Sample Writing for “Keep it in the Family”

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Part One, starting section 8

VIII

The western tower was the highest point in Duskwood and from it the duke couldn’t see the trees for the forest. It was a rare clear-sky night. Logan gazed high at the crescent moon for a length of time. A bright and beautiful dream-work machine. The crescent, more-so than any of its other shapes, had always fired Logan’s dreams when he was young. It still did. A sweet night-wind caressed Logan’s cheek. He supposed it always would.

There was power in the Duskwood. And its Duke knew this. A quiet power that grows with time. The Archons themselves swore to a virulent nature noticed by their holy men in this forest. They only went back some two-thousand years. Druids had inhabited Duskwood long before the Archon Empire was conceived. Though the former were, in the end, annihilated by the latter.

Logan peered toward the horizon. Clouds of fog mingled with the treetops. Quiet and gloomy things. They lulled the forest, and the duke, to a slow exhale. The northern forests once reached clear across the heart of the Continent. In those times.

The duke stared headlong into the night. Mighty sentinels shuddered as the wind whispered through their branches. Frozen northern tundra, southern orchards, the midlands and the mountains. The forest’s yawn had once swallowed them all. He imagined a strange atmosphere hidden in the forest. Shrouded by fog. Logan blinked at the curiously cruel note in the wind. It keened about the house like a banshee. It seemed to him a far chillier breeze than the others. He shivered and turned to go.

Logan’s knee flared in pain as if touched by hot iron. He stumbled. Took hold of the masonry. His face a mask of pain, Logan found the laudanum in his jacket and took a sip. The hedges below rustled as if in a great chorus of mocking laughter. He stood erect and gazed back out into the forest once more. Moonlit clouds of fog glowed like ghosts beneath the branches.

It’s domain had been great. Once. Greater than any artificial kingdom designed by the shaking hand of man.

Logan turned once more to go. Pain tightened about his knee like a steel-clamp. Logan’s vision tunneled before he saw a flash of white. He swore loudly and gripped his knee. He swore again. Composed himself. Took another sip of the laudanum.

The duke maintained a defiant stare. Duskwood stirred as if in response. Deep in its womb shadows gathered like the mist. And everybody in Duskwood who was worth two licks of salt knew the old words. Strange things follow in the shadows hollow.

Logan told himself he was losing his mind. The hedges below laughed their agreement. Logan turned to go and fell with a cry again the pain that lanced up and down his leg. The bottle slipped from his affects and shattered against the bare stone.

Logan clutched his knee. He was breathing very hard. Watching the dark tincture puddle. Logan imagined the hedges as shrieking, wild things, laughing hysterically at his expense. He pressed his back to the cold stone. Put his hands over his ears but it made no difference. Their laughter turned into hideous shrieks. He cringed. Closed his eyes. Squeezed them tight.

The duke did not know just how long he sat there. His legs no longer hurt—they were numb. He stood with effort.

All was quiet. By the moon’s journey, a few hours passed. Sparing no last glance for the dark forest, the duke sidled inside the manor. Without, Duskwood inhaled the way sleep turned to dreams. A magic metamorphosis into something more.

IX

Dr. Hiram Cotter wasn’t certain of life. Not the way he used to be. Of the few things Hiram was certain of, his age was one. He was old. His back twisted stiffly to remind him. Hiram grimaced. He noted the particularly dense morning fog as he ticked off the years in his head like the pages in one of his books. He made ready for the walk. Sat and donned thick woolen socks.

“She was awful scared.” Oren finished his water. Wiped his whiskered mouth with his sleeve and added, “That’s for certain.”

Hiram nodded. Tied his boots. Tied them as best he could. “Scared of what, if I may inquire…?”

“Don’t rightly know, doc. Think she had her another incident with the maze. She was in a blazing hurry to get away from it.”

“I see.” Hiram tugged his beard thoughtfully. Quietly took his measure of the groundskeeper. He admired Oren Handry’s great height. The tall man’s sledgehammer build. “And what makes you think it was the maze the girl was so—would you say, terrified of?”

Oren shook his anvil-shaped head. He rolled his sleeves up his wrist and said, “You know how Marley is when she gets an idea in her head, doc. Little duchess just has to do what she wants. I told her to keep well enough away from the maze after what happened last time.” He set bear-like elbows on the table. “Mind a refill?”

Hiram poured the big man another glass of water. He shrugged into a brown frock. His work was the other certainty in Hiram Cotter’s life. He watched Oren swallow every drop. His work was his sole purpose. It pushed him from bed before the sun rose. Kept him up long after it set. And such marvelous strength as Oren Handry’s was what the recipe required. Hiram noted once more the dense and gathering fog. His house was surrounded, it seemed, by an opaque, lingering cloud.

“Tell me. Oren. Why should I have any influence over the girl where her lord father does not?”

“I didn’t mean no impropriety or nothing. You just seem to have a way with the lass that none of us have. She respects you. Looks up to you. I know her sister does. You taught Celes everything she knows about—well. You know. Science and all.”

Hiram Cotter watched the groundskeeper finish his water. “Yes. Science and all.”

Oren leaned in with an almost conspiratorial slant. “I hope this wasn’t a bother. I know how busy you are, doc. But you asked me to come to you immediately when the girl is acting strange—”

Hiram held up a spotted hand. Smiled. “I recall well enough what I said, Oren. You have my thanks.” He narrowed his eyes. “Say—Oren? Tell me. Did you happen to notice the girl’s eyes after the incident? Think very carefully now. It’s important.”

Oren Handry seemed lost in the effort to recall. “They were wide. Big with fear—”

“No-no. I’m looking for a specific detail. But if nothing unusual comes to mind, then don’t bother sparing it another thought.”

“No-no,” said Hiram. He shook his head. It was best not to overburden the man. So he said, “I formally withdraw the question. I will see what there is to be done about Marley and the maze. But I can’t promise anything.”

Oren smiled and nodded. “Well-met, doc. Take care there—we’ve got our first spring storm coming on. It looks to be a loud one.”

“Of course.” Another smile. “Of course. Right. Oh, and Oren. Be sure to stop by again soon. I’ll be needing you to head into town for me. Just a few light errands. If it’s not to much trouble, of course.”

The groundskeeper nodded. “No trouble at all, doc.”

Hiram crossed the chamber. Watched the big man lumber off into the fog. There were other things the recipe required as of yet. Hiram would obtain them. But there were steps, precautions to take and protections to measure. Hiram’s genius lay in his ability to affirmatively pulled an idea apart and examine each unique detail from all angels. His was a mind that moved beyond the violet. Mathematics—astronomy! Metaphysical doctrines from countless cultures, arcane spiritualism and scattered cosmology. His studies of biology and the natural world. Modern science—all these he had mastered.

Hiram stepped out into the gloom. He closed the door. All these and more were what led him to become a disciple.

Completion was close at hand. And with it would come what so many, including his former master, failed to achieve before him. Before Hiram. He frowned suddenly. Hiram Cotter. That name. Like an involuntary muscle spasm, something wicked twisted Hiram Cotter’s mouth into a hateful grimace. The doctor blinked. After a moment, shook his head. There was work to be done.

Hiram plunged into the waiting mist. Faint whispers in the dense fog crawled over the lip of Hiram’s ear. Slithered out the other. Familiar trees watched him with foreign faces. Limb-like branches swayed in the wind. They were waking up, it seemed. There was more green in the woods every day. Sheer determination drove Hiram to the old stone well. The ring of gray had widened. A few feet, it seemed. The fog did not linger here and the whispers ceased when he passed over it.

If he could not complete the work, who, then? who if not him? None of them had measured to Hiram. None of them had been able to measure up to his genius. Could put the real picture together, hell, even see the pieces for what they were. Not the duke. Not his brother. Not even the tyrant. Hiram chortled. Some terrible tyrant he turned out to be. Ended up exiled to a spit of land in the ocean.

Hiram peered down into the darkness of the well. Sensed, with hair-raising dread, the presence below. Moments not spent dedicated to his work gnawed on the good doctor’s bones. In a way it was his god, his idol, his thing of worship, and Hiram gladly bowed down.

X

Celes stood in a hallway. It was a familiar place. She’d been here before, in another life, a time she forgot. Someone was singing. A woman. Her voice was delicate and had a mischievous quality to it. It’s playful melody gave Celes the impression that she and the singer were in on some great secret together, one nobody knew, nobody at all, because this was their secret. She padded quietly down the hall. Celes came at last to the room the voice emanated from. But when she tried to push the door open, she stepped back and saw it was chained shut. And the woman was no longer singing. She was screaming.

Celes opened her eyes. She stared at the rafters. Her belly was tied in a knot. It was just before six. Suspecting more bad dreams to lurk beneath her eyelids, Celes disentangled herself from the sheets in brief, mechanical motions. She knelt by the chest at the foot of her bed and opened it. The faint perfume of honeysuckle and lavender still lingered here. After all this time. Celes filled her lungs to expanding. Evoked a familiar pang in her chest. She took hold of a jewel-encrusted white box that fit in the palm of her hand. It used to play an old nursery rhyme Celes’s mother sang to Celes in another life. But the key to winding it was lost in the hazy days surrounding her mother’s death. Celes imagined her mother’s voice echoing about her.

She recalled the first verse and sang in a soft whisper,

*Sleep now my child, may the moon light thy way,*

*Dream of a land long forgotten.*

*Sleep well my child, for the night’s here to stay,*

*Into the dark we shall follow.*

That was all she could remember. Just as well. There was no use in dwelling. Celes drew a weary sigh and donned a copper-brown dress. She accented it with a pear-colored bow she cinched about her waist. Celes knew the woman from her dream was her mother. An innate sense spoke to this as sure as instinct told a bird to fly or a toad to hop.

Already her mother’s voice evaporated from her mind. Replaced by muffled screams. Father never said as much, but Celes was nobody’s fool. She managed to string together pieces of her mother’s story through the various folk that came to Duskwood only to abandon her just as quickly. Their mother died toward the end of the terrible tyrant’s reign. Twelve years ago.

Resentment surfaced inside Celes, tightened the knot in her belly. She sat by the window. Rolled matching pear-stockings up her legs. It was a Tularo day. Bleak. Gray. The sky was flat and looked hard enough to strike a match on. Celes noted dark clouds haunting the eastern horizon. She buckled her black velvet shoes. Completed her outfit with an olive-green bandana-cap, garnished by delicate white-lace filigree.

Celes remained by the window for a space of time, turning the music box over in her hands. Her lord father’s cruel, frowning, ugly face would not evacuate its space in Celes’s memory. Could she inherit that hideous frown? as one might inherit skin color, or hair color, or any myriad of diseases? The nagging-gnawing notion hitched a ride on the tail-end of her every thought. Was her mouth doomed to droop as his did? to despise everything as he did? Was she destined to walk a path of bitterness and anger? to murder her beauty, her passion?

Breakfast was much the same the last few days. Father at the table’s head. He spent the meal’s entirety behind his newspaper. A silent, brooding overlord. Celes stole more than a few glances in his direction. He seemed more haggard than was usual. His eyes were ringed with skin mottled in blue and gray. Almost as if he to hadn’t been sleeping well. He did little more than sip his coffee and mumble a few words here and there.

When he finished with his paper, he quickly departed without so much as sparing the sisters a glance.

Celes shared a concerned expression with Marley before they too abandoned the table. Celes had lessons with Dr. Cotter and Marley with the governess. There was a strong breeze that morning. Ghostly clouds raced with it. Merging together. Ripping apart again. Cascading forward like transparent white waves. Celes felt her mind mired in a similar state. She was about to ask Marley to go and find the governess when her sister piped up.

“Do you think dreams are important?”

Celes was uncomprehending for a moment. She blinked. Looked down. Marley and her cat, Cadbury, stared up at her. Patiently waiting. “Important how—exactly?”

“You know,” said Marley. She was wearing her periwinkle jacket. It was her favorite. “Do you think dreams ever have any special meaning? Old man Cotter says dreams are very important. He says there are secrets in our dreams. Secrets we keep. Even from ourselves. Do you think that’s true? Do you suppose someone could keep a secret from themselves?”

“I don’t know, to be honest,” said Celes. “Tell me about your dream.”

“I dreamed I was in my bed. And it was dark. Really dark. I had a lamp, but when I held it up, I couldn’t see anything past my bed. There was just—darkness.” Marley gestured wildly, as if holding a hefty book. “That’s when I found the book. It was really big. Thick, you know? Heavy. Everything was written in another language. I don’t think it was from any around Duskwood. But. Hell’s Bells, Celes. It was filled with all kinds weird drawings. And all these diagrams—”

“Drawings of what?”

Marley seemed to think back. Celes thought worry passed through her eyes but it was quick. “I can’t remember. I only recall thinking…“ A very peculiar look bloomed in Marley’s nebulous gray eyes, a peculiarity that moved into her voice as she spoke. “I recall they were awfully captivating.” Marley fell silent, apparently lost in her own gray world. Only Cadbury’s presence stirred her again. She scooped him up. Looked up at her. “Celes? Did you know mother was a socialite?”

“No. I didn’t—” Something felt off. The fog was dense. But how, with such a breeze? “Who told you that?”

“Miss Rachel told me. She said mother was friends with just about everyone. She says mother loved parties and balls and had all kinds of fun. Did you know she and Papa used to live in the capital? They would attend parties almost every night—”

A distinct pang moved through Celes, threatened to curl her lip. Resentment tightened the knot in her belly. Marley was looking up at her curiously. The calico slunk about her feet. Celes knelt suddenly. Her sister’s eyes shrouded their true depth, even from her. “Hush. Marley. You know Father doesn’t approve of such talk.”

Marley almost looked accusing. “You mean such talk as our mother. He doesn’t approve of anything. And since when do you give a rat’s ass for Father’s approval? You’re going to leave Duskwood anyway. Just like Rowan did. So I guess it doesn’t matter anyway.”

Celes gave Marley’s hand a squeeze. “I’ll never leave you here alone,” said Celes. “You and I are going to leave Duskwood. Together, Marley. That’s a promise.” Celes crossed her heart. Marley seemed to consider. Celes added, with a sly look, “Wait and see. Someday we’ll be famous explorers like Uncle Duncan. They’ll be writing stories about the Amazing Tularo Sisters in the papers. That’s right. Just wait, and you’ll see.”

They hugged and parted ways. Celes to the gate and the ever-waiting Mr. Handry. Marley to the manor for lessons with Miss Rachel. The groundskeeper always escorted Celes the half-mile or so from Duskwood to the old stone farmhouse in the woods. Celes did not mind. The Duskwood was no place to tread lightly. And black clouds now seemed to surround them, like Duskwood were the eye of the storm. As was his manner, Mr. Handry chattered on almost as aimlessly as they wandered the sullen and somber woods. Off and away into the mist, until it was all she could see.

XI

Marley hopped down the path. There was playing on repeat the most impish tune in her head. It was playful. Childishly simple. She couldn’t say where she’d heard it. If she ever had. Marley thought maybe she dreamed it. Her gaze climbed over the looming manor house, toward the gathering darkness over the horizon. Cadbury meowed.

Marley looked down. Dusky yellow eyes seemed to hint at something. She tilted her head and Cadbury mirrored the action. He looked different. The patterns in his fur had—changed? Marley made to scoop the misty calico into her arms but Cadbury jumped back. Like it was a game. Distant rumble overhead made them both freeze. There was a tenuous cool strength in the wind Marley hadn’t felt before. She summoned all the command she could and said, “Cadbury. No. Not now.”

Cadbury darted out of reach.

Marley trained her eyes on the calico and gave pursuit. It was no good. She was a bumbling gangly ovine lummox compared to the misty patterned feline. Marley reached for him. Tripped on a knot of roots. Fell hard. She dusted herself off and saw, the blood leaving her face, that Cadbury led her right to the entrance of the hedge maze.

And there he was, under the stone archway. Perched on his haunches. Tail flicking back-and-forth.

“Cadbury! Come back!” Marley approached. The hedges were a chorus of noise in the blowing wind. The cat turned around and went further inside, down a path wreathed in oddly still fog. Marley looked up. Dark clouds seemed ready to crash into Duskwood from all directions. Marley started running. “*Cadbury*?”

XII

Logan glared at the message on his desk. He drew a deep breath. The manor house shuddered with him.

Logan took a generous taste of the laudanum. Looked down at the bottle. He would need a refill soon. What a marvelous concoction the good doctor had—concocted! He laughed. Swiped stupidly at his cane. He couldn’t recall why he’d taken so much of the damn thing. Logan stood. Wobbly, uncertain, weak. Delivered the message to the flames.

They honestly thought they could march into his forest and do as they pleased? The duke harrumphed. They would all know soon enough. Logan assured himself of this as he took another taste of the laudanum. What a tonic! He would show them. The Duke of Duskwood was no man to be trifled with! He would rally his armies. Route them out at gunpoint.

They might be operating under the king’s blessing, but it was not the king’s land they threatened.

Then there was his brother. Always inquiring after the family.

Logan snorted and stumbled to his chair by the fire. This was where they belonged. He did not care what his brother wanted for the girl. Or for what he thought at all, for that matter. The girl was his. Marley was the duke’s daughter. She had purpose. She belonged in Duskwood. It was his Logan’s right. Nay. His duty. His sacred duty. He did it all for her—

There was an urgent knock on his door. Logan made to stand but found he couldn’t. They did not wait for the duke to respond. The door opened and the governess swept inside. She looked somewhat flushed.

“Logan—did you send Marley to have lessons with Dr. Cotter today?”

Logan blinked. Rachel Rockeshire was a charming woman. Even in her drab outfits. The dirty smock overtop. Her skin did not hold much color but it glowed with health and luster. Her face was heart-shaped. Her chin small and pointed, her cheeks soft and round, dark eyebrows arched inquisitively. Logan realized she was talking and redoubled his efforts to compose himself.

“Marley never came inside for lessons after breakfast. Did she go to Dr. Cotter’s house for some reason?”

Logan stared at her. Slack-jawed. Where is Marley? “Marley is where she belongs,” he said.

Rachel stared at him incredulously. There was something about her eyes Logan found most alluring. A glint of amber. The flash of youthful passion. Logan looked into the fire. “We are all only ever as we are,” he mumbled, more to himself than the governess. “The fires that burn at the core of every star burn in the heart of every man.”

“What?” Rachel looked bewildered. “Where is Marley—Logan? Is Marley safe?”

A gust of wind struck the house and it groaned. The duke curled his fingers over the chair’s armrests.

“Of course she’s safe. Do you think I would keep her here if she wasn’t absolutely safe?

The governess said nothing. She looked away.

“Duskwood is where she belongs. This is where we all belong.” Logan tasted the laudanum. Twice. He sneered. “And those mangy dogs think they can stroll in here. And just. Do as they like? Is that it? Vile cretins. Bloody warmongers. Liars and cowards. They’ll answer yet. To the butt of my gun.

“I know what they say about me,” the duke continued. He clutched at the armrests over and over. “I know what they whisper. What they say about me behind my back. When they think I’m not listening. They don’t realize. I’ve always been listening, and I never stopped. Think I don’t read the papers? Bah! Some have even put forth that I died some time ago, and nothing but ghosts inhabit this house. Idiots!” Logan swiveled about. Saw he was alone. He turned back. Drew a sigh. Shadows move across the study. Across the carpet, the worn red wallpaper.

The fog gathered. But there was nothing to be done for that.

XIII

Celes held the device up as Dr. Cotter instructed. Peered through the eyepiece. She adjusted the index arm. The doctor was explaining how one can use the device to measure the distance between two objects. Such as a naval officer wishing to judge the distance between his ship and the shoreline, when an urgent knock sounded at his door. She did not miss the irritation flicker over the old man’s kindly features. Dr. Cotter instructed her to continue with the lesson. Shuffled into the adjacent chamber. Softly closed the door.

Celes set the device down gently. Fell back into the chair with a tired sigh. Cat-stretched her arms and legs. Her mind backpedaled into her dreams. Celes recalled the song in her dreams. But try as she might, the words beyond the first verse evaded her desperate grasp. She fell into a crepuscular state and the words became almost tangible.

*Sleep now my child*, she sang quietly under her breath. *May the moon light thy way*. Celes stood. The laboratory walls were stockpiled with books. Looking at them, an idea sparked inside her. Celes combed through the wall of books. She searched for any that might have to do with music and song, folktales and nursery rhymes. But almost the entirety of Dr. Hiram’s collection consisted of hefty volumes on science.

*Sleep well my child. For the night’s here to stay*.

Noise from the other room struck Celes cold. She made to inquire what all the fuss was over but found, with a prickly sweat, that the door was locked. Why should the doctor have locked it? shut it at all, for that matter? Celes hesitated. She pressed her ear to the door.

Muffled voices. Had they mentioned Marley?

“No. No, that can’t be right,” came the doctor’s raspy voice. “Marley is with her lord father the duke.”

The discomfort in Celes’s stomach tightened into sudden panic. She knocked. Called out.

A moment later, the door opened. Miss Rachel stood before her. The governess was ashen faced.

Celes’s eyes darted about the room for Marley. “Where’s my sister?”

“The girl is back at the manor with your lord father,” said Dr. Cotter. He was using his hearing horn. “There is no cause for alarm—”

Miss Rachel shook her head. “No. Hiram. I’m telling you. I was just with Logan. Marley isn’t with him.”

“Preposterous,” muttered Dr. Cotter.

Celes’s heart froze. “What do you mean? Where is she?”

“Little Marley is safe inside Duskwood with your lord father—”

“Their lord father,” insisted Miss Rachel, “is in his study at this very moment, completely strung out—” The governess looked at Celes and hesitated. She shook her head. “Marley never showed at the parlor this morning. I haven’t seen her since breakfast. Celes. Do you have any idea where she might have gotten off to?”

Celes was frozen for a long moment. Looking between her distraught governess and the irritated, stubborn doctor. “Yes,” she said, moving to gather her things, scolding herself all the while: Celes suspected foreboding when Marley started asking after their mother, but did nothing about it. Shrugged it off. Now her baby sister was missing and most likely lost in the hedge maze. And Celes had spent all morning nursing resentment toward her.

Dr. Cotter was most displeased as Celes hurried after Miss Rachel. “Come now. Be reasonable Celes—”

“I’ll walk Celes back the moment we find her sister,” chimed in the governess.

“I’m dreadfully sorry, Dr. Hiram,” said Celes, gathering her things. “I have to find her. I’ll come right back. I’m sure she’s just fine. But if I don’t go find her now, I’m afraid I won’t be able to concentrate on our lesson. Not the least bit.”

Dr. Cotter’s gnarled features blended irritation with—worry? fear? He tugged on his beard but said no more.

Outside, dark clouds steepened Celes’s panic. Howling wind swallowed any further conversation between her and the governess. If Marley really was lost somewhere in the hedges, they needed to find her fast. Celes followed Miss Rachel down the familiar path through the woods. Strong winds keened about the treetops. Whistled like a train in the hedges. It was time to run.

Celes could hardly hear her thoughts. Wordlessly they hurried through the gate. Duskwood Manor loomed ahead. A solid black mass, sturdy and strong, a bastion against the storm. Celes raced along at Miss Rachel’s heels. The governess must have shared her inkling. She chose the western path. To the maze. The hedge tops swayed like amorphous, murmurous worshippers. Celes couldn’t help but imagine a mocking laughter imbedded somewhere inside those murmurs.

Celes had been lost in this labyrinth for nearly two days when she was nine. She did not come this way often.

Celes halted beneath the archway. “Marley?” She used her hands like a horn. “MARLEY?”

Miss Rachel did the same. But the wind boomeranged. Carried their cries off with it.

Ghostly white mist clung to the ruptured cobblestone walkway. Celes’s skin crawled. It wreathed the walls like cobwebs. Miss Rachel touched her arm. Gestured for Celes to stay. But when the governess started forward, Celes followed on her heels.

Miss Rachel took her hand. They marched down the path. It dead-ended into a T formation. Miss Rachel gestured for them to split up and Celes nodded. The governess squeezed her hand and they parted. Celes barreled ahead. Calling for her sister all the while. She gave herself no time to be afraid. To think, really. Celes came quickly to a fork in the path and came to a halt. All three prongs looked exactly as the other, with small, minute differences in the cobblestone ruptures. She cupped her mouth. “Marley?” But the hedges offered no response.

Celes opted for the center prong. She slowed. Was no longer running. The wind blew but ceased its howling. A last great inhale before the storm unleashed its fury. The sky seemed uneasy. Clouds were swollen in metallic shades of blues and purples. She hurried forward. Mist lapped at Celes’s feet. She made a right. A left. The maze dead-ended. Celes turned back. Arrived at the fork and tried the eastern prong. This did much the same, sidewinding about here and there only to dead-end into a wall of hissing hedges. She doubled-back once more, tracing her footsteps carefully, only to pause when taken entirely off-guard. The fork was now two-pronged.

Celes stood, bewildered. She replayed her movements over in her head. She could have sworn… there was a cool tremor in the wind. Celes shivered. Thunder rolled across the sky. She felt the sky’s great uproar vibrate up her spine. Celes barreled like a bullet down the eastern path once more and after an impossibly long distance, came once more to a three-pronged fork.

She swore. Loudly. Called out for Marley. Once more, the wind stole her voice away.

Part Two

Black-market Braxis

I

The wayfarer’s inn was perched atop the crest of a grassy knoll. Cool night air weaved through the top of the tallgrass. The grass turned to sway and twist with the wind, and like ten-thousand dance partners the wind and the grass whispered their secrets, thick-as-thieves.

The moon was bright and nearly full when there came to the old inn a rambling man. His eyes had seen very far. He had beheld realms inside his head that were distant and foreign and all-together alien. And though his heart was heavily scarred, and though his bones were weary, there was a streak of kindness in him that left the air smelling like rain in his wake.

The inn had served as the city’s town hall building, long ago. So it came to be known as the Town Hall Inn, though most folks took to simply calling it the Town. There was courtyard built around the Town, though very few knew just how old the cracked and crumbling flagstones really were.

Most of the yard lay unseen anyway, hidden beneath clumps of dirt and straw and sprawling patches of chickweed. It had a mill, but the mill had ceased to operate long before the war, and that was eleven winters past. Or was it twelve winters past? Time had a way of toying with reality, and the inn was old. So very old. Older than any of the current residents could possibly guess.

So many residents had come and gone, had walked its halls, slept in its beds, ate and drank and made merry beneath its roof… and whether they had songs in their hearts or malice gone malignant in their minds, the impressions left behind by so many had, overtime, begun to coalesce. As the centuries came and went, the impressions formed memories inside the inn, remembrances that were precious and dear and frightening and lovely, and a kind of anamnesis started to take place.

At first it was a ripple in the ocean. A blink of the eye, a subtle groan in the floorboards that gave the occasional resident cause to stop and look back. It took hundreds of winters to make that board groan. Countless people wading through, leaving the shallowest of impressions, a shadow of themselves, every time, but the thing about shadows is, they can be as big as the moon or small as a mouse, they still weigh the same.

There was another man approaching. His heart was slow, each beat seemingly deliberate. He too had seen very far, perhaps even further than the first man, but there was little kindness to be had in him. His eyes had seen death, his hands had caused harm, and his heart had pulsed.

Clouds trailed between the moon and the inn. They dragged dark shadows across it. Wind crashed into the inn, playfully, unmercifully, laughing and rolling and tumbling about the yard.

The Town’s shudder was a trifle thing. More of an eyebrow lift than anything.

Enough, though, to loosen a few shingles, and one shingle fell shattering about the porch.

II

Duncan scanned the tavern. Spacious, not crowded. A few scattered lamps provided dim light with reliable flickers into darkness you could bet on. He threw back a shot of blackstrap whiskey.

“Do you have it?” he croaked.

“I have it,” replied the man seated across from him, very slightly leaning forward. They called him the Blueskin. Blueskin Blake. His face was mottled in patches of blue and gray, all scaly like a chameleon. “You’re sure about this, Professor?”

“A little late to back out now don’t you think?”

“I’m not paid to think.”

“What are you paid for then?”

Blake smiled and it was just as reptilian as his face. His eyes glinted in a flicker of lamplight, two deep inkwells that seemed to miss nothing. Blake was thin, almost frail. His narrow frame appeared further emaciated by the big black frock he had on. It swallowed him whole.

“Never mind,” said Duncan. “Where is my package?”

“Being dropped off as we speak.”

They lapsed into a tense silence when a red-haired serving girl approached their table. She placed a bloody steak and a glass of beer in front of the Blueskin before quietly sidling off.

The Braxis Town Hall Inn wasn’t like the hotels downtown. It was old, and tended to complain in bad weather. The tables wore threadbare cotton covers, if they wore anything at all. No golden trimmings or filigree was seen caught in the light. But the ale was strong and good and got a man’s blood up. The fire in the hearth was real and its flames were warm and comforting and crackled like a grandmother plotting mischief with her favorite grandchild.

The Blueskin took hold of a large knife. It seemed to become an extension of his arm as he methodically cut his steak into thin slivers. Steak juices and blood consorted across his plate. “Job took a fair amount of planning. Considering our line of work, I think that really means something.”

Blake maintained a lighthearted manner and treated everything as a joke. Despite this, a metallic aura clung to him, warned of danger... and despite his malnourished appearance, a deep-seeded intensity underscored the Blueskin’s every movement with subtle vibrations, a trembling echo of something sinister that followed in the wake of his jokes and his laughter.

“I’m going to return it when I’m done with it,” said Duncan. “He knows that right?”

“He knows,” said Blake. He knifed a sliver of raw meat. Drenched it in the blood. “What clients do with their purchase is usually of little concern. So long as it’s not used to incriminate anyone aside from yourself. Professor.” He opened his mouth wide, put the dripping flesh in his mouth.

“And by usually, you mean to imply my case is more the unusual sort.”

“By no means,” said Blake, words drawled in around his steak. “Just a little more sensitive than others, is all. It won’t go well for you if you’re caught.” Juice trickled down the corners of his mouth, wet his lips red. “You know. Treason and all. They tend to frown upon it.”

Duncan fired a glance toward the innkeep. His name was Ladd Hansen. Being that his inn was a couple miles outside the city limits, he was the only form of present security, but Duncan supposed that was enough. Hansen was a former prize fighter with a reputation alone that hit harder than most men. He was a northerner, spoke very little, and stood closer to seven feet than he did six.

“I’m aware of the risks.”

“And you are aware,” said Blake, knifing a second piece, “that if you decide to steal away, and abscond from our next engagement,” he put it in his mouth and started chewing, “that things will go much worse for you?”

The serving girl approached and they lapsed into silence once more. She proffered Duncan another round of whiskey when he asked for it and then left them to welcome a new couple, a man and a woman, whom she led to the far side of the commons.

“Fully,” said Duncan, dryly. Wind from without barreled into the house and he imagined he could hear the old farmhouse groan against it. “I’ll have the money. The money is no matter at all.”

“The money,” said the Blueskin, sardonically, “is the only matter at all.”

Blake swallowed the last piece of his steak. He’d never stopped, but had mechanically stabbed at the meat in front of him eating it piece-by-piece, his seemingly implacable appetite entirely at odds with his emaciated appearance. He brought a napkin to his mouth.

“You’ll find your end of our deal waiting for you in your apartment. Until next time, Professor.”

The Blueskin took to his boots. He made to say something else, some last quip or another, some hideous threat, but his glance caught something that gave him pause.

Blake’s reptilian smile crawled across his face again. He tipped his hat and swaggered out.

Duncan turned and nodded his thanks. The innkeep stared, hard, until Duncan too had paid for his whiskey and was out the door. He hurried down the hill into the night, all-too-aware that the Blueskin had just come slithering this way only moments ago. He turned and looked back at the inn.

The very outer edges of the capital were Duncan’s favorite part of the industrial metropolis. Here, humming streetlights did not drown out so many of the stars. The noises dulled and fell away like they never did in his apartment, not even at night. Being out here reminded him of what real ozone tasted like, how it felt to stretch his lungs with air untainted by factory fumes or coal smoke.

Looking back, he could see the city lights on the horizon, a small sanctuary of dim lights amidst the sweeping dark of night.

III

Rowan Tularo covered his mouth and yawned. He gazed up at the piece of clear sky between city streets. Dawn glowed beyond the eastern slopes and would soon coming tumbling down upon the capital an avalanche of sunlight. He stopped in at the coffee bar on the corner for his espresso, required before he could go any further. It was a rustic shop, small but warm and clean.

Rowan paid for his coffee and continued on to open the store, gulping down the hot drink greedily, burning his tongue and throat.

An alleyway with a pregnant swell in its center linked two market arteries. His uncle’s bookshop was a narrow two-storey made of red brick, sandwiched between a white stone domicile and a tailoring emporium located along the edge of the swell. Most of the alley was previous generation homes, converted for business purposes: there was a tax bureau across the street, a series of law offices and legal firms and apartments above them.

Rowan climbed the shop’s front steps. He fumbled about searching for his shop key.

“Ho, Rowan!”

Not looking over, Rowan said, “Morning Murdoch.” He found the key. Hastily thrust it inside the lock.

The door cried in protest and the bell chimed brightly as Rowan swept inside the shop. He pulled back the curtains from the latticed windows and sunlight fell in bright squares against the tattered maroon carpet. They would spend the afternoon climbing the adjacent wall of books. The bell rang again as Murdoch followed him inside.

“The place is looking fine Rowan,” he said. “Just fine!”

“Thanks Murdoch.” Rowan set his bag down. Flicked on two desk lamps. He turned their dials, growing the wicks until they burned with a soft amber light. He then sat and savored his coffee. It formed a ball of heat in his belly that stirred his blood.

Murdoch Ping sidled up to the desk in the same mustard colored clothes from the previous day. He was a rickety old man, with a bald head and long face made longer by narrow features. Loose cadaverous cheeks gave way to a jut of bony chin. The only hair on his face were the reddish-brown hairs above languid yellow eyes. He owned the toyshop Crank & Ping’s, next door. He lingered by the desk as Rowan set about filling the final collection of shelves from a few scattered piles of books he’d arranged by category the night before.

“You reckon to open up directly? Looks to be you’re nearly there.”

“Nearly,” Rowan agreed. “Maybe in a few days I’ll open up. There’s a little more I want to get done first.”

“I haven’t seen so many books in all my days,” said Murdoch, picking up a volume off the shelf, “no sir, not in all my days.”

“The second floor shop is still packed up in boxes.”

Murdoch grunted, flipping through the text. “How’s a body find time to read so many words? It would take me a damn lifetime of nothing but reading to finish this wall alone, never mind time for that one or that one, and time for chores and food and time for the damn shitter. You’re telling me you got more up those stairs?”

“My uncle has an impressive library. He’s hoping the sales will float his next expedition.”

“Azania?” Murdoch shuddered at Rowan’s solemn nod of affirmation. He followed Rowan and continued calling to him from the bottom of the narrow staircase. “I swear, Rowan, fella like yer uncle has to be plumb jolly rotten, traipsing about the dark world like he does. I ‘eard me that terrible savage folk live in those jungles.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” said Rowan, returning with another box. “There are man-eaters. If you go deep enough.”

Murdoch Ping’s eyes widened like limey yellow saucers. “I ‘eard me some of that. So it’s true then, is it?”

“My uncle has told me stories that would make you piss your britches clean.” Rowan set the books down and exhaled. “He’s told me about war parties filled with screamers. They file their teeth into fangs and paint their skin in such a way as to blend in with the jungle and disorient a man if he isn’t ready for it. Then, if you’re lucky, it’s a spear through the chest.”

“Wicked creatures,” Murdoch breathed, taking a moment. “And ’ow exactly is a spear through my bloody bird cage supposed to be lucky, anyhow?”

“Some natives are known to coat blow darts with a poison that will leave a man paralyzed, but the poison doesn’t rob him of consciousness and it doesn’t dull the senses in any way. They enjoy their meat fresh.”

Murdoch’s pallid features paled further. He remained for a few minutes more. The conversation turned to alleyway gossip and city news, as it usually did with the old tinkerer. “There’s a piece in the day’s *Outrider* about the damn railway tunnels beneath the city again. Some confounded company wants another grabble and go at it.”

Rowan inspected each volume before shelving it, letting the older man’s words wash over him as a dull backdrop for his own work and thoughts. He nodded, though in truth Rowan had only been in Braxis for three years and did not recall the story. His uncle had started Rowan at the Academy when he was sixteen. He graduated three years later and took up work in his uncle’s bookshop as a means to pay Duncan back three years of free room-and-board.

Rowan glanced over at Murdoch. The old man was prattling on about the perils of technology as Rowan emptied the box.

“They had all kinds of problems last time they went under these old roads. Guess they plumb forgot, eh?”

Rowan looked up. “What kind of problems?”

“All kinds!” cried Murdoch, gesticulating wildly so Rowan was afraid he might knock a shelf over. “The big machines they took down in those foul tunnels never worked proper-like. Not for long. They never could reason out the why of it. I remember once, this one time, they came running out of the tunnel, shouting all wild and crazy-like. Gas drove the foreman and half his damn crew mad as hatters. It was a collapse, I think real deep in the mine, that was the final nail in the project’s coffin.”

The days went on much like this. Whenever Mr. Murdoch had no customers, which was often, the old man shuffled over to regale Rowan. He was a compendium of knowledge about Khorum. Particularly concerning Braxis and its long history. So Rowan took full advantage of him and learned much about the capital that folks born in the city never knew. There was far more to the industrialized city than meets the eye. Braxis was ancient, and ancient things accumulate.

The old man, in his turn, seemed grateful for a mostly-listening ear.

Rowan was sorting through another box of books later that afternoon when he happened upon an older volume, bound in vellum, that appeared out of place with its mates. It was an archaic manuscript, probably close to three hundred years old, with exquisitely crafted, illuminated pages. He only took notice of Murdoch standing in the doorway when the old tinkerer made a noise.

“Best be careful with such as that,” said Murdoch. “Especially with the Carbunkle’s just down the road a piece.”

“Calm down. It’s nothing sordid. Just an old copy of the March.”

“They don’t care much about what it is, old books like that, only that it’s old. You know the law about Mystic grimoire and the like. Folks don’t like ‘em and Folks don’t trust ‘em. I’ve ‘eard me more ‘n a few places raided, their owners accused of dealing in ancient wares and then arrested for it.”

“I know the law,” said Rowan, placing the volume in a desk drawer, “and I promise you there is nothing illegal about this book.”

“Oh? Well I promise you that doesn’t matter the way you think it does.” Murdoch shook his head. “No sir, no it doesn’t. Folks don’t like us looking back so much, don’t like us looking back and thinking too much about things. Those old histories, and all the forgotten things in them, they aren’t for us. No sir they are not.”

Rowan locked up the shop for lunch and was mindful not to unpack any more of his uncle’s boxes in front of Murdoch Ping. His neighbor was right, though. Attention from police and other investigators would doubtless follow should he endeavor to sell such artifacts publically, even if they weren’t explicitly illegal. He walked past the bar. Inhaled the rich earthy coffee, the aromatic rising of bread. His belly grumbled and Rowan checked his watch as folks paced to and fro: just after twelve, noon. He made certain to steady his tallhat with one hand as he wriggled through the crowds. His other hand kept his watch, his purse, and his spectacles in a chokehold.

Four years in the city and Rowan was still a frequent mark for pickpockets. There’s a pick for every pocket, he thought, or so they say. A smoke for every bloke and a soggy-box for all the cocks. He allowed himself to be carried along with traffic for a few blocks. Queen’s Road was wide but bottle-necked beneath a vast wrought-iron bridge.

Rowan watched a train glide across the bridge with a banshee’s wail emitting from its chimney. He cursed the slow-moving traffic, which had ground to a bloody standstill. At six feet, Rowan was able to see over many heads, and quickly espied the cause: two herds of sheep had met in the shadows beneath the bridge. Their respective owners were pantomiming wildly trying to sort the mess out. In the meantime, horses, taxies, cattle, goats, food carts, and an endless stream of pedestrians were left with nothing better to do than start jostling one another to get ahead.

Rowan squirmed out of the burgeoning crowd and picked his way down a winding alley, meticulous to avoid dark puddles of filth. He’d had his fill of shit-stained socks from some that went deceitfully deep. The alley dumped Rowan onto a busy thoroughfare adjacent to the Academy. He found his uncle waiting for him at their usual sandwich shop, the corner café called the *Cat’s Meow*.

Duncan Tularo wore a dark slimming, single-breasted frock with vestments pinstriped in ochre and umber. Duncan sat with his back perfectly erect and shoulders up against the wrought-iron chair. His right leg rested upon the knee of his left. He seemed wholly out of place, sitting so cool and calm with a doubled-over copy of the Outrider in one hand and a small white coffee cup in the other.

Duncan lifted his espresso cup in salutation and said, when Rowan was close enough so he have to shout, “Running late, nephew?”

Rowan sat across his uncle at the wobbly iron table. “You know how I feel about running Uncle,” he said, and then asked the waiter for his usual ham and lettuce sandwich and double-sized espresso. He watched the bloke move to fetch his order and said, “I tend to swagger late more so than I run it. Don’t you think?”

“Swagger. Run. Wake up,” said Duncan, counting off on his fingers. “Toilet training. Puberty. I think you do everything late.”

“And you’re senile,” said Rowan. “I came across another old manuscript in the boxes this morning. Seems you didn’t sort them out as well as you thought you did, because that makes three now.”

Duncan’s playful grin faded on his face. Mint-green eyes bespoke caution and concern and asked a question without asking it at all.

“Nothing overly dubious,” said, pausing while the waiter delivered his meal. “Just an old copy of the March. It looked archaic.”

Duncan nodded and some of the mirth returned to him. He was a tall man, his uncle, hale and ruddy, lithe and strong. Years in the dark world had piled tough muscle atop his shoulders and thickened his arms. His skin was dark-hard like boiled leather. At nearly fifty years of age, Duncan had an ardor for life Rowan couldn’t help but admire and emulate. His uncle was a man of unparalleled interests; a master archeologist, geologist, and mineralist. He served as a professor of history and linguistics at the Academy.

“Caution is required for those kinds of artifacts,” said Duncan. “Whether it’s your problems with punctuality—”

“I know.”

“—or my apparent senility.”

“I know.”

“They’re going to come sniffing around the shop if we give them any reason at all to suspect.”

“I know,” said Rowan. “Hell. They’re drawn to our family like starving rats.”

Duncan wried his features and set about packing his pipe. “We have our dear duke to thank for that.”

Rowan did not agree to that. He scowled and said nothing, just polished off his ham and lettuce and leaned back in his chair to idly watch traffic busy on by. The duke did not feature often in their conversations. Rowan had not seen nor communicated with his father in three years. His current thoughts manifested themselves by means of a tremble in his free hand, which he bawled tightly into a fist.

“How are the lectures today?” Rowan asked, in a bold change of topic.

Duncan struck a match and said, “Much the same as they always are.” He puffed on the tobacco until he’d beaded up a little red cherry in the bowl. He exhaled a stream of smoke through his nostrils and passed the smoking piece to Rowan. “I utterly despise their curriculum, but the bastards won’t work with me. I can’t teach anything considered *ancient* by the regime without committing bloody treason.”

Rowan took a drag from the pipe and watched the constant stream of smoke die as he pulled. A blast of hot and dry smoke filled his lungs. An evanescent white cloud followed on the heels of his spluttering and coughing. He handed the smoking pipe back to his uncle. “I guess they figure if it drove one king to madness and tyranny—”

“It’ll do so with all of them.”

Rowan nodded.

“That is what they say.” Duncan scratched the stubble on his chin with thumb, fore, and middle finger. “Mysticism and its practices have been a part of the Continent for thousands of years. Far longer than we know. It was probably around before the druids. Hanniel Bohannon was the first to commit such hideous and loathsome acts in the perusal of alleged Mystic arcane faculties, and even apotheosis.”

“The first we know of,” said Rowan.

“Well spake nephew. Well spake indeed!” Duncan’s regard was underscored by stiff movements and a lack of eye contact that belied his bravo. “The first we know of…” He trailed off, taking intermittent drags on the pipe and falling in a deep funereal state.

We have a melancholy all our own, Rowan thought. He was left kicking ideas around in his head over what a man like Duncan Tularo might dream about. What his uncle might find himself all caught-up thinking about. Was he back in the jungle again? Rowan didn’t think so. His uncle assumed a highly alert and adroit modus when memories of the dark world consumed him. Lines would form in his face, mostly around the eyes, some about the mouth, like he were a man wound tight, and anything, the slightest touch, the right look or the wrong word, might spring him loose.

Duncan was calmer than all that just now, but Rowan imagined his melancholy reached just as deep. His uncle didn’t seem to be watching anyone in particular. His gaze saw everybody, followed nobody.

“I want to go with you,” Rowan blurted out. “Your next expedition. To Azania. I want to go with you.”

“We’ve talked about this—”

“You talked. It’s my turn.”

Duncan drew a weary sigh. “I’m not even certain when I’ll be going,” he complained, looking off for a long moment before turning a presently focused gaze back on Rowan again. His eyes had a conspiratorial gleam that was all at once challenging and electrifying.

Rowan’s excitement drew him forward, ready to lay bare his means and machinations to make his uncle’s expedition team. It was true enough, that his uncle did not yet know when he might go, but by hook or crook, Rowan was going to follow him there.