duke Bailey. Beside him was a small man on a small horse. She left Conrade hitched in front of the church and walked in their direction.

She recognized the man atop the horse. She'd seen him bound in the corner the night before. He was untied now, and staring vacantly at her as she approached.

"Well if it ain't Rory Reed," Bailey smiled, "Wasn't expecting to see you again so soon. Can't say I'm displeased."

Though her heart belonged to Elizabeth, she enjoyed the bandit's harmless flirtations. "The pleasure's mine. But, what are you doing strolling into a town that would see you hanged? And who's your new friend?"

Bailey was interrupted before he could answer. "Hands in the air!" "Well if it ain't Duke, Goddamned Bailey. Keep your hands above your fuckin' head big shot. You've gotten uglier since last I saw you. I got a heads up you'd been lurking around town today. You've been turned in by your own papa. If you had a heart, that might be plenty enough to break it. Gonna let me take you in, or should I shoot you right here and now?"

The man atop the horse threw his hands up without hesitation, but Duke didn't budge. Rory had an inkling of a plan, and no time to think it through. She shrieked and threw her arms around Bailey's broad torso, placing herself between the sheriff and the gun.

"Mrs. Bradwell? Step away from this-"

“What is the meaning of this?” she shouted back, “Put that thing down! Why are you pointing a gun at my husband?”

“Ma’am I don’t know what the hell you’re talkin’ about but I’d advise you to stand aside lest I need to put this outlaw down.”

“Outlaw? Who in God’s name do you think you are, calling a United States Senator an outlaw?”

He hesitated, and squinted at Bailey. Doubt had taken root. “There seems to be some confusion...”

“Indeed there does. If you don’t put that down this instant we will make sure Governor Sheldon hears about this.”

“You’re saying this is...”

“Senator William Bradwell of New York. My husband. We’ve been traveling together with...” she hadn’t accounted for the man on the horse when devising an explanation, “my brother in search of the criminal of whom we spoke earlier.”

Rory hadn’t expected Bailey to speak up in his own defense, and was entirely unprepared for how well he imitated her accent. “My wife and I were aboard that train when the bandits stranded it. I opted to see the passengers safely into town, fully confident of her ability to handle the roughians on her own. Of the two of us, she’s better with a gun, and I’m louder on the approach. I am not accustomed to roughing it through the desert, but I believe that it is my duty to help the people of this nation, be they of my constituency or otherwise. Now I won’t be asking you to thank me, but if you could please lower your gun, I promise not a word of this mishap will get to your governor.”

Sheriff Peck looked impossibly confused as he holstered his weapon. “Sir, I am deeply sorry for any offence I may have caused you. Pardon me for my...”

Rory cut him off, “Sheriff, you are pardoned. Now go and do your job.”

“Right. Thank you ma’am,” he turned to Bailey again and added, “Best of luck to you, and your wife and brother-in-law. If I can be of any further service in helping you apprehend this criminal, you know where to find me.”

The sheriff retreated to his office, unsure of what had just happened and determined not to think on it further.

“Bradwell, huh? Wouldn’t have taken you for a Senator’s wife,” Bailey quipped.

“Wouldn’t have taken you for a Senator.”

He laughed and turned to face her. “Ms. Reed, you just saved that man’s life.”

“I saved your life, Bailey. Or was I wrong about who was holding a gun to who?”

“I concede, Peck had his gun on me, and at that distance I believe there was a chance he could have hit me, maybe even fatally.”

“You concede that Peck had his gun on you?”

“Yes ma’am. But Little Bill Stockton, James Flank, Davis Miller, Twitch Carson, and both of the Gallagher twins had their guns on him.”

She looked around, searching for the faces of the men she’d met the night before. “You’re joking.”

He shook his head.

“Are they invisible?”

Bailey pointed at various locations around town. “Church belltower, third floor suite of the Rattler Inn, roof of the municipal building, and out front of Malton’s Provisions hiding behind the newspaper. Oh and the Gallagher twins are in that tree.”

Though well hidden, she could see each of them from where she stood, and they could see her.

“I didn’t realize you came so prepared.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed, Ms. Reed, my heart cannot take it. Tell you what, seeing as you saved my men and I from the hassle of a shootout, we’ll consider this a favor. That brings your countdown to four if I’m not mistaken.”

“Duke Bailey you are absolutely insufferable, and a pleasure to be around.” The man on the horse jolted beside her, as one does when they fall asleep upright. “Who’s your drowsy friend?”

“Funny thing about that...”

Bailey trailed off, drew his gun and aimed it over Rory’s shoulder. She stepped aside and turned to see who he was aiming at. It was the kindly Friar, and his rifle. Rory played the same gambit.

“Friar, there’s been a mistake, this man is...”

“No point to that,” Bailey stopped her, “Not with him.”

“Son,” began the Friar. “I expected the Sheriff would have you in custody by now. I’ll have to bring you in myself.”

“Father. What makes you think I’ll go?”



“Come now, Richard. You know I can’t let you leave again. I’ve already got a plot dug for you in my yard. If you’re not ready for a reckoning why did you come back to a town that wants you dead?”

“I’m here to say goodbye. My men and I are done with this pile of rocks. We’re leaving Rameses, and I don’t expect to see you again.”

“Son, I made a terrible mistake bringing you into this world. I’ve spent years agonizing over my one sin that led to so many more. I’ve come to realize that you’re my punishment from God, and the only way for me to atone is to take you out of this world.”

Without thinking, Rory drew her own gun, and leveled it at the Friar’s head.

“Ms. Bradwell,” he didn’t take his eyes off Bailey, “Stay out of this.”

“Don’t mean to get caught up in family business, but I’d prefer if you let Richard here walk free.”

The Friar was fuming now, “I will not let him leave further stains on my soul! Though I’d prefer to leave this business to the hangman, I’ll do what I must to end this madness here.”

Rory had never been in a standoff before. The tension of it excited her. She wondered what would happen next.

The man atop the horse bleated pathetically, then toppled onto an unexpected Duke Bailey.

## 7. SEBASTIAN WARD.

Sebastian had been watching the chaos unfold from above. The mid-morning sun was torture on his head, and it was taking all of his energy to stave off the dark clouds pressing in at the corners of his sight. When the guns came out, he started paying more attention, but this distracted him from his other task. When the clouds finally overwhelmed him, the world turned sideways, and the ground leapt up. At that moment, he was happy he'd been given the short horse.

He didn't make it all the way to the ground. He landed on Duke Bailey. Then a lot of things happened at once.

Seeing an opening, the Friar took his shot, and missed. The bullet landed in the dirt just outside the Spattered Rattler.

Before the Friar could fire again, Rory shot him in the hand. Two of his fingers were blasted clean off, speckling his robes with blood. He glared indignantly at Rory, like a child who'd bitten her father. She didn't like that, so she shot him again, this time in the leg. The Friar's rifle tumbled to the ground, and the Friar followed along.

The sound of gunfire drew Garrett Meade and some of the bolder patrons out of the Rattler. It also brought the Sheriff, still befuddled, back into the street. Many of the sheriff's men ran out of their houses, guns in hand and ready to keep the peace by further disturbing it. Suddenly the once quiet Main Street was bustling with those ready to join the action and those simply hoping to watch.

The bandits, hidden in plain sight about the town, preempted the emergent lawmen and opened fire. The town of Rameses was aflame with the sounds of war, echoing off the mountains and out into the empty desert.

The horse was entirely unphased by the gunshots, though he was worried for the man who'd just fallen off his back.

Sebastian regained consciousness and tumbled to the ground as Bailey shrugged him off, found his footing and joined in the percussive symphony. For the first time since Sebastian saw fear in his eyes.

“Rory!” he shouted, “Get the Friar to safety, and we’ll call us even!”

Sebastian felt arms beneath him, and realized he was being lifted off the ground. In his delirium, he thought an inappropriately buff angel was taking him away to be judged. Considering the events of the last couple weeks, judgement wasn’t looking good for him. When he felt himself being thrown back on the horse, he realized that his saviour was of criminal persuasion rather than angelic.

“Hang on now,” Bailey called out through the fog, “you’ll be out of this soon if you just hang on.”

The horse was pleased at his rider’s return, and took off down Main Street, towards the tracks. It realized after a moment that it hadn’t been this way before and, not feeling particularly adventurous, turned back to run the other way, back to the Bandits’ camp.

Sebastian regained full consciousness as the horse turned, just in time to cling to the creature for dear life. He pulled himself clumsily to a sitting position. Being both upright and conscious proved beneficial for riding. With this particular horse charging straight into a

firefight, these factors only made Sebastian a taller, more anxious target. He ducked as low as he could, and felt the dust and gravel spitting up at his ankles. Luckily he was as skillful at being shot as he was at being bound, which is to say not at all. As he passed the Spattered Rattler, the swarm of curious patrons cheered him on, thankful for the good show. Among them, an elderly couple looked on, fascinated by the brutality of it all.

And then he was out of town, home free, on the way up the mountain back to the bandit's camp.

He thanked the horse, and asked, "Think you can get us the rest of the way?"

The horse whinnied back, though it hadn't understood a word.

"Then I think I'll..." and he slumped over, finally embracing the clouds.

## 8. RORY REED.

Rory dragged the Friar across town, thankful that he'd taken a vow of malnutrition along with his vow of poverty.

She brought the Friar into the rectory and laid him out on his worn and lumpy cot. He shouted at her, the same thing he'd shouted at her no less than thirty times since she started dragging him off the battlefield. "You shot me!"

"Yes. Twice."

"Damn you!" He writhed, spraying blood across his cot, "Why?"

"You tried to kill my friend. If you hold still and stop shouting I'll dress your wounds. If not, I'll have to leave before you draw attention. I don't regret shooting you, but I'd rather not hang for it."

The Friar grunted through the pain and stopped yelling while Rory fetched some cloth with which she could make a bandage. She'd trained to be an army nurse, but never got to see active duty. She'd been discharged for her unorthodox views on non-malfeasance. She tried to tear a piece off the Friar's robe, but he stopped her. It was his only one. He had no pillows from which to grift fabric and only one blanket, so threadbare a fishing net could have better sealed the wound.

She rummaged through his desk and found a simply constructed knife. Though dull, it served its purpose. With some effort, she stabbed it into the cot, and tore two long ribbons of fabric, sending a cloud of dust into the air and spilling old straw across the floor. The Friar closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. He didn't support this solution, but it was preferable to dying or having to go about his holy work in a robe which was cropped above the knee.

His hand was an easy fix. She folded the narrow ribbon around it tightly, covering both his knuckle nubs and his functional fingers, turning the whole appendage into a ball of bloodied fabric.

“If it didn’t come out the other side, I’ll need to extract the bullet before I bandage you up.”

She lifted up the wounded leg, causing another bout of shouting and writhing. Blood poured out of him from two separate holes, an odd stroke of good fortune.

She wrapped his leg more neatly than his hand, and managed to stop the bleeding. While he recovered from the blinding pain, Rory stepped outside. The gunfight was stretching on, and moving closer to the other end of town as the bandits pushed to escape. She couldn’t see Duke Bailey, nor the man on the horse. The golden beast she’d rode in on was still hitched outside, and was agitated by the gunshots. These shabby restraints were functioning on the honor system. The horse would have no problem snapping the post in half, or else wrenching it from the ground entirely. She snuck over, and put one hand on its barrel of a jaw, while the other stroked the silver blaze that ran down the length of its face. The creature reared up, straining against the reigns as the hitching post creaked in distress. Then it began to settle, and snorted loud and low like the growl of a bear.

She unhitched the horse and led him to the graveyard on the other side of the chapel, where he would be safe from any stray gunfire. As she tied him to a drought-withered yew, she noticed an empty grave, dug for an extra large coffin, right against the wall of the rectory. She was glad it would remain empty.

When she returned, the Friar was unconscious, but she could tell from his labored breath that he was alive. Rory didn't know what to do. The gunshots had stopped, the bandits fled or dead. Someone would check on the Friar, and when they did, he was sure to tell them who was responsible for his condition. Nevertheless, he had information she needed. She slapped him lightly on the cheek until his eyes fluttered open.

“God?” he murmured. Then his eyes adjusted and he saw her face. “Not God.”

“Not god,” Rory confirmed, “Though if you help me, and quickly, I can be persuaded to act in a godlier fashion.”

“Your charity astounds. What do you want?”

“Sebastian Ward. Tell me where he is.”

The Friar looked perplexed, and then began to laugh. It was a weak laugh, punctuated by wheezing and wincing, but the cruel mockery behind it made Rory want to unravel his bandages and leave behind a suitable resident for the empty grave on the other side of the wall.

“The oaf that fell off his horse. That's the man you're looking for.”

“What?”

“I sent him as bait for my son. Not very Godly, I know. I am both Franciscan and Pragmatist. It was one sin, enacted to expunge another. Thanks to you, my greatest sin walks free, and my lesser sins fester, unjustified.”

“That can't be right. I'm looking for a master criminal, not some drowsy fool!”

The Friar looked at her with pity. “I don't believe you know the mess you've fallen into, Aurora. I will show you the kindness I owe to every child of God, and advise you as best I can. Leave. Go home. Forfeit her wicked game,” he turned his head to the ceiling, and closed his

eyes, “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes,” and then he whispered, “Ephesians. 4:14.”

And he was out again. No amount of jostling would wake him. It was time to split, and the only lead she'd gotten was impossible to believe. As she ran out to her horse, she wondered whether the Friar was trying to mislead her, get what vengeance he could. She didn't have much time to think about it. A small party of lawmen was marching towards the chapel. Rory swung around the side of the building and unhitched her horse. She wanted to have him dash right down main, push on after the bandits and discover whether that fainting daisy was really Sebastian Ward. To pursue him, she'd have to make a wide arc around town to make sure she wasn't held up, or worse, by the lawmen. And so she rode South, across the tracks and into the blistering desert. The one that kept her going was the desire to have Elizabeth back, safe in her arms.



## 9. DUKE BAILEY.

Without a horse, Bailey was forced to slog up the mountain on foot. He found long walks refreshing on those not-uncommon mornings he'd narrowly escaped death. He bounded up the rocky path, driven by eager anxiety for the days ahead. Many of his men had never been past the Rameses Stretch. Now he was asking them to make a long journey across a country unknown to them. It was a frightening prospect, but they all understood he was doing it for them. There wasn't much left in those days for a bunch of bandits in the vast desert. The occasional train robbery helped keep them fed, but few took the mountain road anymore, which had long been their mainstay. Word from out east held that the big city gangs were thriving in prosperous infamy. It was a longshot. They would adapt, or they would die.

In camp, the men had already packed their belongings, rounded up the few remaining horses and gathered their dwindling supplies. Everything was loaded into three large wagons they'd liberated from an unsuspecting merchant who'd been traveling south, visiting the other dying towns that hide in the shadow of the mountains.

Duke walked into camp, and his men ran to greet him. They gathered around like children to their mother, awaiting storytime. He recounted the firefight, and asked if any of the other bandits had made it back before him. They had not. But Sebastian had.

They brought him to the cart where Sebastian lay unconscious, dreams piled so high on his head that even the late morning light couldn't reach and rouse him. They had created a bed of fur garments, offered up by various bandits who were concerned for his well being. Bailey thanked them for taking care of him. He was beginning to feel an inexplicable attachment to

Sebastian. But this relief did little to dampen his concern for the other men he'd left behind in town. They were capable, especially when fighting together, but heavily outnumbered.

As the day dragged on, the problems piled up. Without their best horses, the bandits had to hitch the carts to the younger colts. No one knew whether they'd be strong enough to make the trip across the Stretch with all the bandit's possessions in tow. They would have to leave soon to avoid being pursued by the Sheriff and his lawmen. Usually they could fend them off, but ammunition was running low. If the bandits didn't return from town soon, Bailey would have to make the call to leave them behind, with no means to catch up to the rest of the gang.

He didn't like the idea of dragging Sebastian across the country against his will, but the alternative was worse. If the Sheriff took him for a bandit, he would be hanged. The Friar could confirm Sebastian's innocence, but that was too big a gamble. Then there was Rory. If she found Sebastian, he would surely meet a fate worse than any Jebediah Peck could lawfully dispense. Duke liked Rory. He would have accepted her among his men. If only he had time to mediate whatever chaos Elizabeth had sown between Rory and Sebastian. If only he had more time in general.

"We wait until sundown, then take the North road down the mountain, in case the Sheriff's set a trap for us. It'll be harder to travel by night, but easier on the horses."

"And the boys who haven't made it back yet?" Ghenny asked.

Duke's silence was answer enough.

Everyone did their best to pass the time in a camp that had already been packed away. Some of the men played cards in the gutted husk of the prospector's cabin. They were spending

their last few hours in what had long been their home, drinking their first sips of nostalgia for a dwelling transformed by emptiness. Some gathered around Ghenny, who sat on the end of Sebastian's cart, strumming a guitar and singing tunes he'd composed. He was a better guitarist than he was a lyricist. The Gallagher twins often pitched in to help him find the words. With enough booze in them, the two could spontaneously compose ballads with rhymes in spiraling switchbacks and rhythms like the peaks and eddies of the mountains above. With the Gallaghers still missing, Ghenny's song took on the qualities of a dirge. Nealand wandered about the complex, saying goodbye to each of the rocks, promising that their bold constellations would be remembered for as long as he lived. The rest of the men didn't understand Nealand's rituals, but respected them because they respected him.

Duke Bailey sat alone by the gate. It was one of those rare days where the joy of leading his men was overshadowed by the stress of being entrusted with their lives and livelihoods. Each of these days brought a new grey hair to the ever expanding silver streak on his head. He stared down the path to Rameses, listening to the melancholy notes of Ghenny's guitar as the sun dashed towards the mountains, slower and faster than it ever had before.

He heard them long before he saw them - horses - a whole stampede. He'd expected the Sheriff to set a trap for them, never to go on the offensive.

"BOYS!" he shouted back into the camp as he drew his mother's revolver. He thumbed the engraving, a nervous habit he'd picked up when she was first teaching him to shoot it. Before long, he was flanked by his remaining men, each of them aiming their weapon down the mountain. Bailey knew they were low on ammunition. Hopefully they could turn their enemies

back down the path before that became a problem. They had the high ground. That was some consolation.

When the source of the commotion came into view, Bailey's fear became confusion. All the king's horses were here, but none of the king's men. Finally, the Gallaghers, Stockton, Carson and Flank all rode up, covered in dirt, some roughly bandaged and all looking like hell. The men within the complex hollered in celebration as they opened the gate to let the horses run through. Bailey was helping the injured down from the horses when he noticed an absence.

"Where's Miller?" he already knew the answer.

"He made sure we were all out of there when the shooting started. It was his idea to go back for the horses," Rhett Gallagher choked on his words, "Shot by the stablehand, right when we thought we'd all gotten away. We couldn't get him out but... there was nothing left for the hangman."

They had five men back when he'd expected none. And enough horses for the trip east. It was a victory, but it didn't feel like one. Davis had been there since day one, when Bailey realized he wasn't supposed to run solo. He'd never been a reckless man, though he never left good enough alone. He'd died not leaving it alone.

They hitched the stronger horses to the carts and packed away the last of their things, right as the sun rolled down the far side of the mountains. They made their way down the rougher North road as the light faded and the earth cooled. As they reached the edge of the desert, bulbous clouds poured in from the west, obscuring the last of sunset's withering golden glow. None of them had seen clouds like that in Rameses, in the many years they'd called it home. Dark and heavy, they looked like the curse of some sorrowful god. The bandits quietly

hurried themselves, wanting to outrun whatever malice was about to come descend on Rameses Stretch.

When the white curtain fell, it cloaked the mountains entirely, and swung steadfast towards the caravan. Duke Bailey put his hand out in front of him, melting the crystals of snow that fell into his palm. He sighed, his breath rolling upwards like a foggy spectre.

“Oh, Elizabeth,” he spoke to the tops of the mountains he could no longer see, “What have you done now?”

## 10. WILLIAM BRADWELL.

All trains through Rameses were delayed in Stillwater for several days due to heavy snow.

“Heavy snow? In the middle of a desert? Do you take me for some halfwit yokel?”

Yes, yes and respectfully no were the answers William Bradwell received, but didn't hear.

In his experience there were certain obstacles one could overcome with status, others which could be bribed away, others yet which crumbled under charisma, threats or brute force. Issues involving trains fell under none of these categories. Once you step inside a train car, you've placed yourself at the mercy of the great metal dragon that operated on its own circadian clock. Its actions were incomprehensible, even to the bold men who attempted to map its patterns of movement and sleep on vague and infrequently circulated train schedules. The servile railway authority in front of him had just as much control over the situation as the stray dog pissing on the side of the tracks. Yelling at him wouldn't help anything, as much as it made William feel better.

The assassin Miss Arté was waiting at the station door, holding her bags and watching his. He'd instructed her that if anyone laid a hand on either of their belongings, she'd be compensated for discreetly dispatching them. She'd been acting strange the entire ride west - at one moment jittery as a bird, then enraptured in a conscious catatonia for hours after. It unnerved him to be near this woman who. For all her beauty, she possessed some unplaceable, uncanny quality that made him feel as though she were a martian in disguise.

Between them, a line of angry passengers had formed, each waiting their turn to lodge futile complaints, hoping to gain some recourse other than a complimentary, one-way ticket back

in the direction of New York. Each was turned away once they'd exhausted themselves degrading the powerless representative. The man's composure suggested a monkish detachment from worldly concern. Once each suitor was sated and slunk away, a sympathetic scoundrel would greet them at the door, offering greatly discounted lodging at the local hotel.

William returned to Miss Arté by the door. They could not turn back, nor stall in Stillwater until the train or the weather could be tamed. The trail they followed was luke-warm at best, and growing colder under the falling snow. They would have to cross the desert.

The stablemaster in Stillwater swindled them, as he always did when a city-slicker came in to purchase a horse. William knew this, and might have had Miss Arté do away with him, if not for his honest appreciation of grifters and conmen. He'd brought an amount of cash more appropriate for a month-long Parisian holiday than a morbid business trip which he hoped to conclude by the end of the week. They tied their baggage to the saddles. In preparation for the journey, William Bradwell made two stops in town and directed the assassin to make another. Her job was to gather provisions, which she did without protest.

William first stopped in at a tailor's shop in the center of town. It was a quaint place, up a flight of stairs and marked only by a sign at street level which read *Wilhelms Vestments*. He stepped through a creaky door into a room full of dapper mannequins, and fine garments laid across low shelves. In the center of the room, sitting behind the counter was a plump man with a tuft of white hair on either side of his head.

"Welcome to *Wilhelms Vestments*!" his accent made the greeting alliterative.

"Are you Wilhelm? I'm William. Looking for something that'll help me blend in a bit more around here, you see? I'm with the lot from the train and seeing as I'll be spending a few

day's out West I'd prefer not to stick out like an ass among steers." He spoke with a politician's grin, as he always did to clothiers. He respected their trade beyond all others.

"Aye, Wilhelm Morant. Clothier since sixty years. Very good at my job, I think! Let see what we can do with you, eh? Come, come." The man hobbled off his stool and led William into the back room. "William you said? I consider once change name to William. Very American, very trustworthy. Good name for politician!"

"I've always thought so."

"Wilhelm is better choice for clothier. Sets apart. People remember Wilhelm the clothier, same as William the politician. Try this on. Curtain over there. Go, dress."

William stepped behind the curtain and began to change. "How do you figure that? About the names?"

"Politician must be everyman. Must fit in, have comfortable face, comfortable name, comfortable family and home..."

William wondered if he had a comfortable face. He didn't dare let his mind linger on his family and home.

The Clothier continued, "But Clothier must stand out. Many William the Clothiers, very few Wilhelms. I have unique... what is word? Like professional name?"

"Brand?"

"Is that it? Sounds painful. Yes, I have unique Brand, I think. Maybe making all this up on the spot."

"Maybe you're a politician after all," William quipped.



The clothier laughed heartily until he was doubled over as much as his rotundity would allow.

William stepped out from behind the curtain, dressed now in the local garb. The flannel shirt and vest were just as comfortable as his usual attire, though the pants were tighter at the waist than was comfortable. He tugged at the waistband.

“We can tailor for comfort, but tight is the fashion.”

“Then I’ll keep with the fashion.”

The Clothier eyed him up and down, curiously. “Aha!” he proclaimed. He opened a cabinet above his head, out of which tumbled an avalanche of hats. Most fell to the ground, but one he snagged as it bounced from his shoulder. “I’m not hat maker, but this town has no hatmaker, so I will do.”

Standing on his toes, he placed it atop William’s head.

“Now you look like you have lived here whole life. If you keep mouth shut!”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said William, trying to dial back his New York accent. “How much for this getup sir?” The clothier gave him a number which he happily paid. He carefully folded his city clothes and stowed them in his suitcase.

Walking to his second stop, he watched a disgruntled crowd bottleneck into the hotel. The scoundrel who’d offered them discounts at the train station ushered them in with a salesman’s smile. Some of them were even beginning to smile back. William realized he liked this place. These westerner’s were a shrewd lot. Even the crooks had a good, American honesty to them. It wasn’t the kind of place that would harbor the layabouts which comprised the litter of the city. Sure, the streets were dirtier than New York, but that’s because they were made of dirt.

His second stop was the sheriff's office. William got along well with police - the New York Police Department vote was the only reason his loss to Quinn Campbel was not a landslide. The sheriff's office was wonderfully furnished (another thing to like about this town). Beyond the sheriff's desk at the front of the building was a lavishly upholstered lounge for the big boss and his deputies. The cells that lined the back wall acted as a trophy case, proudly displaying whatever captured misfits had been dragged into the building cuffed or hogtied, while keeping them just distant enough that they couldn't piss on anyone's shoes.

"Sheriff," William got the attention of the man behind the desk, who was, from the looks of it, signing someone's death warrant. The sheriff stood to greet him, not knowing exactly what it was about this visitor's fairly standard attire that demanded full respect.

"Sheriff Herschel Holmes, at your service. And you might be?"

"William Bradwell, former Senator, New York State." At hearing this introduction the sheriff's spine, already perfectly erect, spontaneously invented a new extreme of perpendicularity. William had expected this. "I'm looking for a woman, my wife, Aurora."

"Can you provide any details of her appearance?"

This man cut straight to business, no unnecessary questions - more marks in his favor.

"I have a photograph here," he handed it over. It was an old portrait William insisted on having done not long after they were married. He told her it was so that he might have something to remember her by during his long stays in Washington. In reality he had it taken so that he could project the image of a normal family man to his colleagues upon whose continued support his reelection hinged. The only thing about the photo that dissatisfied him was that his wife was smiling slightly, which he felt cheapened it.

“You believe she’s been through Stillwater?”

“I believe she was headed to Rameses, but the train will only take me this far as I’m sure you’re aware. I want to make sure that if she heads back in this direction, she’s apprehended and detained until I can return to receive her.”

The sheriff looked concerned. He had many questions, but standing before this inexplicably dapper man, he lacked the will to ask them. William decided to help him out, and answer them anyway.

“She’s been influenced and abducted by another woman. About five and a half feet in height. Straight black hair. Likely incredibly dangerous, and should be apprehended with caution and with force. Now, my wife may believe this woman has her best interest at heart. May even try to defend her if things come to blows. Despite this, no harm may come to my wife, do you understand?”

The sheriff nodded and studied the picture, silently.

“I’m going to Rameses to see if I can catch their trail. Anything you can tell me about this supposed snow storm?”

“Not more than you’re like to already know. Started up three days ago, coming from them mountains past the Stretch. The whole mess grew from one little cloud it seemed like. ‘Fore long we couldn’t see the mountains, and ‘fore longer we couldn’t see half-way down the Stretch. Sent a posse out to see what was the matter, said the snow was too thick to know what way was what and they almost didn’t make it back out. It’s lightened a bit since then. I reckon you could get to Rameses now if you dressed up and followed the tracks while you can, then ride real straight.”

“A thing like this ever happen around here before?”

“No sir. First time my men had ever seen snow. The fools only got themselves lost cause they wandered too far playing in the stuff.”

“Good to know. Thank you Sheriff,” he turned to leave. “One last thing. Keep this business on the down low if you don’t mind. Bad for the image, you see.”

“Of course, sir.” He watched William walk away.

There was no road to Rameses from the East, just an open and sweltering expanse of desert which the locals referred to as Rameses Stretch. William and Miss Arté walked their horses down the railroad until they reached the end of town, then mounted up and began to ride. They followed the tracks silently through the Stretch, the town of Stillwater growing smaller in the distance and wigglier through the hot air.

They saw what lay ahead long before their minds let them accept it as truth. The white curtain swaying in the distance was impossible to rationalize, even as they came too close to deny it was anything but a massive snowstorm in the middle of a sweltering desert. The air began to cool as they rode on. They stopped to pull on warmer clothes.

“Elizabeth Hill,” William pondered aloud.

The assassin emerged from her travelling trance. “Hmm?”

“Just thinking about that name. Elizabeth Hill.”

“What about it?”

“Not too uncommon a name, Elizabeth. Can’t say I know many Hills personally but I’d imagine it’s not so uncommon either. Course, I’d have to check the census numbers to know for sure. But say I were you, and I already knew a woman, goes by the name Elizabeth Hill.”

“I don’t. Didn’t,” she interrupted, icily.

“Course not, but say I were, and say I did, Miss Arté. Well I’d be a hell of a shock to me to get a contract to kill one Elizabeth Hill. It could always be a different woman by the same name, or using the name as an alias. But suppose I knew it was the same woman, or that I already had reason to suspect her.” He paused.

“What’s your point, Mr. Bradwell?”

“I don’t know, nothing I suppose. Just to say that if we come across an Elizabeth Hill that isn’t our Elizabeth Hill, then it’s good we both know her face.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“So you do know her?”

Miss Arté froze, just after pulling on her down jacket.

“Don’t you think that would have been an important detail to disclose to your employer before the contract was signed? Trust means a great deal in business like ours and this omission does not help me to trust you.”

“My relationship to Ms. Hill has no bearing on my ability to carry out this job. That is all I will say to you on the subject, Mr. Bradwell. I feel no need to earn your trust, only to complete the contract as signed. I strive for perfection, and so far I have never failed to fulfil a contract. I do not intend to now. Will there be anything else?”

“Miss Arté. What is the nature of your relationship with Elizabeth Hill?”

William put every ounce of his stearn charm into the question, and turned to face her head-on so that the full power of his ensemble could be projected and absorbed. She stared him down, took a long, emptying breath, and remounted her horse.

William followed suit. He had never met someone who could so easily shrug off the power he'd been honing since childhood. He felt naked, even under all his newly added layers. He looked himself up and down before coming to the conclusion that the fault was not in his expensive bespoke winter-wear. This carefully-chosen outfit should have allowed him at least some measure of control over the willful assassin. Though his trust in her was diminished, the empty space it left behind was now occupied by respect for her preternatural self-control.

But for someone with such control, she'd been tricked into a confession with only a little verbal sleight-of-hand. This woman was the most curious individual he had ever met, and he did not like it at all.

## 11. DIANA SOMMERFIELD-WARD.

Diana could not believe her mistake, letting Bradwell know she had a personal connection to the job. She was not accustomed to the stakes of this mission, and found herself wildly oscillating between her usual composure and wild anxiety for her husband's wellbeing. She was battered by a whirlwind of panicked possibilities and half-baked guesswork.

The two rode their horses under the curtain, feeling the first light brushes of snow drift across their faces. At the very edge of the storm, the snow had melted, creating a muddy swamp. They rode along the tracks, hoping not to get mired down. Farther in now, the snow had begun piling in drifts, coalesced by frigid wind. The tracks disappeared entirely. They resolved to continue on as straight as possible, so as not to get lost in the storm. The air was biting. Their cheeks and chins glowed red and freely expelled their body heat to the passing wind.

It began to grow dark. It was impossible to say whether this was the fault of the storm above, or whether the sun had finally set on the desert. How long had they been out here? As the light dimmed, the air grew colder still. They shivered atop the frost-caked horses, who did their best to push on through the swelling dunes.

After miles of nothing but white, the ground shot up before them. They had reached the mountains, but could see no town. They had strayed from the tracks.

"We have to find shelter before it gets too dark," William shouted over the gale. "Didn't come all this way to freeze to death." They had only two choices now, north or south. The mountains rose too sharply for the horses to climb in the snow, and they'd never make it all the way back to Stillwater. They had a fifty percent chance of finding Rameses, and a fifty percent chance of becoming ice sculptures. Diana didn't like leaving so much to chance. She focused on

the tracks they had left beneath the snow. Though she had spent most of the trip in dissociative meditation, she could recall many sensations perfectly. She remembered feeling the smallest of imbalances in her horse's trot, as though its front right hoof were heavier than the rest. A glance at their trail confirmed her suspicion. It was only a slight deviation - a fraction of a degree's error, compounded into a full-on change of course. Her horse had a starboard list.

"South," she said.

"Why South?"

"Trust me."

"Wish I could, Miss Arté, but you've done nothing to earn that privilege."

"Okay, then go North," she said, turning to ride South.

William followed. She knew there would be no talking sense into him. He clearly did not like to follow. To his own mind he was born to lead, and any minor act of subservience would be both contrary to nature and an affront to his lord's plan. She also knew that as much as he detested being a follower, he also could not stand the thought of being wrong, or being dead. Should she have chosen incorrectly and led them both to icy graves, at least he would have someone else to blame.

They hugged the side of the mountain. With the world growing darker by the minute, Diana worried that even if they were heading in the right direction, they might not make it in time. If she hadn't made the right decision... No, even with her mind spiraling and ricocheting uncontrollably, she could still trust her senses. She felt her breath condensing into frost on her lips and the tip of her nose. The snow swirling down from above populated the world with dancing ghosts. She was tired.



Then there was a light. It was dim and ghostly, the only warmth she'd seen in that sea of ice. Her horse saw it too, and of his own accord began to dash through the snow, as fast as he could with the snow now piled to his knees. William followed. The flicker grew larger, and soon they could see the vague shapes of buildings, their windows aglow with more ghostly fires. The warmest of them all, the beacon that drew Diana in, came from a larger building at the very edge of town. Most of the windows had been boarded over. A sign hanging crookedly above the door read "The Spattered Rattler." Someone had tried in vain to clear the snow from in front of the door. She dismounted, and hitched her horse to a post just barely peeking out above the drifts. She wished she could bring the poor thing inside.

"I'll be back to get you somewhere warm. Hang in there, boy."

William rode up behind her and hitched his own steed..

"Goddamn," he said, "I was beginning to think we'd never make it."

The batwing doors had been expanded with repurposed timber to fill the whole frame. There were other makeshift renovations. Dozens of bullet holes which speckled the walls had been patched from the inside. Diana knocked on the door. There was some commotion within, then a horrible scratching noise as the makeshift door was pried back.

"Come on then! Get in quick before you let all the warmth out!"

Diana and William squeezed through the small opening that had been made for them, then winced as the door was creaked shut.

"Please, come sit around the fire," said the man who let them in, "let's chase away that chill before you catch your deaths. Can I get you anything to drink? Booze is on the house until the snow lifts."

Diana looked around the room. It was a saloon - a well decorated place, even with much of the furniture and pieces of the bar having been salvaged for wood. An unfortunate chimera was coiled on a pedestal by the door. His serpentine scales clashed horribly with an anthropomorphic face. Beside the roaring fireplace, sat dozens of confused patrons who looked ready to jump out of their skin.

“No,” Diana replied, “No thank you. We left our horses outside, and I’m terribly worried they won’t last another hour in the cold. Is there a stable in town?”

“Barry!” called out the man. A few moments later, a breathless individual descended the stairs beside the bar. “We got new guests in, Barry. Get on your warm clothes and bring their horses to the stables out back.”

Barry gave the man a look of silent protest, then speechlessly slunk into the room behind the bar.

“I’m Garreth Meade,” said Garreth Meade, “proprietor of The Spattered Rattler Inn. You two ain’t from Rameses, which means you must’ve rode in from Stillwater. You must have some damn important business here, because no one comes to this town even when the weather ‘aint fucked.”

“Mr. Meade,” William removed his damp gloves and shook the innkeeper's hand, “I’m Theodore Gurney, and this my associate, Beatrice Gauge.”

Diana suppressed the urge to glare at him for having assigned an alias without consulting her. Instead she followed suit and shook Gareth Meade’s hand, adding in the slightest curtsy which did not suit Diana, but was quite becoming of Beatrice Gauge.

“You’re correct sir,” William continued, “in assuming we have business in this town, but it doesn’t seem we’ll be conducting it until this snow lets up. Until then, we’ll be in need of lodging. Looking around this place I must assume you’re all filled up. Would you have a recommendation of where we could rest our heads until our business in Rameses is concluded?”

“Unfortunately for you, this is the only inn in town. And as you noted, we are packed to bursting on account of this here group of stragglers stopped in town on account of train troubles. You could ask some of the locals to rent you a room, though they’re mighty distrusting of outsiders. Other than that, there’s the Friar, who’d never turn out a lost soul, though he is currently recovering from an injury. Or there’s the Sheriff, who thinks it his duty to give tourists a better impression of this little ghost town than it deserves. They’d be your best bets if you’re seeking hospitality.”

“Thank you, Mr. Meade.” William shook his hand again. “If the folks of this town are half so hospitable as you, I believe we’ll find our stay here rather comfortable.”

“Wouldn’t count on it. I made hospitality my business, and it became my habit. As for the rest of Rameses... well, what I’ll tell ya is that they respect the resourceful. Living in this wasteland makes one hard-hearted. I wouldn’t try to charm anyone.”

“Understood.”

Diana watched William process the innkeeper's advice. She saw the subtlest of shifts in the way he held his brow and mouth. He looked colder, tougher in an almost imperceptible way that she knew could make all the difference in their interactions with the population of Rameses. She was coming to understand for the first time the brilliance of William’s craft, and how similar it was to hers. Through the most miniscule expressions of boundless self-control, he could exert

control over those around him. She was still impressed, and apprehensive. Diana was not one to be easily charmed, but around this man she would have to exercise caution.

“Sit down by the fire, I’ll get you both something warm to drink,” Gareth Meade motioned to the patrons to clear a space, “Won’t be able to conduct your business here if you rush back out into that mess and freeze to death. Get some heat back in your bones and I’ll help you get where you’re going when I trust you won’t catch your death.”

The gaggle of stranded patrons sitting around the fire chatting happily seemed to view the debilitating storm as a mild inconvenience rather than a potentially life-threatening event. This man Meade had clearly gone to great lengths to keep them comfortable, at great expense to himself. As he disappeared behind the bar to fetch them a drink, Diana pulled William aside and spoke to him in a hushed voice.

“I have some questions for our friendly innkeep.”

“As do I,” William replied, “He’s being awfully charitable and I’d like to know what he stands to gain. Go.”

While William took a seat by the fire, Diana slipped into the room behind the bar. It was a cramped and cluttered kitchen, with a small wood stove in the corner over which Gareth Meade boiled a pot of water for tea. He turned around, surprised to see her standing in the doorway.

“Everything all right, Ms. Gauge?”

“Everything’s just fine,” she said with a disarming smile. “Just have a few questions for you. Forgive me if I overstep the bounds of politeness, my employer Mr. Gurney is an inquisitive man.”

“Fire away. In business and in life, I keep no secrets, if I can help it.”

“All those people out there, the ones that got stranded when the storm started, are they paying for their rooms?”

“Nope. Lodging is free until the weather parts. Can’t exactly charge them to share floor space. At least not in good conscience.”

“Must be expensive, keeping them all fed.”

“Food’s not an issue. I’m still charging for booze, and that’s where the money’s at. ‘Sides that, the train they arrived on was carrying a shipment of canned goods out to San Francisco. If it weren’t for that stockpile, this whole town would be hurting.”

“Awfully convenient,” she mused.

“It’s a damn miracle’s what it is.”

“Second question. This storm - anyone have any idea where it came from or what caused it?”

“There are as many ideas as there are people in Rameses. The clouds came from high up in the mountains, seemed to spread out from a single point, or so I’ve heard.”

Diana tried to think of everything she’d ever read or heard that could explain such a phenomenon, but it appeared to be something entirely outside her lexicon of knowledge. The mystery excited her.

“Last question. There’s a whole lot of holes in the front wall of this establishment - holes you didn’t have time to patch over properly before the snow started coming down. Who was shooting at the inn, and might they be interested in doing it again?”

Meade sighed, then chuckled as he recalled the events of the last week, the gravity of which had quickly been buried in snow.

“A local group of bandits came to town to attack the Friar. A whole lot of local history and bad blood that you probably don’t care to get into. It should comfort you to know that their business in Rameses is concluded, and their gang long gone.”

A bell rang in the back of Diana’s mind. She had a hunch but surely it wasn’t correct...

“Tell me about these bandits.”

“Led by a beast of a man, goes by the name of Duke Bailey. Been the scourge of this town as long as I’ve lived here. Funny thing, you’ve got a face a lot like his.”

Ding, ding.

Diana hadn’t seen her brother, or any of her siblings, in years. From what little information her mother dispensed, they had each found their way into an occupation not dissimilar from her own. Richard became the leader of a group of bandits. Elouise was an expert thief and a spy in the Great War. Constantine operated a boozy empire which prohibition had delivered into its golden age. There was also Arlow, who was an experimental meteorologist, whatever that meant. She wondered what he would make of the current predicament in Rameses.

Unfortunately, Bailey’s presence here only further confirmed her mounting suspicion that she had been Elizabeth’s target, and her dear husband Sebastian little more than collateral damage. She didn’t yet understand how or why Elizabeth had decided on Diana as her mark, but the growing string of coincidences was too much to ignore. There were only six members of the Bailey family in the world, and only five in the United States since Elouise supposedly stayed in Europe after the war to work as a suffragette. What were the odds that Elizabeth Hill would have robbed one, then run away to the long-time home of another? She only hoped her brother wasn’t an accomplice.

These thoughts overwhelmed her, and the heat of the kitchen was making her dizzy. She pardoned herself and stepped away from Gareth Meade, rejoining William who sat on the floor, a distance from the other patrons around the fire.

“This town’s paralyzed,” he told her, recounting what he’d learned from the patrons, “One thing the North East will always have on the West is that we don’t let a little bad weather get in our way. What did you learn from the inkeep?”

Diana recounted their conversation, careful to conceal her mounting rage and fear.

“I wonder who’s organizing distribution of the stockpile from the train,” William pondered, “Rationing is a science which requires practice, and if done poorly, things get messy fast. How about this freak snowstorm?”

She explained that he had no more information than anyone else in town.

“Damn. If we don’t know how it started we can’t make any estimates about when it will end. If someone doesn’t whip this town into shape it’ll consume itself before long.”

“And you intend for that someone to be you?”

William smirked. Gareth Meade emerged from the kitchen, carrying two mugs of peppermint tea, and set them down on the floor.

“Now folks, I don’t intend to turn you out into the cold. There ain’t any more room upstairs, but what would you say if I offered you the two rooms in the cellar? It’s none too warm but we’ve got plenty of blankets.”

“That would be wonderful, Mr. Meade,” William replied.

“Splendid!” he said, “How about I show you down there now so you can take a load off? Stillwater’s a six hour ride on a clear day. Can’t imagine how long you two have been at it through this mess.”

They followed him through the kitchen where he handed them each a candle, then down a tight staircase and into the cellar. Their eyes adjusted to the candlelight and they saw that the cellar was indeed immaculately clean. A well-bundled Barry passed them on his way back upstairs, clearly dreading the task at hand. Meade led them past rows of casks and kegs to the opposite side of the room where the wall opened up to two small rooms. Each contained a bed, a dresser, and a gas lamp.

“Myself and Barry stay down here,” their host explained, “please don’t feel like you’re putting us out, though. We’re the last to sleep and the first to wake, so there’ll be no harm in us sleeping by the fire-place upstairs. These beds aren’t much better than the floor, in all honesty.”

“Why are you doing this?” William asked bluntly.

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you being so overwhelmingly generous to two individuals you’ve never met and to whom you have no obligation. I’ve heard the line about hospitality but I just don’t buy it. Can’t keep a place like this afloat on kindness and tips. So tell me why.”

Gareth smiled. “You’re right Mr. Gurney, you’re right. It’d be very hard to keep a place like this open on charity. But say for the sake of argument some very, very wealthy benefactors were to become stranded in town, and offer to pick up everyone’s tabs out of the kindness of their hearts, on the soul condition that I kept their generosity under wraps. Say they were paying



me by the head and not by the room. Well then what reason would I have not to be kind to whatever creature knocks on my door?"

"I can appreciate a shrewd businessman, Mr. Meade." William smiled, finally comfortable that he was speaking to a like-minded individual, "Rest assured, your secret's safe with my associate and myself."

"Much appreciated. I'll send Barry down in a minute to clear out our things. Make yourselves comfortable. Welcome to Rameses." Gareth receded into the dark cellar.

Diana didn't think she'd be able to sleep with the panicked thoughts in her head piling up faster than the snow outside. But once she'd gotten into dry clothes and crawled under the blanket, the strain of her journey caught up with her, and she was plunged at once into a pleasantly dreamless sleep.

## 12. WILLIAM BRADWELL.

William's time in New York had taught him one very important thing about New Yorkers: they detest leaders because they do not think they need them. No matter what decrees were proffered by the rich and mighty, the cities great verminous swarms would continue about their lives in whichever way struck them as appropriate. It was what he detested about New Yorkers and what he loved about having been elected to rule them.

This place provided him with an opportunity. The morning after they arrived, he properly introduced himself to the other patrons of the Spattered Rattler Inn. He learned many useful things from their idle chatter, the product of half a week spent trapped in an old town with new gossip. The most important detail he gleaned was that this town lacked a mayor. The Sheriff Jebediah Peck was the closest Rameses had to a figure of authority. Faith in him had been greatly shaken after the latest in many failed attempts to capture the bandit leader Duke Bailey and his crew. He seemed to be handling things well as far as the blizzard was concerned, but William suspected his methods wouldn't hold up under scrutiny from a more experienced leader.

There was no point continuing the search for Aurora and the maid until they could leave town without being buried to their hats in snow. If he gained the trust of the townsfolk, it would be far easier to flush them out if they hadn't already left Rameses. He had a plan, and would waste no time putting it into action. The snow had slowed to a calm flurry.

Before the clock above the bar struck noon, he'd rounded up a dozen men who'd been sheltering in the Rattler and were antsy to make themselves useful wherever they could. They trudged through town in waist deep snow, knocking on doors where they could and windows where doors were inaccessible. Within an hour, they had a crew thirty strong awaiting William's

instructions. Those without their own shovels looted them from the stables. First, they excavated the houses of the elderly and the ailing, hurriedly clearing snow from the doorways to the fully buried streets. William checked in with them personally, making sure they had everything needed to wait out the storm. Then they cleared paths to the few houses still occupied after families started grouping up to save on firewood. This consumed the rest of Rameses' finite daylight, but by the time it was done, the town was on its feet again.

Locals swarmed to the Spattered Rattler to thank the new arrivals for their eagerness to help. Drinks were poured, and William very publicly covered the tab. Theodore Gurney became the name on everyone's booze-loosened lips.

The second day of William's great public works project, the snow was barely coming down, though thick clouds still drowned Rameses in eternal twilight. Before stepping out into the cold to continue his work, he found Miss Arté in the cellar, sitting entranced on her bed. He instructed her to start the search for Aurora and Elizabeth. Without returning from her dream state, she gave him an understanding nod. He was getting more used to seeing her this way. It unsettled him less every time.

All the previous day's workers, along with some new faces, lined up at either end of town, ready to dig out Main Street. They worked in teams of eight, taking shifts as each group exhausted themselves. While four men shoveled snow onto tarps, the other four would drag the tarps away to pile the snow somewhere unobstructive. William led the charge with the speed and intensity of a machine. When he'd finished his third shift, he retreated to the porch of the Spattered Rattler where some of the workers took their breaks, warming themselves with tea or

whiskey while they caught breath and waited to get back to work. He removed his hat and wiped down his brow.

“Theodore Gurney?” a man called to him with a deep drawl.

“That would be me,” William answered, “How can I be of assistance?”

“I’m Sheriff Jebediah Peck. Been told you’re the one organizing this excavation.”

Seeing as the sheriff had yet to thank him for the hard work, he knew to expect a reproach. This would be better in the grand scheme. He offered a hand.

“Yes sir. Pleased to meet you, Sheriff.”

The sheriff shook his hand, squeezing hard.

“Your help here has been much appreciated but I believe it’s time I took over the efforts.”

“It’s really no bother sheriff,” William said with a grin, “In fact, I’ve been meaning to ask you, who’s the one presiding over food distribution? I worked for the American Relief Association after the war, so I have experience handling the rations.” This was true, and was one of William’s proudest accomplishments. It wasn’t often in his line of work he got to make a positive impact in the world. So much of his time in office was consumed warding America’s political institutions against base immorality and tolerance of heathen religions. Having saved the lives of so many in the old world filled him with the hope that, even as his country fell victim to vice and liberality, honorable conservatism might thrive in Europe.

The Sheriff’s strained smile showed William he’d struck just the right nerve.

“Like I’ve said, Mr. Gurney, the work you’ve done is appreciated. But Rameses doesn’t need outsiders running our town.”

The other men on the porch, half of whom were foreign to Rameses, watched the conversation with curiosity.

“Sure Sheriff,” William conceded, “What’s your plan then for getting the rest of the town dug out and making sure you don’t run out of food?” He spoke this as calmly and genuinely as he could, cheating out to the onlookers ever so slightly.

The Sheriff swallowed his foot.

“I’d... well I’d... I’d have them keep doing what they’re doing,” there was a pause as he looked out at the teams in the street, still shovelling away, making amazing progress, “But I’d have ten people on a team rather than eight. We want to get this done before dark.” He looked proud of himself for coming up with such an efficient plan.

“So four shovelers and six people pulling tarps?” William asked, “The teams of four have been doing just fine. You’d be wasting your manpower.”

“Then we’ll do six shovelers and four people on tarps. Surely we have enough shovels. Easy as that.”

“Snow would pile up too fast. You’d exhaust whoever’s on tarp duty.”

“Well why not five shovelers and five pulling the tarp?” the sheriff was raising his voice.

“Can’t say I see much of a point in that either. Besides with the number of people we’ve got teams of eight work perfectly well. If you switch to teams of ten some people would have to double up shifts, all you’ll have is tired workers. Might as well do away with the shifts entirely at that point.”

“Yeah! Why don’t we do that?”

“So everyone just works all at once? We go until we stop?” William asked, stringing him along.

“Why not?”

William gestured to the men enjoying their drinks and chatting away on the edge of the porch. “Sheriff, these are men, not machines. They need time to rest, but they also enjoy it. I see no problem with idle hands, so long as they’ve the callouses to show that idleness is earned.”

“You’re criminally underestimating the fine men of this town! I’m taking over here and that’s that!”

William pretended this outburst surprised him, and exchanged sympathetic glances with the other men on the porch. He’d pushed this man to his breaking point, intentionally making him feel emasculated, powerless, usurped. He’d done it in full view of ten men, half of whom were locals and had known the Sheriff all their lives. And somehow, all of them were on William’s side. Perception is everything. It’s the beauty of politics. If you can control someone’s perception of a situation, you can control their actions.

“Alright. You seem to know what you’re doing. This operation is all yours.”

So far as William could tell, there were two ways this could go. Either would inform him as to what kind of man the Sheriff was. The first possibility was that nothing would change at all. The men would continue to dig in teams of eight and would clear Main Street by nightfall. The Sheriff would take the credit, revealing himself to be a prideful man, but not stupid. The second scenario involved an arbitrary and catastrophic change to William's plan. The whole operation would slow down as its optimization was disrupted, and the workers would know exactly whose

fault it was. The Sheriff would attempt to shift the blame onto someone or something else, exposing his copious pride and an intellect on par with that of a baked potato.

Neither of these things happened.

Rather than making a small change to Willaim's finely tuned plan, the Sheriff scrapped the plan completely. Hell-bent displaying the superiority of Rameses stock, he expelled all foreigners from the dig. It was a proper shit-show.

Well before dusk, the town had gathered in the Spattered Rattler. The mood was less festive than the night before. Booze flowed quicker, now being employed as a painkiller rather than an aide to the night's festivities. William picked up the tab. He was once again the life of the party, which was not a high bar among the dozens of half-dead drinkers. He'd worn his best suit for the occasion, which radiated an aura of leadership, professionalism and kindness.

Peck was nowhere to be seen, having disappeared after blaming the chaos on Theodore Gurney. Everyone had a good laugh when this accusation was circulated at the Inn, especially William. He'd won the trust of everyone in town, and undermined the troublesome Sheriff. Now it was time for phase three.

The next day, William brought Gareth Meade and two other men to the abandoned train. They slogged through the snow, back to the two cargo cars full of canned goods. Inside, dozens of empty crates littered the floor and shelves. The place had been ransacked and looted.

"What happened here?" William asked.

"People got hungry," Meade replied, "Nobody's organizing food distribution, so folks come in and take what they need."

"What they need or what they want?"

The tally took place to the percussive sounds of well organized digging that occurred outside. On Main Street, work continued according to William's plan. Soon they'd be moving onto First.

It took all morning to count up the remaining cans and cartons inside the train, a good deal of which was spent discarding empty boxes and reorganizing the heap into a stockpile. The situation was just as worrying as William expected. Judging by the amount that had already been taken, and the number of days since the blizzard started, the remaining food would be gone in three days time. William saw no way of restocking - not in snow this dense, in a town so unprepared. Rationing would have to start immediately, and be monitored strictly.

He called a meeting outside the newly excavated town hall, and standing upon the steps, announced the specific details of the ration and distributions. There was a general heaviness in the crowd, but all of them trusted the man they knew as Theodore Gurney. He organized a team, borrowing from the digging crews, to help him move food into the town hall, where it might be more easily stored and distributed. He then appealed to anyone with private stores to donate them to the stockpile, for the good of the town. He assured them that if all this was done, they should have enough food to keep everyone healthy until the clouds parted and the snow melted.

By that evening, the roads were clear enough for horse drawn wagons, which hastened the movement of food to the town hall. The townsfolk returned most of what had been taken from the train during the blizzard, and Bernard Malton, who owned the general store, donated the bulk of his stock. It filled William with warmth to see such generosity and self-sacrifice in a time of crisis, and he made sure to voice his appreciation to whomever did their part. He assigned two



men to watch the stockpile for the night, and promised to assign a full guard schedule by morning.

The rations instituted further increased the consumption of alcohol at the Inn, which was running up quite the tab for William. He was thankful he'd reserved such a hefty portion of his suitcase for cash. He asked Gareth about the seemingly endless flow of booze.

“When the state went dry back in ‘19 I had to find some new channels by which to acquire my wares. The deals I made didn’t go in my favor, almost shut me down, then almost got me killed. When the law was repealed I decided that if Nevada is ever again wracked by holy drought, I’d be provisioned to outlast it.” He smiled with pride at the efficacy of his preparedness.

William was of two minds on prohibition. One understood that the spineless proletariat could not be trusted around any substance which offered them an easier path out of suffering than hard work. The other found it absurd that he, a responsible man of god, should have trouble acquiring a drink when he so desired one. It wasn’t impossible - little was for a man of his means - but it posed an unnecessary inconvenience, the likes of which he despised. William was an advocate for a kind of Selective-Prohibition, inhibiting the common man from accessing alcohol while eliminating such barriers for those of a certain social, economic or moral standing. In fact, he’d already devised a comprehensive written test to determine whether someone met these criteria. He liked to talk about it at parties.

William was of a single mind when it came to Gareth Meade. He liked him. The man was the most useful individual in Rameses, and he wasn’t even on payroll. Meade was a two-faced

con, for sure, but his motives were simple and predictable. Simple men could be understood and controlled. William intended to keep him around.

The next morning, when William arrived to relieve the guards and distribute the first round of rations, he found the Sheriff waiting for him on the steps.

“This is a disgrace Mr. Gurney! An utter disgrace! A week ago I couldn’t even imagine a foreigner coming into town and taking food from our citizens! Taking the food right out of their mouths and giving it away like some sort of liberal or Episcopalian!” The Sheriff was drunk. William had walked this man to the edge, and he’d thrown himself right off it.

“Sheriff Peck, I assure you I’m only doing what’s best for this town and the people in it. Why don’t we step inside and talk about this.”

“What I have to say can be said right here in full view of my people! I want you gone, Gurney. I want you out of this town by sundown tonight or so help me God, I’ll have my men lock you up.”

“On what grounds Sheriff?” William asked impatiently.

“On the grounds that you’ve stolen these good peoples’ food and are holding it ransom for your own sick power fantasy.”

For all the man’s ravings, he was not far off the mark.

“The citizens of Rameses were asked to volunteer their food supplies to the stockpile for the good of the town. You would do them a disservice to characterize their charity as my theft.”

“No, no, no! Don’t you act like you have any interest in the wellbeing of this town and it’s people! I know what’s best for them! I’ve lived in this town... I’ve *served* this town my

whole life! You think I wouldn't know what's best?" He was yelling loud enough to draw people out of their homes. A dispersed crowd was forming to watch the Sheriff's outburst.

"Gareth," William turned away and spoke in a hushed voice, "Would you bring Peck back to his office? I don't want people to see him like this."

Gareth nodded, and approached the Sheriff to take his arm. Peck shook him off and stomped away. Gareth followed Peck back to his office, keeping his distance so as not to provoke another outburst.

Assisted by eager townsfolk, William spent the better part of the day distributing rations, then sorting and organizing the donations that had come in since that morning. He wondered what to do with the troublesome sheriff. Perhaps it was time to test Miss Arté's talents. When the work was done and guards had been assigned for the night, he gave himself a tour of the town hall. The place was both the residence and office of the town's mayor. Other than a heavy layer of dust which blanketed every surface, it looked to have been well maintained over the long period of disoccupation.

A door creaked open behind William as he gazed over the well furnished master bedroom. He turned to see Gareth Meade standing in the doorway, looking concerned.

"How's our Sheriff doing Mr. Meade?"

"He's been better. I have some concerning news. Peck's been hoarding food. He thinks you'll start withholding it and wants to be prepared when that happens. Looks like about half of what was missing from the train is piled up in the cages at his office."

"That's unexpected, but not an issue. We have enough food for now and should we stretch our stockpile thin we'll find a way to negotiate with him."

Gareth hesitated while he decided what to say next. "He also has a prisoner with him..."

"What do you make of this place, Mr. Meade?" William was done discussing the Sheriff and didn't much care what luckless man had run afoul of him. Perhaps he'd ask Miss Arté to frame this prisoner for Peck's murder. A true test of skill.

"It's a fine building. Why do you ask?"

"I think I'm going to have my belongings and those of my associate, if she's willing, moved over here. I appreciate the kindness you've shown us in lending us your basement rooms but now that the world's warming up again and we don't need to huddle for warmth, I think I'd like to move into more spacious lodgings."

He chuckled at William's plan. "Jebediah's gonna have a field-day with that one Mr. Gurney. He already thinks you're here for some kind of egomaniacal takeover of Rameses."

"Let the man say what he will. Can't imagine he enjoys watching me live out his hero fantasies."

"Do you share those fantasies, Mr. Gurney?"

William smiled. "It'd be unnecessary to fantasize about that which I already have."

"I suppose it would. You're already a hero to the people of Rameses. I only hope that if you decide to betray their trust, you do so in a way that nobody gets hurt. There's been a lot of violence in this town recently and I'd rather nobody provoke more."

William looked back at him again, with the same deceptive smile, "Your advice is much appreciated." There was a silence as he continued to size up the room.

“Say,” Gareth interjected, “You never did tell me what business you had in town. It’s been very benevolent of you to set it aside for so long to help us out. Might be able to repay the favor if you let me in on what this business is.”

William considered this offer. He’d had no word from Miss Arté on her investigation. Perhaps Gareth Meade was exactly the help he needed to find his wife and bring a swift yet painful end to Elizabeth Hill. He decided to take a gamble and trust the Innkeep. Worst case scenario, he’d have another name for his assassin.

“I’m looking for two women. Mrs. Aurora Bradwell and Ms. Elizabeth Hill, though the latter may be a pseudonym. I have reason to believe they came through town just before the snow started and I need to find them.”

There was a long silence, William walked about the room opening drawers and wiping the dust of the long unused bed.

“And what do you intend to do once you’ve found them?” Gareth asked.

“Bradwell will be returned to her husband in New York. Elizabeth will be held accountable for her crimes.”

There was a silence as Meade hesitated once again.

“Can’t say I’ve ever heard either of those names Mr. Gurney. I’ll certainly ask around though, so long as you’re not trying to keep this under wraps. And I’ll keep my ears peeled around the Inn for any helpful chatter.”

He was lying. This disappointed William. Had Elizabeth sunk her claws into him too? Or was there some larger secret he didn’t know about? Someone in this town must have had information and been willing to spill it.

“That would be infinitely helpful,” he wore his kindest smile, “I would be in your debt.”

That night, the Spattered Rattler was more subdued than it had been in previous days. This was good, William didn't have the energy for another night of revelry, and wanted nothing more than to leave that dank, dusty basement and move into the less dank, yet somehow more dusty quarters in the town hall.

He stomped wearily into the cellar, but even once his eyes had adjusted, he could not see his assassin. In fact, he hadn't seen her at all since he'd ordered her to begin the search. He heard the commotion coming from upstairs and resurfaced, half expecting that the Sheriff had returned to chase him out of town.

There was a crowd gathered, all shouting questions at a man they'd cornered by the door. William had seen him once before, he was one of the Sheriff's deputies who'd been on his first digging crew.

“What's happening here?” William shouted over the commotion. The men and women, hearing the authority in his voice, parted the way for him to speak directly to the deputy.

“It's the sheriff... he's dead.”

From deep within the mountains, a train whistle cried out in mourning.

### 13. DIANA SOMMERFIELD-WARD.

Diana stomped through the dimly glittering snow, which in the absence of sunlight, caught and scattered the living reds and oranges spilling through the windows on Main Street. The snow was still falling then, though it had slowed. It clung to her, dusting her clothes and hair. If she stood there long enough, she could disappear into the drifts until she saw fit to emerge from her frosty chrysalis, shedding fear and helplessness in favor of perfect control. At least, this is what she dreamed.

She'd spent her first day in town gathering gossip from the patrons at the Rattler. No two people had the same account of what occurred the day the storm hit. Comparing the various tall-tales, she gathered that the town's Friar was injured in a standoff with her brother Duke Bailey and a local hero reverently referred to as "The Deadeye Dame." Physical descriptions of this mysterious woman were all embellished beyond use. Apparently, the Sheriff and his men had set off in pursuit of Bailey and his gang, but this is where all accounts came to an abrupt and icy end.

Today, she intended to hear from the eye-witnesses. She was excited to meet her brother's father. So few people had connections to her odd little family and here was one of them, stranded in the same town! She had so many questions, but would have to be careful not to reveal her identity. The Friar's relationship with Duke was strained, and had recently turned violent. She did not want to become the target of this man's ill will by familial association.

She approached the chapel, and tried the front door. It was locked. This would not be a problem. Duke had taught her how to pick locks, so many years ago. She pulled a small pouch from her jacket pocket, and took out her lockpick and torque wrench. Though more conspicuous

than a hairpin, she preferred to use the proper hardware. When she was sure she would not be spotted by the digging crew, she pulled off her gloves and got to work on the lock. Ten seconds later she stepped inside.

As she walked the cramped aisle, she noticed a thin spray of dried blood between two of the pews. She hadn't been in many churches, but had studied christianity enough to know that transubstantiation was generally favored over hematophagia. She wondered whose it was, and how it had come to stain the floorboards.

Hanging on the wall above the altar was a wooden carving of Christ on the cross. His eyes were open in an expression of agony, and seemed to stare directly at Diana. Those in her line of work seldom had much use for religion. Nevertheless, she found herself unsettled by the way it looked at her, as its pained gaze broke through her defenses and prodded at her guilt about her husband's disappearance.

"Stop giving me that look," She muttered.

"Is someone there?" a weak voice called out from an adjoining room.

She followed the voice into the rectory. It was both office, and bedroom, with such scant furnishings as to make it ineffective at either function. On a tattered cot in the corner was a tall but gaunt man, lost in his robes. His resemblance to her brother was striking, though his pallid skin and skeletal build lent him the air of a starved animal. He only opened his eyes once to look her up and down, then closed them again, and was silent.

"Friar Terrence? My name is Beatrice Gauge."

"Why can't you people just leave me alone?"

"Has anyone been taking care of you?" She asked.



“There’s a boy, Stanley. He’s been making it out to change my wrappings and help me eat. If you’re seeking employment you’d best seek elsewhere.”

“I’m seeking information.”

“If it’s about Sebastian Ward, Richard Bailey, Aurora Bradwell or Elizabeth Hill, kindly go to Hell, or at the very least get out of my church.”

This was certainly telling, though it told her nothing she needed to know. Clearly the Friar was disinclined from helping her. She didn’t want to torture him, mostly because she didn’t think he’d survive in his current, fragile state. But this man knew her husband, and she would stop at nothing to extract any information about his whereabouts and wellbeing. First she’d appeal to his sense of professional goodness. As they say, you catch more flies with honey than with torture. Or something like that.

“Please, Father...”

He finally opened his eyes and rasped, “Listen, girl. I’ve lived in Rameses my whole life. I’ve watched this place wither, yet still I remain to help its last denizens turn to God. In all these years of thankless toil, I’ve never met four individuals so bent on performing the work of the devil. There are many new graves in my yard thanks to their monstrous acts. Whatever you want with them, I will not help you.”

He was clearly misled about her dear Sebastian, though she doubted he’d give her the chance to sort it out. She pivoted tactics.

“Oh, Father. You don’t understand. I intend to see Ward, Bailey, Bradwell and Hill brought to justice. Between them they’re wanted in twelve states. My only interest is in seeing them charged.”

The Friar looked skeptical. “A female detective? I’ve never heard of such a thing. If you work for the law, how about showing me the warrant that let you break into my church?”

“True, there are few female detectives in the field, but our numbers grow greater every year. The world is moving fast outside of Rameses, Father. Unfortunately, no such warrant exists. I don’t work for the government, but a private agency. There’s a good deal of money invested in making sure these rabble-rousers rouse no more.”

He sized her up. “You’re hired muscle without the muscle. I have little respect for your profession. Private investigators are little more than glorified bounty hunters.”

She had a feeling he was thinking of her mother now.

“Friar Terrance, if you know anything at all...”

“Swear to me you’ll leave this chapel, better yet leave this town. As soon as the snow clears, I don’t want to see you or any of the hellspawn you seek ever again.”

“I swear on God.” She hoped for his sake that this was enough.

The Friar took a deep breath, “The Sheriff’s office. One of your quarries has already been caught. The rest are long gone.” He rolled onto his back and closed his eyes again, wheezing all the while.

“What? Why did nobody in town tell me he’d made an arrest?”

“Odds are they don’t know. I asked him directly,” he gestured to his bandaged wounds, “Personal interest in the case. Now get out. That’s all I know.”

She stepped back out onto the snowy street, now walkable due to the hasty work of the digging crews. She was disheartened by her encounter with the Friar. His only lead was taking her where she had already planned to go. Nevertheless, it was her first real lead. She was not

excited by the possibility that the individual in the Sheriff's custody was her husband. He was not the type to find himself in a cell. Even if there had been some mistake, his innocent smile and the adorable way his brow furrowed when he was nervous would surely show his captors they had caught the wrong man.

Lost in memories, thinking of her dearest Sebastian, Diana arrived at the Sheriff's Office. She turned to look behind her. The footprints left in the snow were proof she had walked from the Chapel, but she had no memory of the journey. Most would have understood and accepted this strange phenomenon, but Diana was unused to the common pleasure of daydreams. Such acute descent into reverie frightened her. So much could have happened in that lost time. Even in her deepest meditations, she was always fully aware of her surroundings. She could not let this happen again.

Reorienting herself in the world, Diana noticed that the Sheriff was having a heated conversation with her employer on the front porch of the Spattered Rattler. She planned to use this to her advantage. She also noticed that since the storm had calmed, there seemed to be much less snow on and around the sheriff's office than any other building in town. She had no clue what natural phenomenon could have caused this. It was as though the little building were in a climate of its own.

When Diana opened the door, she was hit with a blast of dry, desert heat that didn't belong in the strange tundra that engulfed Rameses. At the back of the room, in the only cell not piled high with canned goods, was Mrs. Aurora Bradwell. She looked just like her photograph, except she wasn't smiling. When she heard Diana step inside, her gaze snapped towards the door like that of a coyote eyeing a rabbit.

“Thank God,” she growled, “I was expecting the Sheriff again. Please, there’s been a terrible mistake, you have to help me out of here.”

“Aurora,” Diana said. At the sound of her name the caged woman stiffened like a board.

“You’re with my husband aren’t you?” This was not a question, but an accusation.

“Aurora Bradwell, I have a few questions for you.” She could easily inform William as to his wife’s location, and have half of her contract fulfilled. But once Aurora was back within William’s clutches, she might never again have a chance to speak with her unsupervised. Diana had never intentionally jeopardized a contract, but her desperation overcame her devotion to professionalism.

A flash of grief illuminated Aurora’s face. She spoke again, this time lacking all anger and spite.

“Do you know where Elizabeth is? Is she okay?”

At the sound of that name, Diana felt the panic again, burning in the space between her lungs and stomach. She forced it down and carried on.

“I don’t, but I am looking. If you can answer some questions for me, it might help me find her.” She approached the cell, and calmly asked, “Have you come across a man named Sebastian Ward?”

The heatwave that swept outward from the cell nearly knocked Diana off her feet. The door was blasted open, nearly mangling the startled Sheriff. He stepped inside, glanced back at the door and catalogued it - alongside the freak blizzard and the sauna that used to be his office - under ‘things to rationalize later.’

He looked disdainfully at his prisoner.

“Don’t be fooled by her innocent looks,” he hissed, “She’s in league with Duke Bailey, one of the baddest bandits in the Rameses Stretch. Shot the Friar twice, then tried to skip town.”

Diana looked from the Sheriff back at Aurora. The situation had just gotten more complicated, and from the mischievous look on Aurora’s face, there was yet more to the story that the Sheriff wasn’t volunteering.

“I’m Sheriff Jebediah Peck. How might I help you today?” Despite his best efforts to put on a friendly face, it was clear something was irking him terribly.

“Actually Sheriff... I can’t say I remember. It’s the damndest thing, walking into a room and having no idea at all why you walked in at all. Has that ever happened to you?” The confused dame was always an easy act to sell, especially to incompetent men.

He smiled genuinely now, charmed by Diana’s ruse.

“I know exactly what you mean Miss... I’m sorry, I don’t believe I caught your name.”

“Beatrice Gauge, pleasure to meet you.” She shook his hand daintily.

“Well Miss Gauge, I have to get back out there, seeing as I’m responsible for organizing this dig. Mighty hard work, but someone has to step up and do it. Now, if you happen to remember what it is you’re looking for, you can usually find me here and I’d be more than happy to help you out.”

“Why thank you, Sheriff. Pleasure meeting you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” he said with a slimy grin.

Diana left, relieved to feel cold air on her face once again. As the door swung closed, she looked back in at the woman in the cell. Aurora Bradwell stared back with red embers sparkling

behind her eyes. Mr. Bradwell had given her the impression that she was searching for a sullen and impassive woman. What she had found was rage incarnate.

She couldn't get the information she needed with the Sheriff lurking around. He'd be leaving soon to return to the dig. Then she could sneak back in, find some way to make the prisoner speak. No, that would be too risky. The Sheriff could return at any time. The confusion act wouldn't work twice in one day, but her ever-racing mind refused to conjure a better cover story. She would just have to wait.

#### **14. RORY REED.**

If Rory could not escape the Sheriff's clutches before her husband came to claim her, she would lose Elizabeth forever. Her usual strategy, brute force, proved ineffective against the solid iron bars of her cell. Though Rory's internal temperature was barely feverish, every piece of metal in the room was painful to touch.

There were three sources of Rory's blind, radiant and all-consuming fury. The first was present: it was captivity. She had always known some form of captivity, first in her father's house, where she learned the ins and outs of anger. Maxfield Rede was a first generation German immigrant and among the first of the new nobility that arose in the last century, one hand dripping oil, the other blood. He anglicised the family name when he founded the company, at which all his sons would be employed. Rory was the only child he would not hire, on account of her sex. Instead, he treated her like property to be traded. He controlled every aspect of her life. He often withheld food to make her behave. So she learned to steal her own.

When he inevitably discovered her rebellion, he confined her to her room. Watching her suffer and starve tore the heartstrings of her maid Mathilde, the only person in whom she had ever confided. Rory's mother had died giving birth to the youngest Reed boy, so the kindly young Russian woman took it upon herself to reveal all the secrets and surprises Rory could expect as she grew into womanhood. She snuck food to Rory, first from the house's kitchen, then from her own meager pantry when that became too dangerous.

When Maxfield Reid discovered this friendship, he not only fired the maid, but had the entire staff replaced, from the lowliest serving boy to the butler of twenty years. That was when she learned true hunger, and true loneliness. She became hardened, and endeavored to cut all the

strings her father liked to pull. She never told anyone how that pain stuck with her, except Elizabeth.

The second source of Rory's anger lay waiting in her future. It was William. For a time, he was the only person Rory didn't hate. He was an awful man, but he was unashamedly awful. Her father cloaked his hideousness under so many layers of elegant pretense that sometimes even Rory was fooled into believing he had the capacity to be a better man. When business partners would come around, he'd have lavish dinners prepared, dress Rory up like a prop to be admired, and shower her in compliments where they could be heard by all. She would eat well and sometimes even enjoy the company. When the night was done and the last greasy businessman had slithered out the front door, he would have some maid whose name he did not know drag her up the stairs and lock her in her room.

William, on those rare occasions when he would have company, allowed everyone to see the real him. He would speak shamelessly about the dangers of enfranchising women, and the potential benefits of some abhorrent idea he liked to call "Selective Prohibition." Rory couldn't stand his politics. But as she watched the guests reproach her husband as a radical traditionalist, all while throwing their power and money behind causes not dissimilar from his own, she could not help but feel refreshed at William's perfect honesty. She did not like him, but she also didn't hate him. Besides that, he was well dressed.

But having finally experienced love, the thought of living the rest of her life tied to a man she simply didn't hate was terrifying.

The third cause of her fury was in the events of the not too distant past. She had been ambushed. She did not like surprises, nor setbacks, and an ambush was the unholy union of both.



She had made it to Bailey's camp just before sundown. The Sheriff's men had blocked off the mountain road, forcing her to find her own path. Deep fissures and towering crags proved impassable for her great golden horse. The better part of the day was spent doubling back and circling round, skirting both deadly terrain and patrolling lawmen. When she finally arrived, the place was abandoned, but from the high vantage, she saw a thin line of dark shapes creeping across the desert. The gang was heading east. She could not go back the way she came and still hope to catch up to them before sun down. Had she spent another minute searching, she'd likely have found the northern path down which the bandits had escaped.

Instead, she spurred her horse down the mountain road, where she knew the lawmen were waiting. She expected resistance as she drew closer to town, which she intended to overcome with brute force. When four men leapt out at her from all directions, she realized brute force wouldn't save her from a bullet in the back. They tied her hands behind her and dragged her back to town. The Sheriff made it known that for aiding Duke Bailey and shooting Friar Terrance, he intended to have her hanged the next morning. She knew he wouldn't make good on this promise. He'd ensnared a local hero, and let the bandits get away. He'd keep her arrest under wraps as long as he could to avoid the embarrassment.

Ambushed, trapped, and awaiting the return of her loathsome husband, Rory had become a perpetual furnace. Then this woman appeared out of nowhere, taunting her with the name of her enemy, and she nearly melted through the bars of her cell. It was the final straw.

The Sheriff returned and dispelled the apparition that had drifted into his office.

Since the snow and the influx of tourists had prevented him from making his usual rounds at the Spattered Rattler and sounding off his daily perturbation to anyone who would

listen, Rory found herself regaled with impossible versions of each day's events. That night, when the Sheriff had finally returned from the dig, Rory was treated to a tirade on the wrong-doings perpetrated against himself and his town. His ravings made mention of a familiar figure with an unknown name. One Theodore Gurney was described as an icy phantasm who had emerged from the white curtain under which Rameses slept. He had selfishly organized the relief efforts and, according to the Sheriff, mercilessly eroded the town's cherished culture of individualism and self-reliance.

"He sounds like a monster." Rory spoke for the first time since her imprisonment.

"You're one to talk," the Sheriff snapped back.

Rory knew he didn't care much to hear her point of view, but that he'd absolutely love to hear his own echoed back.

"There are different types of monsters Mr. Peck. There's my type. Petty criminals. Lacking respect for the institutions and conventions that form the glue of our society. Then there's folks like this Mr. Gurney, actively trying to destroy them. Pure evil is what he is."

"Damn right. Seems you've got some sense in you after all. Shame you don't use it." He sat at his desk and lit a cigar. He grunted between puffs, each time shifting in his seat, searching for a comfort his ill constructed chair refused to yield. Rory waited some time, watching his frustration mount.

"You know, someone is going to have to stop him."

"He ain't done anything illegal! Ain't nothing I can do while he acts within the law."

"Sheriff, you are the law. And you're looking out for what's best for this town."

"I don't want to hear you talk about what's best for this town!" he snapped.

She backed off, receding to the corner of her cell in which rested a small and lumpy cot. She felt as though she'd made headway, though towards what she was uncertain. If she could destabilize the Sheriff enough, she may be able to get him to slip, and expose some means of escape. Having a strategy put her mind at ease. She reclined upon the stiff cot in the corner of her cell. Since her arrest, she had not slept. Eyes open, she spent all hours of the night in perfect stillness, dissociating in an obsessive rage.

For the first time in days, the room cooled, her eyes closed, and she slept.

The next day passed without event. Her captor spent his time drinking, brooding, and glancing through the window at the rapid exhumation of his town. Any attempts to coax him into conversation were met with grumbling or silence. She hadn't yet seen him like this, and it frightened her that she may not be able to manipulate him so well as she thought.

When she awoke the following morning, the Sheriff was pacing the room, staring at her from time to time. She pretended to sleep for a few minutes longer, secretly watching as Peck grew more and more restless to commiserate. Her plan was working. She sat bolt upright, pretending to have caught him staring, then feigned indignance.

"Excuse me! What, might I ask, is the matter with you?"

"I... pardon, Miss. I'm just... I wasn't watching you sleep, I promise. It's this damned Gurney again."

"Tell me what's the matter Sheriff."

“He’s taken to stealing our rations, getting ‘em all piled up in the town hall so he can dole ‘em out or starve us as he sees fit.”

“Well you’ve got plenty enough don’t you?” She gestured to the high piles of food in either adjacent cell.

“This ain’t about me, girl! It’s about this town, it’s people!”

For the first time in several days, the Sheriff’s office felt chilly, almost cold. He opened a cabinet behind his desk and withdrew an unlabeled bottle of golden-brown booze. Rory caught a brief glimpse of the cabinet’s contents, and saw yet another hoard of cans and cartons. It occurred to her then that the Sheriff had always intended to do what William had done better and faster. There was no way he could polish off that cache on his own, even if the storm lasted weeks. But sharing his stockpile would certainly win him some favor once stomachs began to groan.

Of course, William was a man who liked to take things slowly, to creep into the seat of power, then exert said power absolutely. If he were already interceding, it meant the food situation was more dire than the Sheriff could comprehend. His little plan to gain popularity would likely end with a starving mob tearing him to shreds for withholding food. William’s strict rationing was the only thing saving the Sheriff from this fate.

He slugged half of the bottle, wincing as the unknown liquid restored warmth to his body by setting it alight. An experienced drinker, the potency of Meade’s Moonshine still made him grunt like a greenhorn.

“Can I get some of that?” Rory asked, pointing to his bottle.

“Scuze me?”

“Can I have a drink?”

“And why in hell would I share with you?”

“You still planning to hang me when the storm lifts?”

“Soon as the men are done clearing the streets I’ll have a team on the gallows.”

“Then it really is the least you can do to share a drink.”

He grunted, and considered this.

“Stuff’s strong, little lady,” he warned.

“I don’t drink weak liquor.”

This gave Peck a chuckle.

“You’d’ve fit in well here if you hadn’t gone and shot up our Friar.”

He handed her the bottle through the bars of her cell. She drained the other half faster than he had expected.

“God damn... you’d’ve fit in real well.”

She passed the empty bottle from hand to hand, enjoying the weight and the smoothness of the glass.

“Maybe, Sheriff,” She took on a nostalgic air. “Unfortunately, I think my place in this town is disappearing as fast as yours.”

His eyes narrowed. He was standing on a pitfall.

“I’m a fierce independent,” she continued, “I never ran with Bailey’s men. Though I helped him and he helped me, I couldn’t bring myself to join up. Places like Rameses used to value that. But this Theodore Gurney, he sounds like he’s changing things.”

“You don’t know the half of it. If only you could look out through that door, you’d see the change, you’d feel it in the air.”

“If only,” she smiled. The Sheriff didn’t smile back. “Soon there won’t be a place left for fine folks like you and me. They’ll be no better than those bandits - a bunch of jolly layabouts toiling for their crooked king.”

Agony wracked the Sheriff’s face.

“Like hell it will... I’ll be back.”

Taking his hat off the hook beside the door and straightening his badge on his large leather coat, he marched angrily out the door.

Rory looked down at the bottle in her hands, smiling at her own faint reflection, congratulating herself on the brilliance of her craft. The bottle was too large to hide effectively in a cell containing only a cot and a bucket. She swung it hard against the bars of her cell, and watched the pieces slide across the floor. She placed the jagged bottleneck in the crevice between her cot and the wall.

No sooner was it hidden than the door opened again, and the mysterious woman stepped inside. This was the woman that knew Sebastian Ward, the woman searching for Elizabeth. Suddenly the room was hot once again. The woman registered this, and seemed to understand that somehow, Rory was responsible. She tugged at her collar.

“Aurora,” she smiled, “Please forgive my hasty departure the other day. You deduced correctly that I’m here with your husband, searching for you and Elizabeth Hill. However, if you help me find Sebastian Ward, I promise I will get you out of this cell and ensure your husband never knows you were here.”

Rory almost laughed at the audacity of the woman standing just beyond the bars. To assume she was foolish enough to trust a total stranger, let alone one who was working for her husband - to assume Rory was incapable of escaping both this cell, and her husband, on her own - to assume that she could double cross William and live to tell about it - she must have been either a complete fool or else a master of subterfuge, and she certainly didn't look like the latter.

“Who do you think you are?”

“I go by Miss Arté. I'm a professional. I find people, and when I find them, I do what needs to be done, what I am paid to do.”

“I don't want your alias. Tell me who you are, and why I should trust you.”

The woman who called herself Miss Arté was perfectly still. Her blank expression was impossible to read. Rory allowed her to weigh her options.

“Not once have I ever been compromised. Not once have I accepted a contract and failed to deliver. I willingly offer to do that now because my husband, the man I love, may be in danger. Mr. Bradwell does not know this, and I would prefer if it stayed that way,” she took a deep breath, the kind one takes before jumping into water from an impossible height. “My name is Diana Sommerfield-Ward.”

Then it all made sense. Rory smirked.

“Then I have nothing to say to you, friend of my enemy.”

“I am not your husband's friend.”

“My husband is not my enemy. He is nothing to me now - an obstacle, that is all. But you...” she scoffed, “I should have guessed when you first walked in. A mercenary, and wife to a master criminal. Your kind disgust me.”

“Wife to a...” Diana was cut off by a familiar plodding in the snow outside.

“Pardon, just a minute,” she said to Diana. Then she laid down on the floor beside her cot, strewing her arms and legs haphazardly, and sweeping over her long, messy hair to obscure her face.

The door opened, and Sheriff Peck stomped inside, doubtlessly having just confronted her husband, doubtlessly having been put in his place once again. He gasped as he took in the scene, Diana standing cluelessly, Rory dead to the world by all outward appearance.

“What the hell has happened here?” he snapped at Diana.

“She just collapsed, sir.”

Rory was thankful this spiteful woman was playing along.

“You stay right there! Don’t move an inch or I’m putting you in that cell with her!”

Victory was the sound of shaking keys, the rumbling of the cell door scraping against the floorboards. She felt the sheriff’s hand on her side as he attempted to flip her upright. In a flash of vengeful speed, she yanked the bottleneck from its hiding place between the cot and the wall, flipped onto her back and lodged it in the side of the sheriff’s neck. A mist of the blood sprayed across half her face and dripped into her eye.

Peck stumbled back and fell to the floor. His hand wavering at his side, unable to choose between reaching down to his gun or up to hold in the life that was quickly pouring out of him. She made the choice for him, leapt across the cell and wrestled the revolver from its holster while he tried with the last of his strength to shove her off. She stood with the gun in her hand and leveled it at his head, but as she watched him suffocate on his own blood, she realized it would be better not to waste the bullet, or draw unwanted attention. She stepped outside the cell,



red rivulets dripping down her face. With the last of his strength, the Sheriff began to crawl towards freedom. She closed the cell door, turned the key, and placed it on his desk.

“Impressive, though inelegant.” Diana said.

“How would you have done it?” Rory wiped the blood from her eyes.

“I prefer my poisons. Subtle, silent. Most importantly, clean.”

“Close to godliness. Do you happen to have a handkerchief?”

“No, but I do have this.” She produced from her bag a set of clean clothes, including a warm black cloak. “I hope you can trust now that it was always my intention to see you out of here safely, seeing as I came prepared.”

“Trust you or walk openly through the snow covered streets covered in Sheriff Peck’s blood?” The Sheriff let out a little gurgle in recognition of his name. “Choices, choices.” She laid down the Sheriff’s revolver and took the clean clothes.

“Would you mind?”

Before Diana could even turn around, the door swung open yet again, and Gareth Meade stepped through with his hands in the air. Rory snatched up the revolver, just in case.

“Hold on now. I’m not here to cause trouble,” he spoke calmly, and was perfectly still.

“Rory, Diana-”

“How do you know my name?” Diana interjected.

“Why, I’m the innkeep,” he said with a sly grin, “it’s my job to know things. And I know that if you two don’t get out of here fast, they’ll have that gallows dug out by morning. Rory, forget the change of clothes, just throw on the cloak and keep your face down. Diana, leave your belongings. I’ll burn your bags so there’s no chance you’ll be compromised. Head north out of

town, and I'll make sure you're not followed. My boss will take you the rest of the way." He eyed the Sheriff's twitching corpse. "I'll have to come up with a damned good story."

Rory and Diana demanded a better explanation.

"I'm afraid there isn't time," he protested, "Trust me or shoot me, but make your decision quick."

When they didn't shoot him, he slipped out the door. They watched from the window while he marched across the street to the Spattered Rattler, where a small crowd was socializing on the porch. He proclaimed that in the interest of public health and safety, the Sheriff was buying everyone a round. Hollering their applause, the crowd and Gareth disappeared into the Inn. Rory and Diana slipped outside and started up Main Street. They kept their heads down and moved as quickly as they could without giving the appearance of two women fleeing the law. Thanks to Gareth's little ruse, they were able to make it to the very edge of town unspotted.

Just as they reached the end of Main, a figure emerged in their periphery, slipping quietly between two houses. Rory instinctively reached under her cloak to where the Sheriff's gun was tucked away, but when she turned to face the spectre approaching them, she was paralyzed.

"Rory. Diana. Please come with me." Elizabeth turned and started off down the alley from which she had emerged. They followed along. Though Diana was perfectly quiet, Rory could sense, in the way that like knows like, a violent rage boiling within her.

"Elizabeth..." Rory tried to call out, but her voice caught in her throat. For the first time in a week, staring at Elizabeth's back and cluelessly following her into the unshoveled snow, Rory felt cold. She tried again. "Elizabeth."

“We haven’t much time, Rory dear. We’re done with Rameses, and the train is leaving soon.”

## 15. SEBASTIAN WARD.

By the time the gang arrived in Memphis, Sebastian was awake. He quickly accepted the reality of the situation, only slightly weirder than it was back in Rameses. He heard some residual murmurings about a blizzard. When he remembered the dry, overwhelming heat that permeated every corner of that dusty town, it was almost too ridiculous to believe. Then again, what wasn't?

That first week in the big city was a bustle of survival. Ghenny managed to scout and secure a long empty warehouse on the city's outskirts. It's position along the water would have made it valuable real estate for anyone looking to use the river for business. The place would surely have housed a more reputable venture had the roof not caved in after a devastating fire.

They brought their waggons into the warehouse through the high dock-side doors. Camp was pitched in the corner of the warehouse least exposed to the elements. They cleared the rubble from the floor, then set up tents on the hard concrete between the circled waggons. Their little village was not pretty, but had a coziness to it that made it bearable. The horses were none too happy, but Nealand, always better with animals than people, was more than capable of calming them all down.

The next step in ensuring their survival was finding work. Several of them were able to find menial and surprisingly legal employment around the city, mostly helping to prepare for the Memphis Centennial Parade. These jobs were demanding, and the pay was abysmal, but it helped them keep from starving. Bailey and Ghenny spent their days seeking out new contacts, attempting to find the Charon to Memphis' underworld. After days of dead ends, they finally got a reliable lead. Their contact was a man named Nichols Bijou. He was as wide as Bailey was tall,

with a gravelly voice and a long braid of grey hair. Ghenny called him “the human embodiment of a cigar.”

The job was a burglary, a field in which Bailey and his men had plenty of experience. The specifics, however, posed a problem. Bijou wanted them to steal a specific painting from the Claridge Museum, for which he already had a buyer. He stressed the importance of subtlety when dealing with an item of such prestige.

As Sebastian was now learning, when plotting out a job, Duke Bailey would gather all of his men in the center of camp and work through the plans together. This built immense trust. If any one of them had loose lips, they’d all be put in danger. But the real intent of this practice was to have as many eyes and ears on the plan as possible. Even those who never participated in the high-stakes jobs would occasionally notice a vulnerability none of the more experienced criminals had caught.

Sebastian watched this ritual drag on as a coherent plan failed to take shape. Bailey, Ghenny and the Gallagher twins sat on one end of a wide circle, occasionally offering an idea, only to have it rejected for its obvious flaws. No one could find a foothold. The longer Sebastian listened to the halting conversation, the more obvious the problem became. None of them had ever stepped foot inside a museum. A second realization filled him with a swelling anxiety: he knew exactly how to plan this heist.

He owed them - didn’t he? They had nursed him back to health and helped him this far along in his journey home. Then again, maybe they owed him that much, being partly responsible for his inopportune and prolonged period of unconsciousness.

There were also the legal and moral implications of helping these people. In any scenario he could devise, there would be no way for him to avoid becoming physically involved in carrying out the plan. It simply wouldn't be possible to educate them on all the relevant details of museum operations within the week or so they had to prepare. Even if they could get the painting out without being caught and thrown in jail, how could he be sure whoever bought the painting would treat it with proper respect.

A third consideration outweighed even these feelings of responsibility and guilt. He liked the men sitting around him. He liked Duke Bailey. They showed him kindness, though he had come to do them harm. Not once since he awakened had they cast upon him a suspicious eye or a probing question. He had simply become one of them, though he had no function within their camp. They treated him as they treated one another. It gave him a feeling he could not name, because he had never *belonged* anywhere before, except with Diana.

Their first night in Memphis, when food was scarce and spirits watered down, the men went round the crackling fire telling their best jokes. Sebastian sat just outside the circle, slurping some non-Newtonian stew. He was barely registering the jokes and laughter until they died down. Looking up from his dinner, he saw the bandits were unwilling to pass him over.

"I don't know many good jokes," he protested.

"Have you been listening?" asked Rhett Ghalager, "Neither do we."

Realizing he could not escape this obligation, he tried to remember the best joke he'd ever heard. Instead he remembered this.

"A freshly recruited navy seaman was getting on a ship to go off to the war. All the other recruits had been sharing stories about the German's U-Boats - how you never saw them coming,

and their torpedoes could sink a ship in minutes. Well, his captain sees him come aboard, shaking in his new uniform, and asks him what's the matter. The recruit tells him he's terrified of the German's U-Boats. The captain replies, 'Don't you worry son. So long as I'm on this boat with you, you've nothing to fear.' The recruit asks him how he knows. The captain says, 'I shan't die at the hands of the sea.' He provides no further explanation as to how he knows this, but speaks the words with such conviction that the recruit believes him. He stops his shaking and makes his way to his post.

Not a week later, they're struck by the torpedo of a German U-Boat and the ship begins to take on water. Recognizing the bleakness of the situation, and that there's nothing left he can do at his post, the recruit dashes to the bridge to find the captain. 'Captain!' he says, 'What happened? You said you would never die at the hands of the sea.'"

Sebastian paused for dramatic effect.

"Well," Bailey took the bait, "What did he say?"

"The sea doesn't have hands."

They all laughed uproariously, their tipsy mirth echoing off the far walls of the warehouse.

Now Sebastian sat within the circle each night, eating his dinner while he conversed with the other men, getting to know their stories and telling them parts of his.

Now, watching them scratch their chins and clutch their rumbling stomachs, there was only one thing he could do.

"I... I might be able to help."

The plan was as simple as Sebastian could devise. There would be no guns blazing, dead-or-alive, cowboy style banditry to which Bailey's Gang was accustomed. This would require finesse and charm. They would take the painting in plain sight of the Claridge Museum's patrons and staff.

The first leg of the plan was recon. Sebastian and Ghenny walked in the visitors' entrance. Each handed over the exorbitant five dollar fee, far higher than the price advertised in last week's paper. Ghenny called this, "The best investment they'd ever make." At the front desk, a woman handed each of them a pamphlet containing a map of the museum. Ghenny called these, "Complimentary Reconnaissance." From there, the two headed their separate ways, Ghenny following the Map in the direction of the room marked, "Samuel Colman Exhibition - Coming Soon," and Sebastian seeking out, "Museum Staff Only."

It was Ghenny's job to plot a course through the part of the museum open to the public. He'd take note of each entrance and exit in case the heist went belly-up, as well as where each of the guards were stationed. If he wanted to peruse the art while he was at it, that was up to him.

Sebastian's job was to learn about the internal workings of the museum. He quickly located the administrative wing and pushed his way through the double doors, imitating the familiar swagger of one who belongs behind the walls on which masterpieces live. There was something incredibly refreshing about being back within his element, even if only temporarily. For the briefest moment, he wondered if the museum was hiring.

He had no real inclination to leave the bandits, even with his old life trying to pull him back in. Even in his fleeting fantasy of becoming the Claridge's curator, he still went through with the heist and make his new friends proud.



He arrived at a door with a placard that read, “Dr. Michael C. Bink, Curator” He knocked, and heard a furious shuffling of papers.

The door swung open and he found himself looking down at a stocky, bespectacled fellow who contested him for ‘Most Mussed Man, 1926.’

“Michael Bink?” Sebastian asked, “I’m deeply sorry to interrupt your work, especially at so crucial a time. Would you happen to have ten minutes to spare?”

“Mind if I ask who it’s being spared for?”

He’d rehearsed this part. “Harvey Carlton, pleased to make your acquaintance. I worked for the late Henry Frick for four years before his passing. I helped him to expand and house his collection. I was deputy-chief curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art until three months ago. My wife needed a change of scenery and, well here we are.” Sebastian thought ‘deputy-chief,’ was a nice touch. He didn’t want to oversell it.

“My, my, Mr. Carlton, that’s quite the resume... For my own sake I hope you’re not here searching for work...”

“Mr. Bink, no! I’d never supplant a fellow professional. Especially not one who’s responsible for such an astounding collection as this! You were correct, however, in assuming I’m on the hunt for work. If you’re in need of an assistant...”

“I can certainly direct you to Mr. Maynard. He’s the Director of the institution and is responsible for hires of your caliber. I’d have to ask that you tell him that detail about your unwillingness to replace me...”

“You have nothing to worry about from me, and I’d appreciate the introduction. But I came to you first for an honest opinion on the internal operations of this institution. Museum

directors, especially those who've never worked in a curatorial capacity, can be insensitive to the demands of our craft."

"Tell me about it! When we decided on this Colman exhibit, I wish I'd known to prepare for the fight of my life. We've got our centerpiece coming in tomorrow, *The Edge of Doom*. I've finally managed to talk Maynard into giving the thing it's own wall, letting it really stand out!"

"I've had that exact conversation!" This was a lie. Sebastian would never give a painting it's own wall. "Did you have to promise him a kidney?"

"Nearly! He's obsessed with getting this exhibit up as fast as possible, but the usual crew that transports the paintings is booked to help out with this damned Centennial Parade."

Sebastian realized this job might be easier than he thought.

"Why, I know an incredibly reliable crew that might have availability. They helped me move my own collection down from New York without incident."

"I wish I could talk the Director into it. He's cutting corners! Hired some half-penny crew to make the delivery tonight rather than wait a week for our guys. We've already had to delay the opening of the Colman exhibit by a month the last time he tried to save a buck! Hasn't learned a thing since!"

"How do you mean?"

Mr. Bink got clammy. He'd said too much.

"That's enough about that. He's a fine man, just a lousy boss. Hey, I'm just about done here. Nothing to do now but worry and wait. How about I give you a tour of the wing, show you the museum's merits now that I've bad-mouthed it so much."

Sebastian got a personal tour of the museum's store-rooms, offices, archives, and the workshop where they performed restoration work.

“Say, where do you source your archival paper? I’ve been looking for a roll to store the paintings that won’t fit in the new apartment.”

“We get it shipped in from Massachusetts. Not cheap to transport, but we’ve got a deal with the paper mill which more than makes up the cost.”

“Damn, guess I’ll keep looking.”

“Hold on,” this gambit was paying off, “We’ve got a near-finished roll around here somewhere. How much do you need?”

After the tour, Sebastian asked to rain-check the introduction with Director Maynard. He left the museum, a sealed cardboard tube under his arm. Ghenny was already outside, waiting on the curb.

“You didn’t go stealing the painting without me, did you?” Ghenny remarked at the tube.

“No, but this will help when I do.”

They returned to the warehouse just before dinner. The smell of cooked meat drifting through the shattered windows added to the spring in their step.

Over dinner, Sebastian and Ghenny recounted what they’d learned, and explained the rest of the plan to the crew.

“Are you worried about that Bink fellow reporting you to the police?” Duke asked. “He’s the only one that got a clear look at you, yes?”

“The man seemed terrified of losing his job. He won’t say anything. He’ll do everything in his capacity to avoid making himself a prime cut of scapegoat mutton.” Sebastian smirked through bites of his dinner.

“I ain’t seen you like this before,” Duke remarked.

Sebastian was suddenly self-conscious. “What do you mean?”

“That cocky grin, the self-assurance, you’re proud of your work. And you should be. You’ve done well today.”

A devilish smile returned to Sebastian’s face. Duke was right, he was proud of his work today. And he wasn’t the only one. The way the other men looked at him showed that he was no longer the stray they’d rescued in Rameses, but a full-on member of the gang. He belonged.

Ghenny took out his guitar and strummed some simple chords. The Gallagher twins sang their hearts out, not yet drunk enough to rhyme consistently. The other men clapped or stomped along to the jubilant shanty.

As all the men retired for the night, Ghenny came to sit by Sebastian, and laid down his guitar.

“You still thinking of heading back to New York when this heist is done?” he asked.

“I think so,” Sebastian replied, “I miss my wife. I don’t know if she’ll ever take me back after what I’ve done. She probably shouldn’t. I don’t deserve her anymore, if I ever did. But still, if there’s a way I can make things right by her, I have to try.”

“I respect that. Just know there’ll be an absence here without you. You’ve done a good thing for this group, for Duke.”

“Oh come now, don’t flatter me.”

“I ain’t. Let me tell you a story. Before I came to Rameses, I was chased out of San Francisco for killing a man. He owned the sweatshop where my brother worked. See, my little brother got mixed up in union business, made the wrong friends and the wrong enemies. Got arrested outside work one day, police had supposedly found a bomb in his apartment. Thing is, I was down on my luck and staying with him at the time, and the police never even stopped by. Didn’t matter. The boss came out to testify against him and it was our word against his. My little brother’s serving a life sentence right now.

“I don’t regret putting that man in the ground. Even so, I let my anger get the best of me. I was reckless, almost got myself killed. When Duke found me, I was near starved and pissed at the whole wide world.”

“Bailey gave you a new lease on life?”

“Like you couldn’t know. First person to ever talk me down from a fit rather than shouting back or running in the other direction. Got me to see I was self-destructing. Never once judged me for the path I’d walked, just wanted to help me shape the path ahead.

“Every one of these men has a story something like mine. He found them dead to the world, turned them around, gave them something to live and to fight for. Gave them a community.”

“Is that what he’s trying to do for me?”

“You tell me.”

Sebastian knew the answer.

“Bailey’s important to every one of these men,” Ghenny continued, “and you’ve given him something great. Now, he was right to take us out of Rameses, to bring us East. There was

nothing left for us there, we'd have all flown off on our own or else starved before long. But see, I know how Duke operates, and I know how big cities work, and those two things just weren't compatible. I never found my way in San Francisco, and I wouldn't have been able to help Duke find his way here. Then you fell into our ranks with some big idea about a museum heist and somehow you've made it happen. You showed us all another way. You've helped Duke shape his path."

Sebastian was silent. He'd never received such praise before, and it stunned him.

"I'm not asking you to stay. All I'm saying is, wherever you are, we'll always be grateful for what you've done here."

Five days later, after the initial crowds had died down, Duke, Sebastian and their small criminal entourage arrived at the museum. They parked their stolen truck at the loading bay out back. They were dressed (to Ghenny's best approximation) as Claridge Museum staff. They'd even forged name tags with the swirly red "C.M." monogrammed in the corner. Their suits had been gradually lifted from the luggage of inattentive rich tourists down at the Hotel Leone, where Stockton had been working as a bellhop. Finding a suit that even remotely fit Bailey was an unexpected miracle, though he still looked like a schoolboy who'd outgrown his clothes. Every one of them, save Sebastian, was discreetly armed. Before they left the truck, Duke removed two guns from his suit pockets, and handed one to Sebastian. He looked down at the handle, and saw the engraved "L.B."

"Your mother's gun?" It was heavier than Sebastian remembered.

"Let's hope it's Checkov's."

“I... I can't take this.”

“That gun's never failed me, Sebastian. She's got a lot of luck in her. If things go wrong here, you'll need all the luck you can get.”

“What about you?” he asked.

“Don't need luck,” he grinned, “I'm a good shot.”

“Fair enough.”

Duke picked the lock on the service door and stepped in first, looked around the cluttered storage room to make sure the coast was clear. The rest of the bandits followed him inside, carrying the wide wooden box with which they would ferret away the painting. Sebastian searched the space and did some rummaging and found two lengths of red velvet rope, four metal posts, and two signs reading “Exhibit Under Construction.” They were heaped in the corner, not yet sorted away by the proper staff. Sebastian ordered the Gallaghers to take these along while Duke and Ghenny carried the box. From there, they took the service corridors, weaving their way through empty hallways until they came to a door which, by Ghenny's calculations, let out right into the Colman Exhibit. They stepped out into a white room surrounded by gorgeous landscapes, like windows to other worlds and other times. There was one guard in the room, and a dearth of patrons. Sebastian approached the guard.

“Mind clearing the room?” he asked politely, “Maynard wants *The Edge of Doom* taken in for some restoration work.”

“Again?” said the guard, “Alright, no problem.”

The guard cleared the exhibit, causing some patrons to mumble discontentedly about the price of entry and the value of their time, then departed to some other part of the Gallery. The

Gallaghers set out the signage and rope barriers to prevent them from being disturbed. Sebastian approached the massive painting, spotlit in glorious gold on an otherwise empty wall. The men set down the box.

“Gonna cut it loose from the frame?” Asked one of the Gallaghers.

“God no!” Sebastian said, aghast. “We’d damage the painting irreparably!”

“Ain’t stolen art before,” Bailey whispered, “go easy on ‘em. Nobody’s touching the thing until you tell us how and give the go ahead. You’re in charge here.”

“Just keep your gloves on. Try not to make any folds or creases in the canvas. And here...” Sebastian set down the long cardboard tube he’d gotten from Chief Curator Bink, and pulled out two rolls of translucent paper. He took the lid off the wooden box the men had brought in, and unrolled one sheet across the bottom.

“Archival paper, cut to size” he explained, “It will keep the painting safer in transport. I’ll put the other sheet on top once the painting is in and secure. Duke, let’s you and I get it down.”

The two approached the wall as the other men stepped back to give them room. Each grabbed a side of the portrait and prepared to lift.

“Up, then out, then down.” Sebastian instructed, then counted to three. The painting jumped up as Bailey overestimated its weight. He regained control and pulled it off the wall. Sebastian watched how gingerly he handled it, appreciating the care he took not to damage the masterpiece. They lowered it to the floor so gently it did not make a sound. Bailey watched Sebastian, who was suddenly enraptured by some detail or another in the painting.

“Let’s get it in the box,” Bailey offered.

“Wait,” Sebastian interrupted. “Put it back on the wall.”



“What? Sebastian we need to get out of here before someone finds us out.”

“Please. Put it back, I need to see it again under the light.”

Bailey helped Sebastian lift it back onto its metal pegs. Sebastian gazed into the painting, staring into the wave of fire which consumed columns and cathedrals and tore apart the earth. There was something wrong with that fire. He reached out a hand and scratched at the canvas, getting flecks of red stuck beneath his fingernail. He licked his finger as the bandits looked on, terrified.

“Fuck,” Sebastian muttered, “Grab the box, we’re going back to the administrative wing. Gather up the ropes and signs, open the gallery. If I’m right, we’ve gotta do this fast.”

“Mind explaining what the hell is going on?” Duke was calmly panicking.

“Hurry. I’ll explain on the way.”

As they dashed through the service corridors, Sebastian did just that.

“The pigment on the painting, the deepest red within the fire, didn’t exist until the 1890s. Colman finished *The Edge of Doom* in 1838. Now, you may be thinking, ‘what if the pigment was added in restoration.’”

“I was not.” Duke admitted.

“Well, this pigment isn’t used in restorations. The acidity of it can rapidly degrade older canvas. Not even someone willing to cut every other corner would destroy the painting to save a few dollars on paint.”

“So it’s a forgery!” Rhett cut in.

“Exactly!”

“Then we’re shit out of luck?” asked Michael.

“No. At least, I don’t think so. If I’m correct, the actual painting may be in the workshop undergoing restorations, even as we speak.”

“How do you figure that?”

“The museum director is a famed cheapskate. The Colman gallery’s opening was initially set for two months ago, but had to be postponed after he cut corners. That was as much detail as Dr. Bink would give me on the subject.”

“I’m not following, and frankly I’m beginning to think we’d best hightail it while we still can.” Duke was getting antsy. He was out of his element, and didn’t know how to protect his men on this seemingly doomed errand.

Sebastian continued to explain his thought process, “I believe when the painting arrived at the museum this past week, it was damaged by improper transport, and unfit for display to the public. So, rather than postpone the opening again, they decided to hang the forgery and pray nobody would notice.”

“How on earth would they make a forgery that size in under a day?” Ghenny was still suspicious of this change in plans.

“They already had it! It’s why the gallery didn’t open last month, because they purchased a forgery by mistake.”

“Why didn’t they just hang it then?” asked Duke.

“They weren’t yet desperate enough. Last week the Museum placed a notice in the Memphis Press advertising admission at a dollar, seventy five. When Ghenny and I came in to scope the place out, they were charging five dollars at the door. They’re hemorrhaging money to try and finish this exhibit, and every corner they cut costs them more.”

“We’re betting an awful lot on your hunch, Sebastian.”

“Duke, we’re both too good for hunches. This is professional intuition.”

They arrived at the workshop. Sebastian gave everyone instructions on what to do if the room was occupied. The Gallaghers were to wait outside with the box until the signal was given. The rest pushed through the swinging double doors.

Across the workshop, *The Edge of Doom* rested on a giant easel. Standing over it were two restoration workers, the Chief Curator and the Museum Director. Bink’s eyes widened when he saw Sebastian, though he said nothing.

Director Maynard panicked. “This section of the museum is off limits to-”

Sebastian didn’t let him finish, “Special Agent Harvey Carlton, United States Bureau of Investigation. Michael C. Bink, Andrew Maynard, you’re both under investigation for Criminal Art Fraud.”

The men were too shocked to answer. This is what Sebastian had hoped for. Had he been asked for a badge or a warrant, things might have gotten messy.

“Please step away from the painting,” Sebastian commanded, “Agent Calder.”

Bailey approached the painting feigning as much authority as could be managed by a large man in a tiny suit.

“If it’s not the real copy,” he began in his best Metropolitan accent, “it’s at least a better forgery than the one on display. I’d have to take it in for a more thorough examination.”

“You can’t do that!” Maynard shouted, almost lunging at Bailey.

“I assure you, we can,” Sebastian countered calmly, “We’ve confirmed that the painting on display in the Colman Exhibit is forgery, and a shotty one at that. We’re well past the point of

suspicion, Mr. Maynard. You're guilty of fraud, and we could book you right now if we wanted to. What remains to be seen is how far the extent of this fraud goes. To further this investigation, we will be seizing this painting, along with all related documentation and certification. These will be handled carefully and undergo examination in the lab. If it all checks out, you'll receive the painting back, and can hang it in your jail cell if you're so inclined. Agent Drake," he nodded to Ghenny.

Ghenny fetched the Gallaghers, who brought in the box. Without any resistance, they took the canvas down and placed it into the box with professional care, exactly as Sebastian had instructed. Then, bounty in tow, they left the way they came, the desperate eyes of the Claridge Museum's staff following them out.

The exchange that took place that night was far from smooth. Bijou almost hadn't agreed to a meeting at all, until Bailey explained at great length why *The Edge of Doom* was ostensibly still hanging on the wall of the Claridge Museum. They met in a narrow building on the river, at an hour closer to dawn than midnight. Bijou came with six well armed men, who he claimed were there to ensure safe transport.

He saw the painting, unframed as it was, worn from mishandling and only partially repaired. He offered them a far lower sum than they had negotiated. Bailey played tough for as long as he could, letting his hand rest on his revolver as he lowered his voice into a growl and demanded payment in full. But the portly middleman showed no signs of budging.

That was when Sebastian, still riding high on the success of the heist, did something that was, in hindsight, incredibly stupid.

“Alright then,” he shrugged, “pack it up.”

“Excuse me?” Bijou demanded.

“Sebastian...” Bailey warned.

“Pack it up, Duke. It’s worth more than he’s willing to give.”

“You ain’t gonna find another buyer, son.” Bijou chuckled in self satisfaction.

“Maybe, maybe not. But you certainly won’t find another seller.”

Bijou’s smile crumbled away. Bailey and the other bandits looked on, dumbfounded.

Even the mobster’s guards seemed uneasy as this gaunt, disheveled fool openly challenged their boss.

“It’s not like you can’t afford to buy it from us,” he continued, “Market price, it’s worth far more than what we’re asking. Four, maybe five times more in fact. Even after the cost of restorations you’d be making a pretty penny on this. But you’re not even selling it at market price, are you? You’re working for an aficionado. Why stress the stealth, why not take every last painting from that shaky excuse for a museum and make a goddamned fortune? Unless, of course, your buyer wanted exactly this painting. Only this painting. With that kind of clientele, you could probably name your price. So we’ve named ours. Take it or leave it?”

Bijou eyed Bailey in disbelief, then after an eternity of tense silence, he began to laugh.

“Where did you find this one.”

“He found us.”

Bijou paid them every last cent he’d promised.

The next night's dinner was bountiful, and from all the singing and cheering of his name, one would have thought it was Sebastian's birthday. Each man knew they owed this meal to him, and even after Ghenny's cinematic blow-by-blow of the day's events, even after the Ghallagers' booze-fueled bardic retellings, they all wanted to hear it again from the hero himself. Sebastian was regaled with questions. How could he tell from sight alone that the painting was a forgery? How could he know exactly what to say to disarm the museum staff so completely that they had let him walk away with a priceless painting? How could he face down Nichols Bijou, and so calmly and tactfully call his bluff?

He answered to the best of his ability, often veering into mundane anecdotes about his work for the Brooklyn Museum, always holding their full attention. No one had taken such an interest in his unique artistic talents since he'd met Diana. It felt amazing.

After the festivities, he did his part to clean the space and lay out the rough mats on which everyone slept. Most everyone went off to sleep and the fire which had warmed their cheerful feast faded to embers. Sebastian sat on the end of the wagon which had carried his limp body halfway across the country. He could not sleep now if he tried.

Duke approached silently, stepping between the sleeping bandits, and sat beside him on the end of the cart.

"Once we make enough money here, we'll be making our way up to New York to try our luck in the big leagues," he spoke in a low whisper, "Think you're ready to go back?"

"I don't know if I want to go home, Duke. Back in Rameses it was all I wanted, all I could think about, other than Elizabeth. But it just doesn't feel real anymore. I know it won't be like it was before, but I don't know how it will be different. I just don't know, Duke. I don't

know if I can face my wife and tell her why I hurt her. How can I ask her to forgive me when I don't want her to? I want her to be absolutely furious at me and I don't know why."

"Anger would justify your feelings of guilt. It would mean she cares enough to want to hurt you back, and if she hurts you back then maybe you could someday be even again. But you won't ever be even again. If you want to make things better with your wife, you're gonna have to understand that you've done a bad thing. You've hurt her. You can't make that go away or even that out. But even if you've done a bad thing you can still be a good man. Take responsibility and do right by her."

"How?"

"That's up to her."

Sebastian was silent.

"Go home, stay with us, or find a new path. What you do is up to you. Whatever choice you make, be good 'Bastian."

"Thank you, Duke." Sebastian's mind was clouded by the static of a million overlapping thoughts and emotions. He blocked them out just enough to ask one final question which had been on his mind since Rameses. "Duke, why Elizabeth?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know... I suppose I just want to know who she really is, why she's doing this."

Duke thought for a while, then decided where to begin.

"She's a revolutionary. I met her back when my gang wasn't much more than myself, Bill Stockton and Davis Miller. You never properly met Miller, but he would have liked you. In those days, she was just a thief and I but an outlaw with little care for anything but my men. I'd lost

hope that there was any good left to be done in the world when my father and that town turned me out to fend for myself. Elizabeth came along and talked some sense into me.”

“How?”

“She told me what I refused to see. She told me that I could be the good in the world, even as a bandit. That I loved my friends like family, that I had something close to honor, even as a criminal and a thief. That I was only a bandit because the options for men like me are truly slim.”

“Men like you?”

“Revolutionaries,” he let the word linger in the air, then smiled at its grandeur. “Her words not mine. Men who were born to lead and to inspire, if they’re born tasting the cold silver of the proverbial spoon, go on to be politicians, captains of industry, great generals and admirals. But if they’re born in the dirt... well then those other folks don’t like you much. Maybe you become the voice of a movement, a unionizer, labor leader. They’ll turn your own people against you, and drive you back into the dark.”

“Still, why become a bandit?”

“Cause it’s better to be hated for your crimes than for the good you try to do.”

Sebastian saw the pain on Bailey’s face. “Do you regret having become who you are now?”

Bailey turned his head and looked around the camp. “Not when I look at them. For all the bad I’ve done, all the people I’ve hurt, I’ve saved these men. They mean the world to me.”

“You saved me, too,” Sebastian confessed, “I don’t think I’ve had a proper chance to thank you. So thank you.”



“And you saved all of us. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say just how much that means to me. But you asked me about Elizabeth. She was a revolutionary. Dreamed of a world where men like me, women like her, and damn well everyone else share in the powers of statecraft. She sees this nation as a failed experiment, and I’m inclined to agree with her. I pledged myself and my men to help her cause. Though neither of us knew at that time what shape that cause would take.”

“Did she ever call it in?”

Bailey paused while thinking about how to answer this, “Last time I saw her, she took me deep into the mountains above Rameses. I saw the strangest things up there. She had some kind of military compound, built up around an old foundry. There were men digging metal out of the old mines farther up. They brought it down, refined it, cast it, and assembled these strange, colossal machines. They were loaded onto trains and sent back east.

“She told me she was raising an army, and wanted me to lead it. Said she needed someone who could create unity, inspire solidarity. I said no. I won’t leave my men and won’t ask them to join a cause they wouldn’t know nothing about. I know Lizzie’s fighting a good fight, but the way she spoke about the future... I worry about how she plans to get there. And when I saw that storm descend on Rameses...”

“You think that was her?”

“One of those monstrous machines, I know it,” Duke sighed, “I only hope that when the fight begins, she remembers all the people she was fighting for.”

These words filled Sebastian with an icy dread. That night, he did not sleep at all.

## 16. ELIZABETH HILL.

As the train barreled towards Port Cedric, Elizabeth excused herself from her guests. Though they had agreed to join her cause, she withheld the final piece of her plan, her secret weapon, whom she was going to visit now. She would show them once they arrived in town.

She stepped over to the last car. It was locked from the inside, and would only open when the passcode was knocked on the door. This was exceedingly hard to learn and execute, requiring both hands to tap out simultaneous rhythms in different time signatures. Such measures were owed to the paranoia of the man within.

She performed the carefully composed password, knocking hard against the door. A long series of clicks and clangs came from inside as locks were undone. The door swung open, and the man who had opened it scampered away to the far side of the car. She closed the door behind her.

“Arlow,” she greeted him, “How are you finding the journey?”

“As I find most things. Taxing.”

She closed the door and he sat down at his desk and resumed his work, fiddling with strange calculations and reworking equations full of symbols and variables only he would ever know the meaning of. Without looking up, he asked, “How is my sister?”

“I can’t be sure. Her poker face is the most incredible thing. She has immaculate self-control, betrays nothing of her emotions. It’s no wonder I could never find any evidence of her criminal activities while I was living in her house, though her husband’s inescapable gaze did me no favors.”

“I told you from the onset. Diana leaves no evidence. You had no faith in me.”

“I prefer caution over faith. I will not approach a woman with the intent of contracting them as an assassin if I cannot be entirely positive she is an assassin.”

Arlow grumbled and continued his writings. “Why have you come here and interrupted my work?”

“I wanted to inform you that we are approaching Port Cedric, and give you the option of joining me when I leave for Washington.”

He looked up at her as though she had suggested he wash himself with lye.

“And why would I do that?”

“In case you wish to see your vision realized.”

“I must respectfully decline. The walk from the train to the Hotel will be taxing enough.”

“Understood. Start packing whatever you don’t entrust others to transport on your behalf. Unless you’d like to make multiple trips.”

She stepped out between the cars just in time to watch the ocean come into view. These were the final days upon which everything hinged. This train ride would be her last moment of respite. Once they reached the station, she would learn how things had been going on this coast, whether Elouise had managed to secure the army uniforms from the bolsheviks, whether Constantin had finished fortifying the outposts along the coast, whether Arlow’s instructions had been followed properly in his absence, and the ships were ready to be deployed. Everything would start picking up now.

At this moment, she felt truly still, truly free. If all went to plan, she would soon be shackled by the weight of rebuilding a shattered world, shaping it from a sheet of ice a mile deep.

If all went to hell, she'd be shackled by shackles, pending federal execution for treason. She took a breath, and did something rare: she let her mind wander.

It wandered through the door before her. It wandered down the narrow aisle between rows of ominous, silent machines. It passed through cars packed with secret soldiers, happy to see the ocean after their long stay out west.

And then it was back at the front of the train, sitting beside the woman she loved. She sat alone, having politely denied company from the moment she stepped onto the train. She did not glance out the window, or fiddle with the furnishings of her compartment. She was still, and she was cold.

Elizabeth wanted more than anything to take the seat beside her, to grab her hands, to hold her, to kiss her. She wanted to promise that once the storm had come and gone, she would make things better.

She thought she had done away with such desires. Rory had proved her wrong. The entire journey from Rameses, these thoughts had clouded her mind, and this frightened her. She could not be distracted in the days to come. She drew her mind back to herself, standing between the cars. She took another breath. She would not let her mind wander again.

**17. DIANA SOMMERFIELD-WARD.**

As the train lurched into Port Cedric, Diana felt... actually pretty great. The last two nights had been more restful than any since her husband's disappearance. She still did not know where Sebastian was, yet somehow felt at peace with that now.

She pondered this in her exceedingly tranquil meditations during the journey east. She still loved him, she was still worried for him, to some extent she even missed him. But now that she knew the truth, she was content not to find him, for a while at least.

She wasn't angry he had lied to her. Actually, she was relieved. She felt, in a way, as though they were pretty close to even. She'd been moonlighting as an assassin for the entire duration of their marriage, renting the apartment above theirs. How many times had she handed him some shallow excuse about taking care of her ailing mother? When she placed these clandestine actions on the scales across from his ill-fated attempt at an affair, she felt years of guilt melt away. He wasn't malicious, just foolish, and a better judge of artwork than he was of character. She'd known all that when she'd agreed to marry him. She found it endearing.

When Elizabeth had told her the whole story, she could not help but laugh. It was funny! She hadn't even known her husband was capable of telling a lie, and yet here he was covering for himself over multiple months without his wife noticing once! She was proud of him, though she recognized the strangeness of this.

She wondered where he was right now. According to Aurora he'd ridden off alongside her brother Duke Bailey. Duke had always had an affinity for strays. Sebastian would at least be safe among the bandits, though likely horribly out of place.

She wondered what he would think of Elizabeth's plan if he knew the whole of it. Diana herself found it quite absurd. She had always contented herself with killing individuals, for reasons mostly personal. To even consider that she could play a part in this war to change a nation... It seemed delusional. But when Elizabeth spoke of the grand plan, she seemed logical, calculating, controlled - all things Diana was inclined to trust. This was the first reason she agreed to join the effort. The second was that if she had refused, she would be the only Bailey sibling who was not involved (save Arlow, whose profession as an experimental meteorologist probably wasn't applicable to a revolution) and that would make her a little sad.

The third and final reason was that this was exactly what she needed. That whole business with her husband and William, the first job she'd ever abandoned, and the brother she had missed the chance to reunite with, all of it had been wildly disappointing. For the first time her impenetrable mental palace had been shaken at its very foundations, and this was exactly the job she needed to prove that she still had it.

She thought of Aurora. As far as she knew, she was not a professional killer, and yet the townspeople of Rameses seemed to blame her for the deaths of no fewer than six lawmen and six bandits. She'd murdered the Sheriff without hesitation, then shook it off like it was nothing. Here was a woman so overcome by emotion that she could seemingly heat up a room. And yet, in the midst of her most violent rage, she maintained perfect composure. It was a method Diana had never considered, and still did not understand. She would have to ask about it, if she got the chance.

The camp was set up like a military barracks. Long lines of beige tents were set up to house the many uniformed men and women who were swarming from place to place. A group of soldiers marched past on their way to unload the cargo from the train.

“This is our main base of operations,” Elizabeth explained, “Though we have chapter houses across the east coast. After the Albatross Shipping Company went belly-up, Port Cedric was deserted, leaving a whole lot of empty warehouses, and a small but formidable fleet of fishing vessels.”

They marched down the main strip of tents into the town-proper. Having come directly from Rameses, the overwhelming notes of dereliction were all-too-familiar.

“Ghost towns,” Diana thought aloud.

“Precisely,” Elizabeth confirmed, “There were other places we might have conducted our operations out West, but none so sparsely populated as Rameses. For any of this to succeed, we must be inconspicuous.”

“A blizzard in the desert,” Rory muttered, “doesn’t strike me as inconspicuous.”

For all Elizabeth had revealed to them, she still had yet to take credit for the strange weather that had paralyzed Rameses in the days prior to their departure. Though both of them clearly suspected she was responsible, neither had any theories as to how anyone could have produced such a phenomenon.

Though Elizabeth turned to speak to Rory, Rory did not meet her gaze.

“No. But a trial was necessary.”

“A trial?” Diana posed.

“I had to see first-hand what it is I intend to unleash. Whether the means can ever be justified by the ends.”

Diana shivered. She was used to dealing in matters of life and death, but the only collateral harm she had ever caused was grief. Ends and means were never a consideration before, but if Elizabeth was talking about reproducing what had happened in Rameses, there would undoubtedly be a great deal of suffering and death.

“What exactly is it you intend to unleash?” Diana asked.

“*Fimbulvetr*,” Elizabeth declared.

Diana remembered the word from her mother’s bedtime stories. It was an old Norse tale, “The Great Winter.” It was the beginning of all endings, preceding the war in which the Gods would meet their fates, and life on earth would end in ice and darkness. In the version Lily Bailey told her children, this was necessary so that the world might begin again, free from gods, and giant snakes, and all-consuming wolves - a world free for people to shape as their own. Diana wondered if Elizabeth had heard it from Duke.

“Where are you taking us?” Rory broke her silence again.

“We’re going to the marina. It’s time for you to see the ace in our sleeve.”

“Cut the dramatics. We’ve both been running around like headless chickens looking for you. You ought to tell us now.”

Elizabeth stopped again to look Rory in the eye, and this time Rory held her gaze. The ensuing silence was brief, but Diana sensed there were more words exchanged in that single glance than she would ever know.



“You saw how Rameses found itself paralyzed the night the snow began to fall. I’m taking you to see how that was done, how we buried the desert in ice.”

“You intend to start your revolution with a snowstorm?” Diana asked, “Rameses was a tiny, landlocked town that had never seen a single snowflake. But Washington, New York, Boston... you’re talking about seizing whole cities, you’ll need more than a snowday to catalyze your revolution.”

“That’s why you must see for yourself.”

Neither of them was satisfied with this answer.

The Marina was a short way out of town, past a row of warehouses emblazoned with the insignia of the Albatross Shipping Company. Many vessels of varying size spanned the coast, crafts of enterprise rather than crafts of war. More regatta than armada.

The three women stood on the deck of a rocking freighter, before a structure sheathed in coarse fabric. The roots of the tower, fastened with rivets into the deck, stretched out in every direction from beneath the sheet. Elizabeth grabbed a corner of the fabric, and pulled it down.

Fully uncovered, it was a spire of dull metal pipes, rubber tubes and lenses of blue-colored glass, intertwined in a high climbing lattice of such brilliant chaos that it was impossible to discern the function of any individual piece. Engraved in taunting block letters down the device’s only flat surface was its given name: DILUVIAN. The dormant machine, resting silently on the ship’s deck, gave the impression of a sleeping Titan.

“This is the machine we used to create the storm over Rameses.” Elizabeth stated. “Or rather, this is the type of machine. The device in Rameses is a tenth of the size.”

Diana was troubled by the Diluvian, though not by its intended purpose, and not by the magnitude of the destruction it could cause. What troubled her was how familiar it was. The shape, the name, even the specific color of the glass brought her back to another time.

It brought her back to her mother's cottage in Vermont. She remembered those restless mornings at the breakfast table, herself and her siblings all racing to finish their meals so they could practice their aim in the yard. But while Richard, Elouise, Constantin and Diana all ran out the door, Arlow stayed at the table, fantasizing about his weather machines, drawing schematics and diagrams which each of his siblings would praise for their artistic value. None of them had imagined that those long strings of numbers and symbols could amount to a functional device, nor that "experimental meteorology" had nothing to do with *predicting* the weather.

Diana didn't take her eyes off the Diluvian, "Is there a reason you didn't tell me that Arlow's on board?"

"He asked me to delay the family reunion until I showed you the Diluvians. Seems there's some bad blood. He's the only one of you Bailey's that doesn't speak fondly of his siblings, if he speaks of you at all."

"We were always kind to him. But he was a black sheep, for sure."

"You never believed he was capable of something like this." Elizabeth gestured to the machine.

"We never believed *anyone* was."

"Haven't you accomplished impossible feats? You may be the best assassin on this continent. According to the stories, you kill people with a breath. You're also a married woman. Would you believe all that possible?"

Rory had disappeared from their side. They turned to see her staring down the length of the marina at the other ships. Nearly all of them had a spire, a cloaked Diluvian, sleeping on it's deck.

“That one, small machine whited out most of the Rameses Stretch. When these all get switched on,” Rory asked, “how big is that storm going to be?”

Elizabeth looked at her, and again, electricity arced between them. The prospect of what was to come excited them beyond mere curiosity. It gave them hope.

Rory read the answer in Elizabeth's eyes, and spoke it herself, “*Fimbulvetr.*”

## **18. RORY REED.**

Not long after they left the marina, the last of the Diluvians were driven down from the train on wide-bedded trucks. The women stood on the hill above the beach. By the fast fading daylight, they watched teams of soldiers arm the last of the ships for the apocalypse.

Rory finally understood why Elizabeth had abandoned her. The barracks, the uniformed soldiers - none of that felt real. Only when she saw the Diluvian did she realize just how real it was. This was the cause, the greater good for which she had been sacrificed. Faced with the possibility to remake the world, she may have done the same. It didn't lessen the pain. She was not angry. Finally back with the woman she loved, she felt nothing but despair.

This Elizabeth was the same one who had stolen her husband's letter opener all those months ago, who had sat with her in that dark theater away from the wandering eyes of the waitstaff, and had fantasized about running away to somewhere they could truly be together. Body and soul, this was the same woman with all the means to create that haven, and keep it safe from those who would tear it down. Rory loved her because she was a fighter, and would not abandon her for fighting. She would fight alongside her love.

Nevertheless, she despaired. She wished to throw herself into Elizabeth's arms, but that could not happen. It would have been wrong now. They were at war.

Diana and Rory were put up in adjoining rooms at The Eastgate Hotel, which was functioning as a headquarters for the militia leadership. The lobby had been gutted. The concierge desk was buried in a vast sprawl of maps which plotted the movements of weapons and troops. Various ellipses of sheer white fabric had been laid over the maps, showing the

effective range of the Diluvians deployed along the coast. Nesting in a neat clove between two such circles was a dot labeled Port Cedric. The hotel's restaurant had been filled with long benches and foldable tables, and converted into a cramped mess-hall. Inside, various strategists, generals and technicians were eating dinner. There was a strange sense of levity about the place, as if they were all children playing at war.

Room 814 held comfort like Rory hadn't known since she left New York. For whatever reason, the whole place was green. The sheets were the color of oak leaves, the walls of pond-scum, and the molding of an unbecoming mint. She showered off the dirt and dust that had followed her from Rameses. When she returned, someone had left a fresh set of clothes on the bed. They were not so different from the pants and buttoned shirt she'd worn to Rameses, in which she felt strangely at home.

The second her body hit the mattress, her mind finally began to let go of all those impossible desires that pained her, and she lingered on the precipice of sleep. A soft knock on the door pulled her back. She swung her body out of bed and shuffled drowsily to the peephole. As she opened the door for Elizabeth, her heartbeat rang in her ears.

"I'm sorry if I woke you... I know you've had a long week."

"That's alright."

"You deserve answers. I'll give them to you," Elizabeth stepped into the room and sat down on the foot of the bed.

"Why..." Rory didn't have to think long about what she wanted to ask, "Why me, why William? What did you want from us?"

“About two years ago, the operation’s chief strategist began a program to assess major threats to the existence of the militia and its goals. Those included remarkable individuals who could prove invaluable if brought to our side. My... prior contact with Duke Bailey helped me to uncover the identities and special talents of the rest of the Bailey family and bring them aboard. And then there were individuals like your husband, with talents suited to the cause, but ideologies staunchly opposed to it. In order to preempt resistance, such agents were marked to be neutralized. I was in New York to recruit Diana, and thought it best to deal with William while I was there.”

“You came to New York to kill my husband?”

“There’s more than one way to neutralize a man whose power is his reputation.”

“Like the maid running away with his wife?”

“The maid wasn’t counting on falling in love with the wife.”

Rory was too flustered to reply.

“Aurora,” Elizabeth took her hand, “When the fight is over, the real work will begin. I don’t anticipate having much time to dedicate to my own life, but what time I have I’d like to spend with you.”

“Yes. Yes, I’d like that too.” Rory sat down beside Elizabeth, wrapped her arms around her, kissed her head and cheeks and lips.

Elizabeth laughed at this burst of passion. “So you missed me?”

“Don’t be mistaken, love, I’m still mad at you.” She kissed Elizabeth again and again, as if that would somehow prove it.

“Dear,” Elizabeth said between kisses, “I’d be worried if you weren’t. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

In the morning, when the sun came in through the blinds and filled the room with a lively green glow, Elizabeth was still there.

## 19. WILLIAM BRADWELL.

Standing over the dead Sheriff, standing in a pool of slightly frozen blood, William heard it again. It was closer now. A train was coming into town. He and his entourage ran back onto mainstreet, tracking red into the snow. They were just in time to see it emerge from the mountain like a dragon from its lair, throwing giant wings of snow twenty feet into the air on either side. It did not stop, but kept pushing east, in the direction of Stillwater.

Peck wasn't Arté's handiwork. It was too messy, too violent, and done by someone inside the cell. Aurora. She'd been right there, across the street from where he'd been sleeping. Now the assassin was missing. He could only assume she had betrayed him. With a further series of guesses and calculations, William concluded that everyone he was looking for would be on the train.

He was done with Rameses. He'd become caught up rescuing its people from starvation and had nothing to show for it. It was time to go. But first...

Gareth had slighted him. He'd seen Aurora in the cell that morning, and must have covered for her escape. William had been hopeful for Gareth. He was efficient, tactful and shrewd. He would have made the perfect right hand man.

William sent him and two other men to check on the town's stockpile, under the pretense that Peck's murderer would need provisions before fleeing town. While they marched toward First Street, William went back to the Spattered Rattler. Jumping behind the bar, he made his way into the cramped kitchen - the only room in the establishment Gareth still had to himself. He tore open drawers and pulled bottles from shelves. If his hunch was incorrect he was likely to be run



out of town for the havok he was causing. A couple of the inn's patrons had gathered in the doorway to observe his rampage.

Deep inside a cabinet, William found a locked wooden coffer. He bashed the box against the corner of the wood stove until the lid broke off, sending papers across the floor. He lifted them up. Alongside well-kept records of the Rattler's financials were detailed accounts of the activities of William Bradwell, Aurora Reed, and a third individual named Diana Sommerfield-Ward, which he inferred was Miss Arté's true name. He intended to use this information to get revenge on the assassin for double crossing him. But first...

Gareth's final hours were characterized by pain of the utilitarian variety. Though it had taken quite a bit of effort to break him, what he revealed was well worth the effort. It was as William had dreamed of his entire life, an opportunity to be a hero quashing a foolish revolution. If he succeeded, his path to the presidency would be lined with the bodies of his foes. If he failed, it would be a good death, and he would be spared from the frightful world the revolutionaries would usher in.

The execution was an unfortunate affair. After a lengthy excavation from the packed snow, the gallows proved ineffective. The rope was brittle from freezing, and snapped under the man's weight after the platform had fallen away. William, who had been tasked with pulling the lever, stood watching Gareth writhe on the ground beneath the platform. He mused for a moment about how in another time, another place, Gareth's sentence would be considered served, having been hanged by the neck. Fortunately for modern, civilized man, "until dead," served as a valuable rider. Standing above the trap door, William fired a shot through Meade's temple.

The crowd didn't flinch. Rameses' stock was tough, and the tourists were either acclimated or numb to the extreme violence. There was something else, too. As William looked out over the crowd, he saw it in their eyes. They looked at him with reverence. He was done with Rameses, but not with these people. He would not go into the coming war alone. His militia would be at his side.

Two days later they left town, pulling food and possessions behind them on makeshift sleds. With few good horses, and an icy desert ahead, the journey to Stillwater would be a tedious slog. From there they could arrange for transport east.

They would find Duke Bailey, and slaughter his men one by one, until he gave up the location of Elizabeth Hill. Then they'd finish the job.

Rameses was left to crumble in the sand beneath the mountains. Only one man stayed behind, forgotten by the scores migrating east, though it didn't matter much in the end. One way or another, he would succumb to his wounds by the following dawn. He would rot in his bed, just across the rectory wall from an empty grave he'd dug for his son.

## 20. 'BASTIAN WARD.

The Bailey's Boys Art Theft Spree was making national headlines, and museums were starting to up their security. But they were looking for a ragtag group of ruffians in mismatched clothes, not gentlemen in bespoke suits and pressed pants.

First, Ghenny ran surveillance, took note of shift changes and patterns in foot traffic, memorized all the entrances and exits. Then they'd make their way inside, one or two at a time, paying full fare at the door. When the right gallery emptied out, they'd subdue any guards and make off with the painting through a staff exit which Sebastian had scouted for them. Then it was time to find a buyer. This was also Sebastian's job, and got easier as their fame grew.

No longer did Bailey's Boys sleep on warehouse floors. They would find a townhouse in whatever city they'd rolled into, live the high life and be out before the rent was due. They'd taken on helpers, children from each city with no work and no home. The gang gave them shelter, and invested in their education. In return, they'd watch for police, create distractions, and keep the gang apprised of the city's rumors. Ghenny called them the Bailey's Boys, Youth League. Nealand would devise games to play with them, variations of the ones he played when he lived in the streets. The Ghallagers bemoaned that their reputable criminal enterprise was becoming an orphanage, but enjoyed the boys' presence all the same, and would improvise heroic ballads in which each of them were a robinhood-like champion of the poor. Most of the kids traveled with them from city to city, but some stayed behind.

The gang also sold their horses - a painful but necessary decision - and bought four automobiles and a moving truck.

Sebastian was behind the wheel. The bandits only had as many drivers as they did cars, each of whom would have been far more comfortable on a horse. They'd moved north along the coast, looking like a funeral procession in their matching black vehicles. With the city of Newark at their backs, the Manhattan skyline rose into view. That jagged jaw that stuck out into the harbor was to be the final home of Bailey's Boy's. Here, they would find out if they had what it took to be a real city gang. There was a non-zero chance they'd all be dead in a matter of days. Nevertheless the procession rumbled slowly onward, as a taxi-cab behind them honked out its impatience.

In the first week, they settled into their cozy little hideout on the north side of Canal Street. It was close enough to that major hive of gang activity known as the Five Points that the police would think twice before bothering them, and far enough outside it that the more established criminals hopefully wouldn't feel encroached upon. It was an abandoned hotel, not as luxurious as their old townhouses, or even some of the nicer warehouses they'd stayed in. Given time, they could make it a home. It also had an underground garage where they could park their vehicles. It was, all things considered, perfect for their operation.

The door was locked, and Sebastian didn't have a key. Elizabeth had taken it, along with everything else he owned. This would not be a problem. Duke taught him to pick locks, and even gifted him his own lockpick and torque wrench. The building superintendent caught Sebastian kneeling in front of the knob and clearly didn't recognize him. Since he'd left home, his hair had grown out, and he'd started slicking it back with the same pomade Bailey used. He'd become

lean and muscular, and held himself differently. The super squinted, then walked away through the door to the stairwell. Whether or not he'd finally recognized Sebastian, or simply decided this wasn't his problem, was anyone's guess.

The door opened with an arthritic creak. The even dust on every surface told him that Diana wasn't home - hadn't been for a long while. He stepped inside, and let the memories of his old life wash over him. It felt as though someone was squeezing his heart as he stepped through the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom where he and Diana had spent each night together. He wondered where she was. Probably with her mother.

He did another walk around the apartment, aimlessly kicking up dust, then settled in their old bedroom and laid back on the soft sheets. He let his eyes wander across the familiar lines in the paint on the ceiling. He'd always intended to go over it with a second coat but there was something beautiful about the accidental swirls and stripes, so he chose to let them stay.

After several minutes of letting his mind empty, he stood, retrieved the spare key from the desk in his office, and walked out the door, locking it behind him.

Bailey was waiting by the door, where he'd let him. "She wasn't there?" he asked.

"No. Didn't leave a note either."

"I'm sorry 'Bastian."

"Me too."

"You'll still get your chance to make this right."

Bailey leaned in and whispered in Sebastian's ear.

"Let's get going, there's a man staring at me just over there and I don't like the feel of it. He looks familiar but I can't place him."

They walked the long way back to the hotel.

Sebastian was conflicted. He missed his wife, and wanted to make things right. All the same, if she had been in that apartment, he may never have been able to return to the bandits.

He'd become something of a leader to them. After Memphis, the men started opening up to Sebastian. They'd tell him about their lives before their time in the gang, the things they missed and the things it hurt them to remember. Each of them was equally interested in how he was holding up, fascinated by his passion for art and how miraculously he had fallen into the criminal lifestyle. He came to cherish his conversations with these men, his dear friends.

Sebastian couldn't leave them now. There was no way. But if he ever got the chance to repair his marriage, he'd have to take it. He feared the day he would have to choose between the life he cherished and the woman he loved.

## 21. DIANA SOMMERFIELD-WARD

It had been two weeks since the launch of the Diluvians, and Diana had been given her assignment. She was to neutralize New York City mayor, James Walker, a dangerously corrupt individual with enough criminal and political ties to threaten the operation's longevity. Having voted for the incumbent Hylan, Diana was excited for this job.

She was sent north, along with teams of soldiers and shipments of gear destined for the New York chapterhouse. There, they would prepare for the coming storm. She wondered what it would be like, returning to the city after all this time. It made her think of her husband, wherever he was. She missed Sebastian more every day, but still wasn't ready to see him. Things could not go back to how they had been. Each of them leading false lives. She would need to be truthful with him, he would need to reciprocate. In all likelihood, neither of them would be great at it.

The train stopped in Newark. From there, she caught a cab to the chapterhouse where she would be staying for the duration of her assignment. It took ages to get there after her cab got caught behind a wobbling procession of black automobiles that looked as though they were heading for a funeral. The taxi-driver leaned on the horn to little avail.

She had a private room at the chapterhouse - a privilege afforded only to the operation's most valuable assets. Despite the luxurious furnishings, there were no windows. In its previous life, the chapterhouse had been an underground speakeasy, and the room in which Diana slept had been a lounge in which the city's richest scum schmoozed with its most bankrupt upper crust.

She had hardly put down her suitcase when a familiar face popped in through the door.

“Little sister!” he greeted her.

“Constantin!” She ran up to hug him. His head still fit under her chin. “I thought you were still living in Washington!”

“I was reassigned. Spent this last year outfitting my establishments to better support the cause. I’m happy to see you’ve finally joined up. Nearly all the Baileys, in the same shady business. Nothing can stop us now! How’s Arlow doing?”

“I haven’t a clue. I tried to pay him a visit in Port Cedric but he wouldn’t come out of his bunker, and rarely lets anyone in. Elizabeth thinks there’s bad blood. I just wish he’d let me in to work it out.”

“Oh Diana, don’t linger on it. He was a peculiar child and now he’s a peculiar adult.”

“I think the war got to him. He never did like the wide open sky. God knows how he fared in those trenches, being rained down upon by artillery.”

“The one thing I can’t figure out is why he’s working for Elizabeth. I never knew him to do anything that wasn’t in his own interest.”

“Perhaps he’s finally seen the light?”

“That would require him to go outside. But enough about our temperamental little brother. What’s your assignment here in New York?”

“I’m here to kill the mayor,” she said casually.

“Of course,” Constantine laughed, “Are you still using those tinctures of yours?”

“I’ve graduated to something a little less detectable.”

“Less detectable than tasteless, colorless, and lethal in microscopic doses?”



“Aerosolized,” she explained proudly.

“How innovative! You should show me your laboratory sometime.”

Diana’s laboratory was exactly how she’d left it, not a tube out of place. She packed herself a bag of tinctures, powders and pills for her current assignment. Then she walked out, and locked up.

In the stairwell, she caught a brief glimpse of a man who, from behind, reminded her very much of Sebastian, if Sebastian were the rugged athletic type.

As she stepped into her apartment, she immediately noticed something was amiss. There was a commotion in the air, a great amount of dust had been recently disturbed, and hadn’t yet found its way back to a comfortable surface. As she dashed from room to room to see if the disturbance was still there, she was battered by waves of nostalgia for her home, and longing for the man she used to share it with. Then she remembered the man in the stairwell... it couldn’t be. She ran outside, forgetting to lock the door behind her. By the time she reached the street, he was already gone. Constantin was leaning against the building smoking a cigar. He turned to Diana as she pushed breathlessly through the glass double doors.

“Ah, there you are! There was a man out here, just now. He was the spitting image of our little Richard, only if Richard was built like a freight ship and taller than the Woolworth Building. Same face though.”

“Was there a man with him? Looked like someone took an academic and threw him to the wolves?”

“Yes. They walked away together.”

“That was Richard! That was our brother. And that man with him was my husband.”

Constantin paused. “When did you get married?”

## 22. RORY REED.

Rory didn't spend another night in that evergreen hotel room, having quickly moved into Elizabeth's lodgings. They got the occasional glance, heard the odd hushed jeer from the more conservative men and women amongst their ranks, but these didn't bother them. They spent their days apart, Elizabeth strategizing and Rory training with the soldiers outside town. She learned to shoot, climb, run and brawl. Every moment was pure freedom.

It was surprisingly hard for the Deadeye Dame to hit her targets. When she let her rage take over, she could rampage up a moving train, killing every bandit in her way. But she didn't want to feel that way again. It tore her down, made her reckless. She was in a better place than she'd ever been, training to be a soldier in the army of liberation. She had Elizabeth. So she endured the training, and slowly improved.

When she was through for the day, she walked back to the Hotel and watched the strategists and commanders plan for the coming battle. They had street maps of New York City marked with arrows to denote potential troop movements. From what she could discern, they had enough soldiers, but were short on weapons. Looking over their shoulders, she noticed a flaw. Normally, she'd have run it by Elizabeth, but she was off meeting with her commission for the identification of useful and or dangerous persons. Instead, Rory spoke up.

"These maps are outdated."

"Excuse me," the colonel snapped, "but you're only here as General Hill's guest. If you interrupt again, we'll have you removed."

"But there's a problem with your plan. The Sixth New York Battalion are under-armed, but right where you have them turning the street there," she pointed to a crooked arrow on the

map, “is an armory built during the war. If you have the troops take the armory before continuing south, you’ll not only have a well armed battalion, you’ll be disarming the opposition before they even know we’re there.”

The room fell silent. They all knew she was right, though none dared come to her defense now that she’d spoken out of line. Finally, the colonel broke the silence by scraping his red pen across the map, rerouting the troops through the armory.

He turned to the other men at the table, “Franklin, we need updated maps by tomorrow at the latest. David, bring Ms. Reed a chair.”

When Elizabeth returned, she found Rory sitting at the strategist’s table, carefully scrutinizing the plans for the New York invasion and never hesitating to speak up when she found something out of place.

When the day’s work was done, they grabbed food from the mess, and left to eat on the hill above the beach. The marina below was nearly empty, the Diluvians now far out at sea. Though they’d just missed the sunset, the sky was still aflame with brilliant color.

“You did good work back there,” Elizabeth squeezed Rory’s shoulder, “The colonel commands respect because it’s how he learned to lead. I hope you don’t hold it against him.”

“Dear, I’ve dealt with men far worse than the colonel,” she sighed, “At least his heart is in the right place. It’s the rest of them I can’t stand. They never know when to speak up. They’re all so damn polite and demure. Makes me wonder how they’re supposed to lead soldiers. Will they shout commands over enemy gunfire or politely wait their turn?”

“Maybe your role here isn’t as a foot soldier. How would you feel about taking on a leadership position?”

“Commanding soldiers?”

“First, a more permanent seat at the strategy table. The colonel is in charge of our armed forces, and it will be his decision whether or not to put you in charge of a battalion. If he thinks you have the tact, you’ll be trained to command.”

“Is there time?”

“No, but you’re a quick study. And I think you’re well suited for the role.”

Rory imagined herself at the head of a battalion, leading the charge and calling the shots. She’d never been in charge of anyone but herself. Still, she knew how to command respect, and would take any opportunity to play a bigger role in the battle to come.

“I’ll do it,” she agreed, “Thank you.”

The sunset had dissolved, and the stars were being lit above their heads. Rory watched Elizabeth stare into the horizon, now just a thin line between deep blue and pitch black. She was lost in thought.

“Elizabeth? When we remake the world and do away with all the silly rules, I think I’d like to get married.”

“To me?” Elizabeth was startled out of her reveries. She started laughing, and couldn’t stop, “Yes? Yes. Of course I’ll marry you.”

They stayed on that hill long past midnight, talking about the future.

### 23. 'BASTIAN WARD.

By the time they reached the hotel, their legs were aching from the long walk

“You know,” Duke pondered, “talking about Diana’s been making me think about my sister. Her name’s Diana too.”

“Oh? What about?”

“Last I heard, she was living here in New York City. Was thinking I might try to track her down and pay her a visit. She’s in a business not unlike ours. She’s an assassin.”

Lost in this conversation, neither of them would have seen the shooter if he hadn’t walked right up to them, gun drawn.

Rather than trying to outdraw the man, Duke shoved Sebastian off the curb, out of the way. He fell into the street and landed on his side. Sebastian saw the bullet enter Duke’s chest, and make its way out his back. He rolled off his holster, drew his own revolver and fired it with determined accuracy into the assailant’s head. The man crumbled beside Duke.

Sebastian scrambled to his feet and ran to his friend, whose heavy gasping was all either could hear. Bandits emerged from the hotel, and carried Bailey inside. They laid him across a cushioned bench. Bill Stockton ran to grab his tools and got to work. There was talk of a second man who’d fled the scene. One of the Ghallaghers was missing. The other was trying to keep the kids out of the room.

Sebastian’s head was spinning as he tried to sort through the chaos and make sense of any single event. That’s when he saw them looking at him. Each of the bandits was eyeing him, desperately. Their leader was out of commission, their head had been cut loose. They were

looking for someone to tell them what to do. But they weren't in a museum. Sebastian knew how to organize heists, and not much more. That didn't stop the glances.

Rhett came back, breathless. He'd lost sight of the runner. He'd searched the shooter on his way back into the hotel but found no identification. He and Michael left to take care of the body. They didn't need unwanted attention right now.

No one knew why Duke was targeted. If it was a gang hit, this attack would only be the beginning. Sebastian ran into the lounge, where the Youth League was frantically theorizing about what they had seen and heard, piecing together a vaguely accurate chain of events. He sat with them on the floor, told them the truth of it, said he had a very important job for them, and sent them out into the streets to find out who was responsible for the attack. With heroic resolve, they dashed out of the hotel to all those familiar nooks of the city where neighborhood children had stories to tell.

When he returned to the lobby, the swarm that had been crowding over Duke Bailey had dispersed, and were just beginning to file back in, weapons in hand. Several of them were beginning to push furniture towards the middle of the room, forming barricades, first and second lines of defense. Bailey had been moved into the kitchen, where Stockton could operate undisturbed. From the chatter echoing around the room, things were looking bad, but could have been worse. The bullet could have punctured his heart or collapsed his lung. It was clean, in and out. That meant he had a chance.

Sebastian watched the men prepare for a last stand, and felt a panic rising within him. He did not want to lose them now. He couldn't.

Two hours later, the kids had all returned to the hotel, now fortified for a siege. Each had a different version of the same story. The downtown gangs didn't care about the Bailey's Boys, so long as they stuck to stealing art. However, someone had been going around collecting information: where to find them, how many there were, if they had allies in the city. Someone had sold this information, and netted themselves a hefty fee.

Their secret enemy was wealthy, and tactful. They'd gunned down Duke right in front of camp. It was a show of power. The bandits had to expect a siege.

Sebastian looked around at the men cleaning their weapons and stashing ammunition behind the makeshift barriers.

"Stop," he ordered them, "Go pack your bags. We will not die here."

"They shot Duke," Ghenny growled, "We stay. We fight."

"You think that's what he'd want? For us to die here, pointlessly, in his name? To get him killed while he can't defend himself?"

"Where will we go?" he asked.

"I've lived here all my life James, I'll think of something. Do you trust me?"

He paused, nodded, turned to the other bandits, and silently signaled to comply. They dispersed to their rooms, gathered their belongings.

Sebastian wandered back into the kitchen where Bill Stockton was leaning against a counter, having done all he could. Bailey was unconscious, and taking shallow breaths.

"Can we move him?" Sebastian asked.

"I wouldn't, if we had a choice."

"We don't."



## 24. THE STORM I.

White on the horizon, from Savannah to Boston, billowing up and out. It was pyroclastic flow in photonegative. It was an army of angels with overlapping wings.

First came the clouds, drowning the sky, whiting out the sun. Then, from over the Atlantic, the curtain fell. It was the pure white of artificial winter. Ahead of its advance the air was still. Then came the wind, a shockwave, ripping away all it could.

It was *Fimbulvetr*.

In New York City, the snow drifts climbed to second stories. Windows were shuttered with blankets from within. The streets were nearly empty. Nearly.

While the populace huddled inside, and night set in for days on end, the streets bustled. Snow crunched under army boots. Out of the chapterhouse and all the little outposts, a small army dug themselves free. They stormed the streets. Ghosts, blurred by the falling snow. Soldiers in borrowed garb, keeping perfectly warm within the frozen labyrinth. Their plans were memoized. They stormed abandoned precincts and empty armories, taking what weapons they could use, destroying the rest. They marched on the courthouse and the town hall, fortifying them from inside, securing these symbols of order against enemies who would inevitably thaw when the storm had passed. If all went to plan, they wouldn't have to fight at all.

While the soldiers took the centers of command, the Assassin took lives. If there was to be opposition, it would be lacking for leadership. The rich, the strong, the zealous, the pious all wound up on the list. In the early days of the storm, a beautiful woman showed up at their door, Cynthia Arté was her name. Poor creature, caught in the storm, frozen half to death. Who

wouldn't take her in? She'd devised a special poison for this job, one which did not kill. Instead, it drew the victim within themselves, forever trapping them in their own mind and slowing their perception of time. In this state, they could feel the impulses leaping between neurons, granting them perfect control of their involuntary muscles. Completely paralyzed, watching the world creep by in slow motion, all they could do was keep their hearts beating, or else stop and slip into the void. The choice was theirs.

She administered her poison, and then was gone again, swallowed up by the snow.

Her dear brother waited nearby, somewhere shielded from the wind, ready to bail her out. But she was a professional. She never gave him the chance.

Not a soul would have seen this invasion if it weren't for a lone oyster-seller, too stubborn to abandon his cart. Wrapped in furs he'd brought with him from his home country, he leaned into biting winds until the snow climbed high enough to anchor him to the ground. His voice was the only sound to be heard in those streets, singing over the deafening gale, advertising his shellfish to the soldiers of the army of ghosts.

Elsewhere in the city, a gang of bandits took refuge under a new roof. Circled in the statue gallery of the Brooklyn Museum, they listened frightfully to the wind, and the shallow breathing of their leader. The skylights above them let in no light. The statues were frightening. The curator knew this. He'd often walked between them in the night, felt their eyes on him, the terrifying mystique of their stillness. So he demystified them, for all the men that sat there in

fear. He spoke of the cities in which they had been hewn, the men who'd made them, the gods and nymphs they were made to honor.

He walked the bandits through the halls, possessed by the spirit of his past life. He spoke to them of the paintings that adorned the many galleries, revealing the most minute details of technique that made each of them stand apart from all the other artwork in creation. With his voice ringing in their ears, each stretch of perfect color became another world. The bandits were used to running between these worlds, but this was the first time they'd stopped to admire them.

Then, the curator told them of his dreams, of all the things he would have done if he'd had the time and will to thwart the museum's director. He would take every painting down and rearrange them not by name or artist or style, but by soul. They would all live together, side-by-side in a single perfect room. Each time they passed a new painting, he explained where it belonged in this grand vision of his. The bandits came to understand this vision implicitly. It infected them, so that they couldn't help but see it's beauty when they closed their eyes. Suddenly, when they came across a new work, one bandit or another would tell the curator exactly where it belonged, and he would agree. They saw through his eyes.

When he ran out of galleries, he took them down to the workshops and archives and the offices. They marveled at the plaque on the door to his old office, tickled that one of their own had his start in such a respectable establishment. He simply wondered at the fact that they had not yet replaced him. He could probably have the job back, though he did not care to.

The curator awoke the next morning to see the bandits smiling, though they wouldn't tell him why. He asked what it was that had them so amused, and it was Nealand that spoiled the surprise.

The old curator dashed through the now empty halls, until he found the source of their mirth. He stood amongst the paintings, clustered together in a perfect, beautiful pattern that commanded the eye to drift and dance along the walls. He was paralyzed by the beauty of a million hues pouring down on him. It was exactly as he'd imagined it.

He missed his wife. He hoped she was warm, wherever she was.

The Potomac was frozen by the time the soldiers hit the streets. The rebellion faced resistance here, far more than in New York. Gunshots were muffled by high banks of snow. Among the combatants, the former wife of a former Senator, now a lieutenant in command of her own battalion. As frightened as she was, for herself, her love and their future, she held her breath, steadied her hands, and fired round after round into the shapes appearing through the curtain of white. The militia pushed to the steps of Capitol Hill, but they were being pursued, and taking fire from guards stationed within the building ahead. The Lieutenant's voice rang out above the din, calling to withdraw. They would live to see another fight.

Their General stood on the White House lawn, surrounded by ten of her most capable operatives. The armed men ahead prevented them from moving closer. A stand-off ensued, until two suits emerged from the building and ordered the guards to stand down. The General and her soldiers were brought inside.

The accidental President of the United States was a stretched looking man. A vein bulged on his forehead, betraying his composure.

She offered him the chance to join their cause, to be an architect in the construction of a new nation. He refused, rebuking her for her audacity, and demanded she call off her troops. She

and her men were shown back to the front door, though not before she thanked the President for his time, and promised to treat him with civility when they next met.

Back in New York, a politician sat alone in his offices. His cult was taking shelter from the cold in the lobby downstairs. They knew his real name now, but only referred to him as The Senator. With his full arsenal, he'd armed them to the teeth, and with his full wardrobe, he controlled them completely.

Even so, they had failed him. One of his lookouts, that overzealous cowpoke, got ahead of himself and shot the damned bandit. As soon as word got back to the office, they mobilized and hit the road. By the time his militia rolled up to that hotel, the whole gang was gone.

The bandits had been so damn conspicuous with their robberies up the coast it had been a breeze tracking them down. But a breeze is nothing to a blizzard. Finding them again would be harder, and this awful weather meant they were already too late to stop Elizabeth from enacting her anarchic schemes.

He would simply have to do what he could to save his city.

Up and down the coast, the rebellion had won. Where opposition had held out, reinforcements were being deployed. It was only a matter of time before complete victory could be declared. The storm would be lifting soon.

Federal forces were sent in from out west, where news from within the storm was finally reaching the public. The rebellion was prepared, but had hoped the storm would lift and allow

them to recuperate before the forces arrived. Nevertheless, they had the defensive advantage, and would use the foul weather to keep their enemies at bay. The storm must be lifting soon.

In most cities, Federal forces had been repelled. News from the south said they'd taken back Raleigh, and that a civilian militia in New York City was laying siege to rebellion-occupied outposts. Neither of these rumors could be confirmed. The ongoing storm was suppressing communications. Supplies were dwindling in the chapterhouses, and starving citizens were attacking rebellion soldiers. The snow was piling up, swallowing houses under a white tide. Tunnels were dug at street level. When rebel soldiers marched down them, they could never be sure that the next glittering bend didn't conceal a mob, ready to tear off their warm uniforms and leave them to freeze in the dark. The storm showed no signs of ending.

Nobody could tell any longer who controlled which city, which town, which state. It did not matter. Those who could, traveled west beyond the storm's reach. Those who could not, fought for food and warmth. It was a new dark age. The rebellion had dissolved. Where it still held out, it was despised by those it had once intended to liberate. Those living under the oppressive shadow of the storm believed it would never lift. The world would not be reborn, free of the gods that had ruled it. It would not be reborn at all. This was *Fimbulvetr*.

## 25. THE STORM II.

The Assassin left the chapterhouse just a week before it was discovered by the Senator's Men, and torched with scores of rebels asleep inside. She returned to the only place she could.

The apartment was just as cold as the rest of the city, even after she'd boarded over the windows. It was lonely, without her husband there. She kept an ear to the ground at all times, listening for any information on the whereabouts of the Bailey's Boys.

Only one of her informants remained active: an old crone from Chelsea. She knew where the gang had been, but not where they were now. They were living in an old hotel on the north side of Canal Street until their leader was shot, and the rest chased away by The Senator's Men.

The Assassin thanked the old woman, and returned to her apartment.

She sat on her bed and meditated. What she'd learned had shaken her. Her brother had been shot, her husband chased into the storm by that awful Senator. Rather than forcing fear from her mind, she held onto it, let it drive her focus. Realization struck like lightning.

There was only one place in the city her husband could have gone if not back home. It was large enough to house the whole gang, and they could very well have made it before the storm grew too intense. Wrapping herself in enough layers to keep out the bitter cold, she stepped out again into the snow-darkened day.

The last two rebels in Washington had fought their way out of the city. By the time the final chapterhouse fell, their faces were on posters, being passed around from neighbor to neighbor, block to block. They stayed in buildings crushed by the snow and wind. Some nights, they only had each other for warmth. Food was even more scarce than shelter, with every store

and pantry picked clean by scavengers, desperate to survive this frozen hell. It was the same or worse all the way down the coast, from the once-bustling cities to the quiet, buried towns. The General felt the weight of what she had caused. The Lieutenant could not ease her mind. They set their sights on Port Cedric, hoping for answers and an open sky.

As they neared the town, they saw a golden break in the clouds above, the first rays of sunlight they'd known in weeks. The storm had been designed to keep the skies above Port Cedric clear. Even so, the town had felt the effects of the eternal winter that surrounded it. Snow blew through in shallow drifts which pulled at the edges of tents around the empty barracks. The air maintained that dead chill of late autumn.

As they slipped between old brick buildings, both women felt the sorrowful stillness of what had once been a hive of rebellion. The last holdouts had either deserted or been captured weeks ago.

They stepped into the hotel where once they had spent the night together in a room of lively greens. Each of them longed to return to that room, just to stare at the walls and the sheets and the drapery, to espy a color their eyes had forgotten. Instead they climbed into a service elevator at the back end of the hotel, past the kitchens and laundry rooms and staff's quarters. The elevator took them into the warm earth. Down a short stretch of tunnel, a metal vault lay waiting. The General stepped forward. She knew the combination. The knob clicked. The door swung open. The two stepped inside.

It was a bunker. Inside was a well furnished office. A man sat behind a broad desk. He lowered his shotgun when he saw the faces of his visitors.

They asked him a question, in many different ways. "Why?"



He could have lied, said the Diluvians malfunctioned, that there was a mutiny on the ships, that he hadn't accounted for this or that in his calculations. Instead he told her the truth.

The Diluvians would run until they broke, just as they were designed. He started to monologue about the wrath of the sky: the stuff of poetry, of Greek Epics, the only force capable of killing gods. He was cut off mid sentence. The Lieutenant shot off his jaw.

It was not the answer they had wanted. Until then, they'd held out hope they could fix this somehow. Now, all they could do was try to live with the destruction they'd enabled.

They stepped out of the hotel, right into the ambush.

The bandits of the Brooklyn Museum were faring better than most. The museum's cafe had been restocked just before the world ended. With heavy rationing, they'd managed to stretch their supplies out and avoid succumbing to starvation like so much of the rest of the city.

Their hearts were heavy. Since the night they arrived in their new home, their leader hadn't opened his eyes or uttered a word. His breath kept to its usual pace, and once every few days, he was shaken by fever. The bandits would watch him round the clock, doing their best to keep it down.

With their leader out of commission, his responsibilities fell to the man who was now a stowaway in his own museum. The curator liked his new job. Those he led were more than capable of taking care of themselves. But they respected him, trusted him, and came to him for advice. It was on his command that they'd barricaded all entrances and exits against potential intruders. It was his call to cut rations when the storm showed no sign of stopping. It was he who

suggested they divert all the museum's central heating to the first floor. These decisions had saved them.

When they needed him, the curator could almost always be found in the Grand Central Gallery, where every painting in the museum had been gathered and arranged into the most captivating display of colors and figures that had ever been. The power of that room was so immense that leaving it was a task of great effort. If one spent too long within, they could forget that the doors themselves were not simply framed masterpieces, and be trapped until someone came to guide them out.

Today, one of the younger bandits, a man named Nealand, had come to find him. There had been a knock at the front door. It had happened before, usually scavengers who were smart or desperate enough to check a museum for food. Sometimes it was just a straggler who'd gotten caught in the storm. These they would allow in, taking down the large wooden crossbars that braced the double doors against assault.

The curator left the Grand Central Gallery, stepping through the blank halls of the museum until he came to the front door. He shouted through the wood, asking whoever was on the other side to introduce themselves. There was only wind. They must have gone away. Another bandit, one Rhett Ghallagher, ran in and breathlessly demanded the curator follow him. They had a situation in the statue gallery.

The bandits within had their weapons drawn, their backs to the door, so that the curator had to push past them to see what they were aiming at. As he struggled through the phalanx, he saw a figure kneeling beside his friend, Duke Bailey. She was cradling his limp head. Every

bandit was simultaneously struck by how remarkably she resembled the bandit in her arms. A thin flurry of snow fluttered about from an open skylight above.

“Diana,” the curator croaked.

“Please ask these men to lower their weapons,” she produced a little phial from her pocket, and lifted it to Bailey’s lips, “This will keep my brother’s fever down.”

The bandits twitched with apprehension as the curator asked them to stand down. They trusted him, and lowered their weapons.

The strange woman who had slipped in through the skylight introduced herself as Diana Sommerfield-Ward, a name each of the bandits knew belonged to the curator’s wife. She then introduced herself as Diana Bailey, who they knew to be their leader’s sister. Most shocked of all was the curator himself. Tears welled in his eyes, though words eluded him.

In the Grand Central Gallery, they said their hellos away from the chattering bandits. Each of them wanted to embrace the other, but there were too many things not yet said.

“I’m so sorry Diana,” the Curator cried, “You are, you have always been the most amazing part of my life. What I did with Elizabeth, I’ll never forgive myself for. I don’t know if you can ever forgive me...”

“I know, Sebastian.” The Assassin cut him off, “What you did was reprehensible. I was worried to death about you while you were off galavanting with the maid. You got me to break a contract, blow my cover, and dragged me into an international criminal conspiracy to overthrow the government of the United States. At this point there have been so many witnesses, I’m not sure I could safely return to society.”

“Contract? Cover? Witnesses?”

“I haven’t been entirely honest with you either.”

“My lord... Diana Bailey,” he finally put the pieces together, “You’re an assassin. I should have seen that coming, I suppose. Never heard of any such thing as a Pine Tar heiress except the once. So all those trips to your mothers...?”

“Business trips. Mostly. I do make the occasional visit.”

“No wonder we haven’t been introduced,” he laughed, “Lilly Bailey mustn't be too happy you saddled up with an artist.”

“Well, you’ll have two Baileys to vouch for you when Richie wakes up.”

“Richie?”

“I always thought Duke was such a silly name! He’s been taking good care of you I trust?”

“And I him. These people, they trust me. I’ve been something like a leader while Duke’s been out. That stuff you gave him, will it wake him up?”

“It’ll help him fight whatever’s keeping him down. My own personal formula. I’ll have to show you my lab sometime!”

“You have a lab?” Sebastian was delighted at the prospect.

“My oh my,” the assassin smirked, “Look at us. My husband, interim leader of the infamous Bailey’s Boys.”

“And my wife, assassin extraordinaire.”

They laughed, and finally embraced as they had been waiting to do for so many long weeks. The assassin looked around the room, at the beauty surrounding them.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” she said.

“Oh, thank you. Nothing like what you managed with those Klimpts though.”

“You knew?”

“Of course I knew! The way you smiled when you stepped into the gallery.”

They spent hours in that room, exchanging stories of the past few months, and daring (as so few did in those dark days) to talk about the future.

They had located the final outpost. It had been more difficult than the Senator had expected. The rebellion was incredibly decentralized for the level of organization it displayed. To his mind, it was like a virus. Each part operated individually, using only the information it possessed. When every part worked together, a larger, destructive goal was achieved.

The Senator’s Men slogged through the tunnels. It was dark beneath the snow, and the light from their lanterns made the walls glisten gold. The safehouse was in a cellar on Riverside, beneath the house of that bastard Quinn Campbell who’d stolen his seat. Campbell didn’t matter anymore. When people said, “The Senator,” they were referring, with varying degrees of respect, disdain and fear, to William Bradwell. Still, the man had played a part in the rebellion. The sentence for treason is death.

Two of the men, Rameses’ lawmen in their lives before the storm, threw smoke grenades through the downstairs windows. The sound of shattering glass echoed through the tunnels. Others lined up outside the front door, ready to fire on whoever came pouring out. Two riflemen were perched in the building across the street in case the rebels tried to escape to the roof.

They waited, but nobody ran out the front door, and no shots could be heard above the tunnels. What The Senator would soon learn is that since he had left for Rameses, his had become the *second* most varied private arsenal in New York City.

The lawmen who'd thrown the grenades were the first to go down. Torn apart in a hail of bullets, they died before they hit the icy street below them. In the dark, with sound echoing from every direction, it was impossible to tell where the attackers were. Only once they started retreating back towards the Senator's offices did they realize they were being shot at from both directions at once. They were cornered.

They made a break for the building where the snipers were nested, but just as they reached the door, two bodies came crashing through the roof of the tunnel. This was a well coordinated ambush. They had to fight their way out.

The Senator drew his revolver and fired wildly into the dark. He hoped to catch sight of Campbell, to look him in the eye and shoot him through the head, for this and all his other ill-won victories. There was no time for that. Instead, he pulled a grenade from his belt, yanked the pin, and threw it down the tunnel as far as he could. The blast caused a cave in. Anyone that survived was buried in tightly packed snow and ice.

The Senator ran north.

The few remaining Senator's men limped into their office headquarters. It didn't make sense. They hadn't lost a single man since the storm began. Someone had defected. Looking around the room at all the families, weeping for the men that had died in the ambush, The Senator could hardly think over the incessant noise, but still he made every man, woman and

child line up against the wall so he could call roll. It was difficult to determine who was missing, and who was dead. When he finished accounting for all the men he'd left behind in the tunnels, only two faces were absent.

The Senator was used to being double crossed. His wife, his maid and that duplicitous assassin had shaken his trust in everyone. He'd been more careful with his followers, strutting himself before them every day in his most fitting attire, captivating them with the power only he could wield. He hadn't accounted for the elderly couple. They kept to themselves so much, were so fascinated with anything loud, he'd never noticed they were nearly blind.

His army was gone. All that was left were a few injured men and many grieving families. There was a choice to be made. He could stick around, pick up the pieces like a true leader and do his best to keep this useless group alive. He picked option B.

A number of weeks ago, he'd received word back from one of his informants about the whereabouts of the Bailey's Boys. He'd planned on marching his army to Brooklyn as soon as they'd demolished Campbell's safehouse. It appeared he'd have to handle this alone.

He stepped into his closet, and at the very back found that suit he'd been saving for a rainy day. It was the most well-composed outfit ever made, sewn of black and silver silk, with every seam invisible. It fit his body precisely, each angle and limb filling the fabric, no bagging or stretching anywhere. Looking at himself in the mirror, it was hard to break away. He reloaded his revolver, pulled on his heaviest, most magnificent winter coat, and left his office, and his followers behind.

## 26. THE STORM III.

“I haven’t seen Constantin since the Chapterhouse was attacked,” the Assassin told her brother. He had awakened to much fanfare, in an unfamiliar place and an unfamiliar world. He was delighted to see his sister, and overjoyed to learn that his closest friend was his brother-in-law. They all took turns catching him up on what he had missed.

The bandit leader consoled his sister, “Remember the first lessons Mama taught us?”

“Always have an escape route.” The words reassured her as she spoke them.

“He’ll be okay.”

“There’s another visitor!” Nealand shouted as he ran into the Statue Gallery. “Seeking the company of one Duke Bailey! Wouldn’t give a name, but says he brings news from Elizabeth Hill.”

“Speak of the devil?” the assassin hopefully remarked.

“I can only hope so. But what would Lizzie want with me now? Bring him in Nealand.”

“I don’t trust this,” the curator declared, “Boys, keep your weapons nearby.”

The Assassin immediately recognized the Senator. She grabbed her brother’s gun from it’s holster, and aimed it at the intruder’s chest. The bandit’s followed suit.

“Hello Miss Arté,” the Senator began, “Or should I call you Diana? Can’t say it’s a pleasure to see you again. Now, I came here to kill Duke Bailey, to finally cut off the head of this serpentine organization. But seeing as you’ve put me in such a tight spot-” The Senator threw off his coat in one sweeping motion, letting it fall to the ground with no intention of ever picking it up again. He was magnificent, radiating pure fashion. Every person in the room was transfixed.



“Well, it seems I’ll have to kill all of you. Lower your weapons, gentlemen.” They did not. He looked up, noticing the winter hat he had worn only out of necessity. He pulled it off, and placed it on a many-armed statue which the bandit’s had been using as a hat-rack. “Pardon me. *Now*, lower your weapons.” They did in unison. All except one.

“Lower your weapon,” the dapper man repeated.

“No,” the curator stood firm.

“What? How are you doing this? Are you blind? Do you not see my splendor? Am I not the most beautiful sight on earth?” The Senator raved. “Lower. Your. Weapon!”

“I’ve seen better.” In truth, the curator was nearing that same hypnosis which had paralyzed his friends. This man radiated beauty, and beauty touched Sebastian more deeply than most. But he was telling the truth, he had seen better. Holding that image in his mind was all he needed to resist the Senator's aura of control.

“I demand to know how you resist.”

“Fine. Follow me.”

The befuddled Senator did as he was told, commanding the enraptured bandits to stay within view, and keep their eyes on him.

When they stepped into the Grand Central Gallery, all eyes leapt from the senator and scurried around walls, frantically tracing the paths of color and negative space in an infinite loop.

“This? This is how you maintain your will? It’s disgusting! You’ve made a vulgar mockery out of a house of culture!” Try as he might to hate what had been created here, he too was enthralled by its innate beauty. The curator watched the Senator scan the walls, unable to

look away. “It’s impossible to appreciate any single work... what is this? How is this so beautiful?”

“It’s not about the individual work, but the room as a whole, the art created when the pieces are placed together, just so.”

“How? Who created this masterpiece?”

“I envisioned it. They created it.” He gestured to the gang.

The Senator sat on the bench in the center of the room, slid his revolver into its holster, and fell deeply in love with the beauty that surrounded him. It was a beauty he’d long been able to project, but never had the occasion to experience for himself.

“I’d like some time alone,” he whispered, “Please.”

The bandits shuffled out, with Sebastian trailing behind.

Several hours later, the Senator stepped back into the statue gallery, suit jacket in hand. Even dressed down, his outward stylishness was enough to captivate, though not hypnotize. The bandits drew their guns once more, and took aim at him.

“I’m afraid I must apologize,” he began, “I came here today with malicious intent. But I cannot bring myself to harm anyone who understands beauty, true beauty, on such a profound level. I did not know there were more of us in the world. I must know your name, sir.”

“Bastian Ward, curator.”

“Bastian. Thank you for showing me what you did. If you ever need a patron for your good works, your assassin friend will know where to find me. Miss Arté... you failed me terribly, but your deception led me here. All transgressions have been forgiven. As for you Mr.

Bailey, please forgive me for my attempt on your life, and may you always keep such savory company. If you'll allow me, I'll be on my way."

The Senator began to back out of the room, hands raised to show that he truly meant no harm. He had seen something today that had changed him. He had so much work to do, repairing past wrongs.

He inched his way to that many-armed statue by the door, adorned with limply hanging hats. Reaching out, he felt for the warm winter cap he'd worn in. But he wasn't looking, or even thinking about what his hands felt. Absentmindedly, he pulled the wrong cap.

When the fabric touched his head, that aura within which he had spent his entire life was shattered. It collapsed so spectacularly that anyone in eyesight felt true pain in their hearts as they watched beauty die. In that moment, twenty odd bandits, a curator, and an assassin all spasmed with fear, pulling back triggers and involuntarily discharging their weapons. Former Senator William Bradwell was perforated so completely that his shadow remained on the wall behind him, even as his body fell, painted in deep red blood.

In those final moments when time condenses to give dying men the chance to regret, the Senator had his second epiphany of the day. These lowly creatures had shown him beauty like he'd never seen. He was at last forced to realize that he was no better than anyone else. William resolved to become that which he had always detested, to live the life he had always viewed with such scorn, only now to realize it was the only life worth living. He vowed that he would be kinder to those less fortunate, forgive their flaws, never again malign them as scum or immoral, or writhing hordes. Nay, he would be their champion before the government of his great, flawed nation, if only God would show him mercy and give him the chance.

God, being busy at the time, did not.

Two weeks later, the snow stopped falling. A week after that, the first rays of sunlight broke through the clouds above Manhattan. Slowly the city thawed, an ocean of ice melt retreating to the harbor. On the first spring day in the middle of August, the city sang. The next day, they began to rebuild.

## 26. THE END.

The Bandits left the museum the day the storm broke. They knew it wouldn't be long before the owners came knocking, and didn't care to be charged for their stay. The Grand Central Gallery was left as it was, Sebastian's gift to the museum director. The cars had to be left behind, the streets still blocked by snow as the tunnels crumbled in the sun. It was an exhausting hike through the uneven, ice laden streets, especially for Duke. Not one of them complained. Having been barricaded inside a museum for so long, a chance to breathe fresh air, to stand under open sky and feel the sun on their pallid skin, was worth the taxing journey.

They moved back into their hotel, the lobby still decorated for trench warfare. It was just as they'd left it, and they were quick to make themselves comfortable. Sebastian and Diana moved into one of the penthouse rooms, which had a kitchen of its own. With the bandits' help, they gathered up their belongings from their apartment and brought them to the hotel. On a second trip, they helped Diana pack and move her laboratory into the hotel's wine cellar. When Sebastian saw his wife's workshop for the first time, he was fascinated by all the unfamiliar implements, and wandered about asking her the purpose of each little piece of metal and glass. She taught him the names of the equipment and the chemicals with which she worked magic. It was a world entirely unfamiliar to him, and to see his wife's passion and brilliance filled him with a childlike joy.

The room they shared was smaller, but brighter than their old apartment, and with all their furniture inside, all their clothes in the dressers and pictures on the shelves, it began to feel like a real home.

A week later, the military moved into the city, cracking into the icy harbor on giant ships. They began distributing food to the hungry, and securing the city's important infrastructure. They also, of course, circulated wanted posters. Diana's portrait and a non-comprehensive list of her aliases were printed in every morning's paper. Her brother Constantin had also made the 'wanted section.' She and Duke took this as a good indication that he was still alive, and agreed to search for him whenever they could come out of hiding. They were also pleased that their mutual acquaintance Rory Reed was still at large.

Duke was troubled to see that, among the various individuals whose faces adorned the wanted posters, Elizabeth Hill was not one of them. A week later, her likeness made the front page, her execution date set. She would be transferred from the prison facility in Frankfort to Washington D.C. in a few days time.

The Bailey's Boys would follow Duke right through the gates of hell, and knew he would do the same for them, but he could not ask them to follow him into a suicide mission. He wouldn't have gone on such a mission himself, but it was becoming increasingly clear that his time with the bandits was coming to an end. The past two months, he'd been nothing but dead weight and not only had the gang survived the storm, they had come out strong as ever. He'd always known that they could make it on their own. They were quite the team. But 'Bastian was the reason they still thrived. A few months ago, he was a complete stranger. Now he was a close friend, a competent leader, and apparently his brother-in-law. Duke would be leaving the gang in good hands.

When he stepped into the hotel restaurant where all the bandits were gathered for dinner, there was already another heist being planned. Sebastian wore his usual cocky smile as he

distributed the details. Diana stood at his side, interjecting with ideas to simplify his plans using canisters of home-made knock-out gas, which she assured him would not damage the paintings.

When Duke told them he was planning to leave, some were confused, some were hurt, but all understood when he told them where he was going. Though not all of them had been around then, they all knew Duke was a different man before he met Elizabeth. She had taken his anger with the world and turned it into a love for his fellow man. She had helped him become the brilliant leader he was, and he could not sit by while she was in danger.

What they could not understand is why he insisted on going it alone. If it were too dangerous for all of them together, it was too dangerous for one man. Still, he refused to put them in harm's way now that they had finally made it in New York City, real players in the world of organized crime. He was proud of them. Sebastian hugged him, and made him promise they would see each other again. He unholstered his revolver, etched with a cursive "L.B." and pressed it into Duke's hand.

"Gonna need your luck back now," he said.

"Then how'll you get by?" Duke asked.

Sebastian put an arm around Diana, "Got mine right here."

She groaned, but found his flirtations endearing.

Duke looked to his sister.

"Take care of 'Bastian. He talks a big game, but he's no Bailey."

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

"Will do, Richie," she replied, "See you at Christmas?"

"Meet you at mom's," he agreed.

He said tearful goodbyes to each of the bandits. Then, bags packed, he strode out the double doors of the hotel, and caught a cab that, against the driver's better judgement, drove him to New Jersey.

Duke Bailey made his way down the county road on a great, black horse. It was a sturdy creature, and it reminded him of that loyal beast, Conrade, he'd had to leave behind in Rameses. He thought about traveling west to find that horse again, if it was still alive.

A convoy of military vehicles was stopped in the middle of the street ahead, parked diagonally across the road with doors thrown open. He hitched his horse, drew his weapons, and snuck into the woods to make a stealthy approach.

Rory Reed was absolutely drenched in blood. It had been a while.

The last time had been back in Port Cedric, after she and Elizabeth had been captured. They were marched out of town in chains, a situation that usually would have had her brooding and fuming. Instead, she kept a clear head until an opportunity opened up. It was easy tripping up her attendant guard and yanking away his side arm. They'd been stupid enough to cuff her hands in front of her. From there, she let the rage flow freely. She was badly outnumbered, but quicker than her captors. It was a bloodbath. She slaughtered them with precision and brutality. But that last man - the guard who had been pushing Elizabeth along - he fought dirty. He held a gun to Elizabeth's head and gave Rory two choices: stand down and leave, or watch Elizabeth die.

Since then, she had been clear of purpose, focused like never before. As she approached the convoy from behind, riding in on a horse she'd stolen from some cushy equestrian center in



Maryland, she let all that pent up rage back in. They'd ambushed her, taken her fiance, and put her on wanted posters across the country so that she could almost never find a place to rest her head. They deserved to die.

And die they did. Thirty men were tasked with escorting the captive Elizabeth Hill to Washington. Not one survived.

Standing behind the armored car, she encountered an unforeseen problem. She had searched the various bodies that littered the road, finishing off those who were still squirming about, and there wasn't a key to be found. She knocked on the door.

"Love," she shouted through the metal, "It's Rory."

"Darling!" Elizabeth shouted back, "I thought as much when I heard the commotion. May I ask why we're still speaking through a door? What seems to be the issue?"

"There's no key out here. I've searched all the guards already. Don't suppose it opens from the inside?"

"No such luck. Ever picked a lock?"

"You'd think, but no."

"Then it seems we're in trouble," Elizabeth paused to think, "Where are we right now? Do we have some time before reinforcements arrive?"

"We're fairly rural but... Oh?"

"What is it? Rory?"

Rory saw a familiar face approach from the side of the road, smiling ear to ear.

"Rory Reed? My lord, it's good to see your face!"

"Mr. Bailey! Hope you know how to pick a lock."

“Is that Duke?” Elizabeth shouted out again.

“It sure is!” he shouted back. “How’ve you been holding up Lizzie?”

“Been better.”

Duke pulled a lockpick and torque wrench from his pocket, then stuck them in the lock and did what he had done one thousand times before.

Elizabeth stepped out of the carriage, gave Duke a grateful kiss on the cheek, then threw her arms around Rory and kissed her on the lips.

“Thank you both,” she said as she stretched her legs.

Rory looked past her into the carriage, where a strangled guard lay slumped under a cold metal bench.

“Couldn’t let me have all the fun, could you?” Rory asked.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

They kissed again.

“As fetching as you look in stripes, darling,” Rory pulled a bundle of clothes from her horse’s saddle bags, “How about you change into something a little less conspicuous.”

Elizabeth thanked her, and climbed back into the car to change.

“Seems I was awful late to the party,” Duke said, “Glad I could still make myself useful.” He put away his lockpick.

“You might still make yourself useful,” said Rory, “Come with us.”

Elizabeth was surprised by Rory’s offer, but agreed.

“We’re traveling West,” Elizabeth explained as she reemerged, “hoping to settle down wherever the general population doesn’t want us dead. It’ll be a long journey, and you know better than most how to survive on the open road. We’ll watch your back if you watch ours.”

Duke didn’t need to think it over. “Let me get my horse.”