

*NYM* (A NOVEL)

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This dissertation consists of a literary novel. A preface deals with issue of introducing philosophical ideas into fictional works, with special emphasis on the techniques of ambiguity and destabilization of reality, as deployed in the novel.

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PART I

A CRAFT PERSPECTIVE ON PHILOSOPHY IN FICTION

One of the interesting things it is possible to do in writing a work of fiction is to use the story as a vehicle for the conveying of “ideas” in the broadest sense. These ideas might be historical concepts or social constructs now lapsed, explorations of current social problems and criticisms, or even speculative ideas and experimental social situations that have never been realized in our world. Thus I pose the following question: how is a writer best to embed philosophy in his or her work, and is it even advisable to do so? I will be examining this question principally from a craft perspective, since, as a writer, I quite often find myself faced with this problem in the kind of fiction I choose to write, and I have faced it in the writing of my dissertation novel, *Nym*. In particular, I will pursue the problem by considering ambiguity and disorientation as devices deployed to keep ideas alive and fluid, and the use of a “magical overlay” such as mythology, or synchronicity, to create a second layer in the narrative.

An argument could be made that the very idea of trying to include “philosophy” in a work of fiction is destined to be a shotgun wedding from the outset, in the sense of forcing together two things that might better be kept in their separate realms, and that if a writer’s main purpose is to discuss abstract or unusual ideas, that writer should probably just pen a work of philosophy and be done with it. I confess that this argument carries a certain amount of weight, at least on first inspection. After all, the main purpose of fiction is probably not the exploration of ideas. If it can be said to have a main purpose, and this is moot, that purpose would surely be something like the successful immersion of the reader in an invented circumstance, which in some sense the reader takes for a real circumstance, at least while the story is being read. In other words, the suspension of disbelief is central. This is a simplification, as we would certainly not want to prohibit, *a priori*, any particular kind of experimentation in fiction, thus writing off much of postmodernism. Nor would we want to deny readers of speculative fiction, for example, their

delight at unusual ideas when reading the kinds of novel that they like, or exclude them from the college of legitimate readers of fiction. Even such readers, however, if the writer allowed their suspension of disbelief to erode too far, would discover that ideas alone cannot carry a novel, no matter how interesting or innovative the concepts may be.

To help clarify the problem, I would like you to imagine a notional slider that can be varied from one extreme setting of 0% to the opposite extreme of 100%. At 0%, even if in practical terms this could never actually be achieved, we will imagine a novel that consists only of story and character, with no discernible philosophy or “ideas” at all. This includes any ideas deeply embedded within the framework of the story, the habitual behavior of the characters, the voice of the narrator, etc. Again, in almost all real cases there will be at least *some* detectable remnant of ideas discernible in the novel, so it might be more realistic to imagine the left extreme as 2% or 3%. At any rate, it would be the kind of novel where ideas seem of least importance and where they are least visible, if they are visible at all. At the 100% end of the scale, we can imagine a novel that exists *only* to convey certain ideas that the author finds interesting. Moreover, the very *raison d’etre* of this novel would be to serve as a vehicle for those ideas, with all of the hazards that entails.

Thinking of this notional scale, two things should become apparent. First, most novels that succeed at deploying philosophy within their covers probably fall somewhere between these two extremes, and not too close to the extremes. Second, if we imagine beginning at the 0% mark and increasing gradually by moving the slider in the direction of the 100% mark, a point is likely to be reached, though varying with the skill of each author, where philosophy as a tool in service of a story, mysteriously flips over to become a story in service of a philosophy. And therein lies the problem, because fiction *is* story, and it is difficult for it to really be in the service

of something else, at least from a craft standpoint. A statement like this could never be absolute, as we are finally dealing with a full spectrum of possible readers, including those for whom philosophy dressed as story with little more than superficial arrangement would not be seen as a problem. As a writer though, I have to take a stance somewhere. Such stories, to my mind, are at risk of having cardboard characters, circumstances that are contrived to prop up the ideas which the writer really wants to get on with exploring, etc. These defects could be repaired by making the characters more dimensional and their actions more like real human beings, but this is to move the slider back towards the middle territory.

So this is the problem definition. How to include philosophy (taken broadly) in a story without forcing a shotgun wedding, and without creating a tale that is little more than a flimsy candy wrapper for fond ideas. My own novel *Nym*, ostensibly set on a remote lighthouse, is a kind of psychological and existential horror where the protagonist, Render Stone, becomes increasingly disoriented as to the reality of his situation. From the outset I wanted to drop hints that question this reality, but (hopefully) not do it in a heavy handed manner. The name Render Stone is one example of such a hint, and I am quite at peace with the reader not catching on to it. In other words, did he “render” that stone” (the island of *Carraig Sithe*)? In similar vein, all the principal characters just seem to have an incredible amount of free time to spend on this island. Not long after Render arrives, in a seemingly whimsical moment of reverie, he ponders that his outside life may have been an illusion.

What if that were true? That in fact I’d always been on this island, perhaps a kind of prisoner, and had only deceived myself that I had a life in the larger world.

He doesn’t really mean it at this stage, but the idea is there, in his mind, and I use it as foreshadowing for the reader. As events unfold, my protagonist develops deepening concerns.



He witnesses apparently supernatural happenings, such as an apparition glimpsed atop the lighthouse tower, but questions whether isolation isn't affecting his mind. So if I could identify one large scale "idea" I am trying to project through this story, it is the fragility of our concept of "reality" and how easily it can come unstitched. I was determined to avoid bringing this across by extensive use of clumsy exposition. This is perhaps one of the easiest ways in which a novel that has ideas to get off its chest can communicate those ideas, but it is also one of the laziest ways.

Edward Bellamy's utopian time travel novel, *Looking Backward*, published in 1888, is an example of a story that relies heavily on this technique, whatever charms it may hold otherwise. The protagonist Julian West is transported to the year 2000, and through the device of what amounts to long armchair lectures by his host, Doctor Leete, learns of wonderful developments in society. The appeal of such a technique for the writer is easy enough to see. It allows the ideas to flow freely like turning a faucet, but this comes at a price. Character, plot, and immersive situation, all take a back seat while this fire hose of ideology is aimed in your direction. Bellamy's book was surprisingly successful for its day, but I'm not sure it would be acceptable to today's reader, even readers of speculative fiction, so I held it in mind as a model of what not to do.

From the beginning pages of *Nym*, I sought to root the protagonist's sense of unease directly through his own sensory experiences and emotional reactions to events. He experiences a sense of unrealism at the job interview, and his doubts are betrayed through his thoughts:

They did their best to appear nominally nautical. A ship's helm that had seen better days adorned the wall above the stair. But rather than lend authenticity to the proceedings, it seemed to suck it away.

I did not want the interview to appear ridiculous, however. I just sought to convey to the reader, through Render's character, that there was something a bit "off" about it, as if he found himself in a situation that (in his eyes) had some of the aspects of a comedy sketch, yet no one around him was laughing.

The sense of unease deepens to foreboding as he approaches the isle of *Carraig Sithe*, and any sense of comedy recedes into the background:

As if its fateful shape had simply risen, fully pictured out in some dark dreaming, from the unguessable depths of the water. But it was more even than that. Like fate itself carved to a shape, if such a thing is possible. A sculpting of doom.

This excerpt comes as part of an extended physical description of the island, and I usually try to place such thoughts in the context of the character's reaction to what he is seeing or experiencing. We don't quite know whether the "sculpting of doom" is actually sourced in the island, or whether its real source is Render Stone himself. Although I dropped some hints of past events upon the island during the job interview, I wanted to avoid any scene of the type "Ah! *Carraig Sidhe* you say? Beware, my innocent young friend! Do you not know the legends?" and so forth. Even from the initial stages of the story I did not want to give the reader too secure an impression that the island can be considered "real," though I also do nothing at this stage to explicitly subvert its reality, as there is plenty of that later. I wanted the impression of something amiss to be subliminal, building slowly. Related to this, I sought to establish a certain unreliability in the character of Render. He wants the lighthouse job, but he doesn't want it. He doesn't remember applying for it. He had his "tongue in his cheek" when he mailed off the application. He wants to be alone on the island, but he doesn't want to be alone on the island, and so on. There are many other examples.

This brings me to a discussion of one of the main techniques I am using in the novel to convey its undercurrent of ideas, and that is to create (and sustain) a strong ambiguity with respect to the meaning of any supernatural events we appear to witness through the eyes of Render Stone. From the beginning, I never intended to close this argument, and so the final interpretation of events, even off the end of the story, is meant to lend itself to more than one interpretation. Stated succinctly, these interpretations are, first, that the supernatural or god-like status of Render Stone is a literal reality; second, that he is a normal human being who was always alone on this island and gradually lost his sanity; third, that he and his companions all really exist as ordinary humans but entered into a sort of downward spiral of group psychosis. This third option is, however, more or less shut down at the end (though it functions as living possibility during the narrative), leaving us finally with the first two. Note that knowledge of these options only becomes fully apparent to the reader much later in the story. As far as possible, I tried to engineer each “remarkable” event within the novel so that it could somehow slot into each of these possible interpretations, though some events with more ease than others. In the human variation, where Render has always been alone in the island, we are invited to conclude that he invented all of his companions from despair of loneliness. In the supernatural version of this case too, where Render was alone on the island but is not human, we know that Render created his companions, but with the added twist that he may indeed have created authentic beings resembling humans, and with minds of their own, at least to some extent. The novel does not finally answer such questions, and I intend it not to. It does indeed appear to answer them, through his own final revelations, but it is always possible that we are listening to his insanity.

This deliberate use of ambiguity has some strong similarities, for example, with a similar device as used by Henry James in *The Turn Of The Screw* (TTOTS). Here again we have an ostensible trail of supernatural occurrences...apparitions glimpsed, sinister tales related, but we are always uncertain about the ontic status of the ghosts. Are they really supernatural? Or have they been worked up into existence by a lather of paranoid obsessions on the part of the protagonist and possibly those around her?

Why create such ambiguity, in a craft sense? Well, for me, whatever James's motives may ultimately have been, it seems that there is something scarier about an episode that is *possibly* supernatural than one that is *definitively* supernatural. The latter takes away the luxury of doubt, and such doubt is surely always there when encountering weird circumstances in the real world. When the reader has the luxury of doubt, I feel that it allows him or her to consider the possibility of the extraordinary more sufficiently, without feeling that they are being brow beaten with it.

Too much ambiguity can be a bad thing however, and while I appreciate TTOTS, I must confess that this aspect of James's novella began to irritate me after a while. This is always the danger. The opposite side of the coin to the luxury of doubt is that if the supernatural can *simply* be collapsed to the mundane in every instance, then this is at risk of taking away any and all of its power. By this, I mean that the reader should be allowed to sustain the live possibility that something out of the ordinary really is happening. If it always seems to be the case that an ordinary explanation is just as plausible, and the writer seems at pains to point this out, then I feel that the reader will simply default to seeing it as a story about misperceptions and so forth. This is what annoyed me a little about TTOTS, though I acknowledge that I have sympathies with supernatural stories. How to straddle this dilemma? In my own case, I try to lean the reader

a little towards the suspicion that events are indeed non-ordinary, though I don't rubber stamp this interpretation for him. When Juan dies in the tower, for instance, it would be a stretch indeed to interpret *all* of that as happening exclusively within the mind of Render Stone. We can do it, of course, but only under the option that he has imagined more or less *everything* about these companions. I also hope to entertain the reader with those ideas I mentioned earlier, contemplating the possibility of a being with such potent creative force that it could generate around itself the semblance of a world that is in its own way every bit as real as what we take to be "real." Even if the reader ultimately rejects this interpretation (and I give him the leeway to do so) he will still, hopefully, have been tantalized by contemplating the possibility, and that can't be taken away from him. There is a sense, I think, in which this 'contemplation' is removed if we fix it for him as actual truth.

Persistently in TTOTS we get the impression that the events involving the children, which the protagonist ascribes to the near-demonic intervention of deceased spirits, are in fact just the ordinary behaviors of mildly mischievous (though perhaps also mildly repressed) children, fluoresced to garish colors by the protagonist's overwrought imagination. For example:

I can call them nothing else--the strange, dizzy lift or swim (I try for terms!) into a stillness, a pause of all life, that had nothing to do with the more or less noise that at the moment we might be engaged in making and that I could hear through any deepened exhilaration or quickened recitation or louder strum of the piano. Then it was that the others, the outsiders, were there. (James 51)

Clearly though, this could be nothing more than a somewhat fanciful interpretation of ordinary events in the room, and a self-fulfilling prophecy of the kind where you find what you are looking for in the subtle behavior of others. Now James spends a great deal of time entirely within the subjective mind of his protagonist, which is an extreme I am not fond of, and usually

try to avoid, keeping at least one foot in external events, even if the final perception of those events is in question. A good example from *Nym* is when Karl shows Render what he believes to be the South Lamp operating, when this should be impossible:

The light winked again, like the sleepy eye of a dragon flickering awake momentarily and then sinking back into slumber. But the signature of the light itself was all wrong. It was too dim and biased towards the red end of the spectrum. A slow, malevolent eye.

“Shine” Karl repeated, whispering the mantra as if to himself. “Shine on.”  
And it did.

On the surface this seems straightforward enough, but it isn't really. Both of these characters (taking them to be literally real here for the purpose of the present discussion) are in strung out shape, having just recently witnessed the gruesome death of one of their companions. They are also viewing what they think is the South Lantern from an unusual vantage and with no points of reference. It could just as well be the light on a vessel passing between the island and the mainland. Render claims, “There was no doubt, none at all, that the glow came from the south light.” But he doesn't tell us why, and so even on those terms, there is doubt, just as there is doubt with the “certainties” that the Governess seems to observe through the behavior of the children in *TTOTS*. If Render is alone on the island, then we must assume that ALL of this is in the theater of his imagination (though whether this is a human or godlike imagination is an open question). If Karl is real, then both of them may be mis-sighting an ordinary phenomenon under circumstances of relative isolation and emotional duress. Thus the event fits my rule of affirming both of the main interpretations, but I also avoid the Jamesian device of compressing almost everything into the heightened and at times feverish thought processes of an over-thinking protagonist. Render sees things and encounters presences, or at least he perceives that he does, and so the reader shares in those perceptions, which are, at one level or another, bodily events. So while I did employ ambiguity much as *TTOTS* deploys it, I chose to realize it in a different

way. I found myself leaning too heavily towards the psychological explanation in TTOTS and I didn't particularly want that outcome for my own readers. I feel that James's almost total concentration upon the self-examining thought processes of the protagonist, rather than external event, is what causes this.

James's work has some different thematic emphases from mine. While there is some exploration of the breakdown of reality/sanity in a semi-remote setting, this is not the main show, as it were. He seems deeply concerned with the loss of innocence supposedly experienced by the child characters, and how the obsession over such loss on the part of the governess, in a way, contrives to actually bring it about. I am more concerned with the fragile nature of "reality" and how it can start to unravel in an isolated environment, along with our (fiction of a?) stably existing external consensus world. None of my characters, taken as human, are "extraordinary personalities" or bring with them any strong pathological tendencies, as the Governess seems to do. Render, our narrator, is not outside the range of a normal human. His greatest evident failing could be described simply as an element of unreliability or eccentricity in his character. I did not want him to be a thinly disguised psychopath who might injure and kill people, as Jack Torrance is in Stephen King's *The Shining* (being a rampaging drunk, an abusive husband, and having broken his son's arm at one point), because the possibility of extraordinary people being pushed to do extraordinary things is less interesting to me than otherwise ordinary people facing an extraordinary environment or circumstance. I do not mean to imply that the possibility of violence doesn't exist in him at all, for then even contemplating that he might be killing the others becomes unrealistic, but I did want to show him as being irritable right from the first moment when his friends land on the island. So he does exist on the first rung to potential violence, which might (in principle at least) be dialed up by isolation and/or cramped living and

frayed tempers. I didn't import him to the story as a lit fuse simply waiting to be touched to the gunpowder of a remote island.

None of the apparitions in James are definitively supernatural. Again, when the Governess appears to see the phantom near the pond, after Flora has absconded, we learn:

To see [Flora], without a convulsion of her small pink face, not even feign to glance in the direction of the prodigy I announced, but only, instead of that, turn at ME an expression of hard, still gravity, an expression absolutely new and unprecedented and that appeared to read and accuse and judge me. (James 69)

Indeed, because the specter might entirely be the conjuring of the Governess's own obsession, and the child is "accusing" her for being a strange and unreliable adult. Similarly, in *Nym*, no two people ever definitively glimpse a supernatural presence. When Anthea sees an apparition at her window, which she takes to be Render, she is alone. When Render himself senses a presence on the rope bridge, there is no one to back him up, and again when he encounters the fog horn creature on the perimeter path. Furthermore, no stable physical evidence lingers of Render's interpretation of these events, or any apparitions perceived by other characters. In a peculiar (though not consciously deliberate) echo of James's narrative, I even imply that the apparition seen at Anthea's window may have been Render himself, who cannot remember the episode or has perhaps suppressed it (when the Governess in *TTOTS* looks out of the window at the point where she glimpsed the specter, she causes exactly the kind of shock to Mrs. Grose standing outside, that she herself received on the sighting).

Through all of these events I am seeking to keep the possibility of the supernatural alive, without reducing it to a traditional ghost story. Some of the best ghost stories, of course, rely on ambiguity to achieve their effects. In M.R. James's *Oh, Whistle and I'll Come To You, My Lad*, for example, where the protagonist, Professor Parkins, appears to be pursued by a creature that eventually sits up in the form of rumped linen in an adjacent bed, all episodes of apparition are



again inferential, and rely on the perception of one character. I held this episode in mind as one of the models informing my “encounter with the fog horn being” scene.

As the stakes ramp up in *Nym*, however, and as we approach the final sections, I deliberately begin to destabilize even the luxury of doubt for the reader. Although I never make a *definitive* closure for one option over another, I do make it increasingly difficult for the reader to tell himself (plausibly) that absolutely nothing out of the ordinary is going on, even if he doesn't quite know what the nature of the anomaly is. I begin this process subtly, when Karl's name begins to toggle between Karl/Carl, apparently without any of the characters, even Render, being aware of this. I also seed this idea in the reader's mind, earlier, with Render's observation, when in Karl's room, that it was as if the *room remembered itself poorly*. I used this unusual device (name toggling) to cue the reader that reality was beginning to break down, and if they take the hint, then they now know something that none of the characters in the story know at that point. This is a risky strategy, of course, as the reader might in principle assume I have simply been sloppy and forgotten the spelling, which might damage their suspension of disbelief and their trust in me as the author, but I try to keep the escalation of events under sufficient dynamic tension that they could not entertain that for too long. Eventually Karl himself confronts Render about the name change in the presence of others, and vanishes in front of their eyes. This is one of the few moments in the novel where it appears we are dangerously close to one interpretation above others (that of group psychosis), though even here the discerning reader will recognize that we are *always* perceiving events vicariously through Render's interpretation anyway, as it is his narration.

John Fowles' *The Magus* is another novel using some of the reality destabilization techniques I am attempting to deploy in *Nym*. Fowles, like James (and myself), takes his

protagonist (Nicholas Urfe) and “drops” him in an unfamiliar, essentially remote context (Phraxos), surrounded by strangers. Render Stone is not entirely surrounded by strangers, but some of the friends that his girlfriend Kryz brings with her are unfamiliar to him, and *Carraig Sithe* is soon cut off from all contact with the mainland. In addition, even those friends that are familiar begin to behave in unusual or surprising ways, so even that touchstone is not entirely secure for him. In Fowles book, all of the reality-warping force is concentrated (or appears to be concentrated) around a particular character, that of Nicholas’s “host” Maurice Conchis, a wealthy land owner on the island. Everything arguably beyond the normal behaviors of reality appears to emanate from him, and in some sense seems to be under his control. At one level, especially in the earlier stages of *Nym*, Conchis approximates to the role of “the island.” We are never certain that *Carraig Sithe* itself does not have a kind of genius loci, a malevolent spirit of the place, that is somehow responsible for all mind bending phenomena. As the story proceeds however, I begin to bend the reader towards the idea that it is all somehow coming from Render Stone, though in what precise sense is not yet made explicit. In Fowles book, the malevolent spirit becomes a literal “genius” in the form of Conchis, if we take him to be physically real. As with a genius loci, however, he seems to have a supernatural ability to marshal circumstances (and people) to his will, soon giving the reader the impression that no ordinary human could possibly achieve all this, or possibly be so persuasive with others to get them to agree, particularly Lily, the ostensibly schizophrenic young lady whom Nicholas falls in love with.

The Phraxos in Fowles’ novel is almost like a magically real version of the island, a giant “stage” in which all the “scenes” and “props” are somehow actual circumstances and people, under the constant choreography of director and principal actor, Conchis. Through a series of events, Conchis appears to offer Nicholas an interpretation of the strangeness he has witnessed

(or provokes in him such an interpretation) only to destabilize it again soon after, and coerce another possibility in its place. The protagonist is never again on certain ground once he has set foot on the island. *Nym* has no obvious master of ceremonies (though on one interpretation it is Render himself, even though he is unconscious of this for most of the story). In similar vein to Nicholas though, Render is forced (by an escalating series of perceived events) to flip through different possible theories in an increasingly desperate attempt to come up with a plausible (and coherent) interpretation of what is happening to him. He is familiar enough with the history of lonely lighthouses to know that keepers have gone mad from the isolation, and this might be the cause of the apparitions he sees. When his companions start to die, he cannot entirely suppress the suspicion that he is somehow responsible, even though he has no memory of the deeds. I also use (hopefully) subtle devices to seed in the reader's mind the possibility that Render is alone on the island. The diary of Mortimer Fowle is one such device (though it also has other functions). Here he reads the account, ostensibly, of someone who really was alone on the island, and the arrival of Mortimer Fowle's companions is eerily synchronistic with the arrival of Krys and her friends, as if the literary and literal worlds are threaded together seamlessly. Nicholas Urfe, too, is soon sucked in to a peculiar nexus that welds together the world of ideas and the supposedly real world when he discovers a book, seemingly left as if he should notice it, with specific passages underlined. These passages themselves suggest an indistinct boundary between worlds of fact and creative imagination.

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time. (T.S. Eliot, quoted in Fowles, 63)

Render stone, too, has his doubts about the reality of his situation, especially once events start to take hold. When speaking to Krys after Eloise dies, he says:

“But what if...” I mimed the next words to her, just in case anyone should be listening, though it would have been impossible to hear us in the quiet of the bedroom with the door closed. *What if I'm not in my right mind?* In other words, the island. “What if...I don't know, I don't even know what I'm saying. What if the island can somehow affect your mind...especially when you're alone? If it can...”

He doesn't want to believe it. It's the possibility that frightens him the most, but he knows that it exists.

As with the scenes that roll over in Maurice Conchis's “theater without an audience,” each provoking in Nicholas a new theory for what he perceives—for instance, is Lily really schizophrenic, or is this just another performance within the masque? Render, too, is forced into an accelerating sequence of possibilities as events tighten around him in the second half of the novel. Karl accuses him of sabotaging the communication link, and seeks to persuade him that he is an amnesiac killer. Render (and the reader) don't have long to digest that frame, however, before Karl, terrified, confronts Render again about his name change, seeming now to know that his very reality depends in some sense on Render's creative force. And not long after this, Render begins to recover a deeply suppressed memory of his existence as the cosmic creature NYM. Also, by making this name the title of the novel, the import of which is not disclosed until near the end, I suppose I am nudging the reader a little towards this possible view of things, though I never conclude for it absolutely. I don't allow the reader enough time to get too comfortable with any of these frames, and this destabilization is on purpose. We don't necessarily feel that Render is the victim (or audience) of a “masque” that is being inflicted upon him by a malevolent third party, but we do begin to suspect, as in Conchis's world where the rules of the “game” are never entirely clear, that Render may indeed be the victim of an elaborate deception, even if that deception is somehow perpetrated by himself, upon himself, without his conscious knowledge.

In *The Magus* (as in the relationship between Rendar's island and the diary of Mortimer Fowle) there appears to be uncanny resemblance between some of the supposedly autobiographical tales that Conchis tells Nicholas in confidence, and certain events in Nicholas's own life. A good example is Conchis's description of destroying books:

Do you know what I did? I burnt every novel I possessed. Dickens. Cervantes. Dostoevsky. Flaubert. All the great and all the small. I even burnt something I wrote myself when I was too young to know better. I burnt them out there. It took me all day. The sky took their smoke, the earth their ashes. (Fowles 94)

This is obviously similar to Nicholas's destruction of his own poetry in a fit of self-loathing at what he perceives to be his own inadequacy as a poet.

I don't attempt to use magical realism as heavily as *The Magus* does at times, except in the broadest sense. For example, I do not often (especially in the earlier stages of the novel) create events that seem overtly theatrical, or contrived, in the way that Conchis's extraordinary care (or control?) of Lily seems. I want the reader to entertain a "conventional" supernatural interpretation seriously, again especially in the early stages, so I try not to damage this possibility too much, too soon. The first cracks begin to appear with the death of Juan in the tower, however. This is such an extraordinary death that any (reasonable) person should have doubts that it could actually happen in a conventional physical world. More so, later, with Eloise climbing into a fog horn, ostensibly to escape the sound of a fog horn. Reality starts to unstitch. Rendar's encounter with the "fog horn being" takes this a stage further, as here is clearly a creature, if taken literally, that could scarcely exist in any reality, except perhaps that of the forms of the imagination taken flesh.

The overtly theatrical, and magical realism, are constant companions in *The Magus*, however. Events seem deliberately "staged" by Conchis in order for Nicholas to have certain perceptions, such as when Nicholas seems to see the enactment of a mythic tableau in the

landscape beyond Conchis's home. Of course the swapping of names (Karl/Carl) in *Nym*, the apparent resurrection of Eloise, and the dematerialization of Karl, all up the stakes as we approach the later stages of the story and are intended to give the impression that not just the actors but the "stage" itself (in other words, the world in which they move) is somehow not what it appears to be. Just as we can never entirely determine whether Conchis really has all of these connections to make him capable of pulling off all these effects he practices on Nicholas, so I never make it entirely certain, even with the most extraordinary events, that Render's private experiences (or, possibly, his account of them) haven't unraveled to the point where he can no longer discern reality from fantasy.

In one sense, Conchis is a God-like figure. He seems to have God-like powers of arrangement in his environment, and I seem to sense a hint to the reader that it is possible to view life in this way. "Something" gives us the opportunity to experience the mystery of ourselves and our environment from multiple possible standpoints, but without providing a hard and fast answer. The "masque" comes across as a possible symbol for this. In other words, the key is not so much in any particular conclusion reached, as these seem always to be temporary; the key is somehow in the exploration itself, in some almost shamanic style of breaking the dogmas of the long set personality to a new kind of radical "open-ness," from which the possibility of a deeper living may emerge. Now in similar vein, when Render begins, ostensibly, to recover his memory as NYM, a cosmic being whose creative power is potent enough to generate an entire reality envelope around himself—and the memory of which he has suppressed, perhaps, to avoid a fierce kind of existential aloneness—I am also nudging the reader to consider the possibility that this may be true of our (real) world. Indeed, that is where the real terror of the idea lies, and it is difficult to genuinely scare people these days. M.R. James's linen ghost doesn't really cut it

anymore. We have become too sophisticated. However, although this nudging is definitely my intent, I do not beat the reader about the head with it. Rather that, I think, than to force the thought, especially since it was one of the more impacting thoughts that can arise. It will seem the more powerful if the reader feels that he uncovered it on his own.

When floating this idea to the reader then, we have what is possibly one of the more dramatic cases of embedding “philosophy” in the novel. I was strongly aware of not wanting to do this in a clumsy, heavy handed fashion, using a lot of “telling.” Instead, I tried to let the concept come through from Rendar’s own terror when these memories of his “true self” (on the supernatural or cosmic interpretation) begin to surface. This is something he has very badly wanted to forget, covering it over with layer upon layer of obfuscation, creating landscapes and companions (real on their own terms, or not) in which to bury himself. But his true nature comes at last, and he cannot avoid the inevitable forever. When he encounters the apparently physical presence of Mortimer Fowle, who embodies this fear in him and also the stirring of memory, this can be seen as the final stage of that memory gradually moving back towards him, which began with the apparitions and his creation (unconsciously, we must assume) of Fowle’s lighthouse diaries. He is complicit in his own dread awakening, because although he is fearful of the diaries, he is always fascinated by them too.

Like Conchis’s “masque,” Rendar’s “island” can be considered a metaphor for the world’s stage; our world, real life. Is our own world secretly a creation in which we hide from some kind of searing, implacable infinity in ourselves? And are all other beings really part of that creation, aspects of the pretense? This was the sponsoring thought behind the creation of the novel, and since it is intended to be a psychological horror, I allow the thought to take a frightening shape, but I wanted it to emerge, as it were, between the pores of event, character,

and setting, and not by laying all this out in over-determined dialog or exposition (even internal dialog) for the reader. Render tries to run away in one final, desperate bid to escape the onset of memory, but his creation plays one last wicked trick on him, and now all paths on the island circle back, inevitably, to the place where the letters N.Y.M. are etched in the rock wall.

*Fifth Business* by Robertson Davies is another novel that self-consciously blurs the boundaries between the real world and the imagination, or, as it is referred to in that novel, “psychological reality.” From the very beginning, the influence of narrator-protagonist Dunstan Ramsay, seems inextricably rolled up into what we would normally consider “chance events” in such a way that he appears able to influence the lives of those around him (and his own) for decades to come. These influences are not necessarily beneficial. He ducks to avoid a snowball thrown by his childhood friend Boy Staunton. Unknown to him at that moment, the snowball contains a small rock, and by avoiding it he causes Mrs. Dempster to give birth prematurely to her son Paul. This seemingly innocuous event has ramifications for the rest of the novel, affecting each of these characters, and ultimately leading to Boy’s death, perhaps hypnotized by Paul.

The world painted by Davies is one in which a kind of Jungian archetypal overlay influences events, much as some of the “stunts” orchestrated by Conchis seem overlaid with figures and highlights from Greek mythology. Ramsay forms a (nonromantic) attachment to Mrs. Dempster, which eventually seems to blossom into religious dimensions. Having barely escaped with his life in the mud filled trenches of WW1, Ramsay glimpses a statue of the Virgin Mary with the face of Mrs. Dempster. And Mrs. Dempster herself, who began a peculiar spiral towards madness in the wake of the snowball incident, seems capable of performing the miraculous when she mysteriously raises Willie from a state of apparent death. All of this seems non-



coincidentally related to Ramsay's own obsession with religion and saints, as if the world of belief and the world of events are flowing together to make a new kind of "magical" reality. Paul Dempster, as a result of Ramsay teaching him conjuring, actually becomes a magician, literally a "trickster" in archetypal terms, and again this outcome cannot be separated from Ramsay's actions as possible cause.

Synchronicity is a key device Davies uses to draw attention to this magical overlay on events. Ramsay "runs into" Paul Dempster twice, once as a travelling magician and then later as a kind of master illusionist who (somewhat like Maurice Conchis) can perform "tricks" so extraordinary that the reader is left thinking that no ordinary conjuror could possibly achieve this. They exist again in "psychological reality," and while this is certainly true of all conjuring tricks, it's almost like Davies is drawing our attention to the possibility that reality itself may be a kind of trick. And it is on this point where we find parallels with *Nym*. The question of "psychological" versus "objective" reality is one I have sought to bring constantly before the reader's mind. Again, as in *Fifth Business*, and *The Magus*, events appear "orchestrated" by a higher ordering principle. In *The Magus* it is Conchis as sorcerer, in *Fifth Business* it is a kind of synchronistic and magical influence of Dunstan Ramsay upon events, and in *Nym* (though the reader can only suspect this for most of the narrative) it is the unconscious world-creating power of the eponymous cosmic being, whose amnesiac avatar within its own creation is Render Stone. Synchronicity is never too far away: the incredibly convenient collapse of the loading crane and loss of the island to mainland communication; the open ended vacation time everyone seems to have; the discovery of Mortimer's diary, and so forth. There's a kind of "magnetic field" acting on events, almost as if they are being scripted (which of course they are, but I mean, within the world of the story too). We just aren't sure what the source of this power is.

I make no overt attempt to overlay classical myth or religion into *Nym*, save for the religious language of Mortimer Fowle in the diaries. By subtly identifying Render with Mortimer, this is probably as close I dare come with a hint to the reader that “Render is God” or the equivalent of a god. Certainly, however, there is that interweaving of Render’s psychological world with the world of events, perhaps most especially as Render’s memory begins to push towards the surface, the island’s “memory” begins to show defects...Karl’s room, the spelling of Karl’s name, the geography of the island rewriting itself to lead him back to the rock wall. All of this started early on with the discrepancy about the curtains in Render and Krys’s room, but the reader doesn’t really know its significance at the time. Foreshadowing again. Render’s godlike powers are unconscious for most of the story. If he sends the horn-faced being after Eloise, and summons storms to the island, he does not do so with the sorcerous will of a Prospero, but as a dreamer lost in a reality he has created. The moot ethical point is this: for so densely potent a dreamer, can the characters of his “dreams” in fact be considered alive? And here again, I hint at our own situation. If we are dreams in the mind of God, what final status can we attach to the feeling, admittedly subjective, that we appear to be real to ourselves?

I want the reader to think about such things, but only occasionally do I intervene directly with an idea in the text, as Davies does fairly frequently. Davies uses Father Regan as a device to inform Ramsay about “fool saints” of the Mrs. Dempster variety, and again Padre Blazon expounds to him about the nature of truth.

Who is she? That is what you must discover, Ramezay, and you must find your answer in psychological truth, not in objective truth. You will not find out quickly, I am sure.  
(Davies 165)

This is part of a very long monologue and in my opinion (though only in that respect) a bit of a heavy brick by way of idea-exposition. Probably the closest I come to this is some of Render's ruminations alone in the lantern room:

It felt like I was watching the world from a secret place no one was ever intended to know about. A cryptic chamber known only to the nameless watchers who control our lives. A place where the distortion in the mirrors can be seen, for what it is. As if the fact that the world was a trick is always there, just beneath the surface, just eluding our attention. I didn't know the origin of these strange thoughts as I polished the inside of the lens. They stole upon me unbidden.

In this situation he is fraught, as he is not long from witnessing the death of Juan, his mind spinning in overdrive. Render has no confidante save for Mortimer Fowle (the only person who can really "tell him things" about the island, and his literal existence is also moot), so it all has to come from his own head and his reaction to events. This can be a powerful method that discloses his own thoughts at the same time as it introduces the idea contained in that thought, and I prefer it, in general, to another character offloading information at high density, Padre Blazon style. I'm not saying that can't be a useful technique in certain situations, but in the particular situation I was dealing with, I think it might have given too strong a (false) clue that the island was necessarily "real," and thus might have weakened the impression of Render desperately trying to hold his own world view together by an internal juggling act, which ultimately may be considered his world itself, on the cosmic interpretation.

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PART II  
*NYM* (A NOVEL)

Historical note: the Irish Gaelic makes mention of a *Carraig Sidhe* in *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* by W. Evans-Wentz. But it is evidently a much smaller place than the potent rock of the spirits described in the current story. Carraig Sithe, the Scottish equivalent, is pronounced “car-ick shee.”

### Book One: Dream Job

The chop was rougher than I’d hoped for on this journey. Salt spray stung at the corners of my mouth after each little plunge of the bow, then leaked under my tongue, leaving no option but to spit or swallow it away. A small swill of seawater churned back and forth in the belly of the boat, and even though I wore oilskin boots, my trousers were soaked dark with spray over the wale. Sunlight capered like a lunatic on the surface of the water and whipped off in glittering mist from the wave crests. Once again, I had the opportunity to pause and consider that the seemingly innocent phrase “be careful what you wish for” carried more wisdom than I’d thought.

It wasn’t that I wanted to be anywhere else. Oh no. Like the skipper of this little boat, I was master of my own destiny. Or so I liked to think, having recently graduated from a fine university. No, it was just that...now that the vision, the imagination, had become real, implausibly real, a small, hard shell of fright landed in my stomach. Soon I would glimpse the remote little island that up to this point had existed for me as little more than a fanciful notion on paper. And when I applied for the job of lighthouse keeper, all those months ago, it was certainly with a light heart and my tongue planted firmly in my cheek. I remember grinning like a village idiot as I mailed off the letter, as if it were a private joke. I didn’t even tell Krys, my girlfriend, till later. She didn’t think it was funny. For the life of me, I didn’t think they would actually offer me the post.

I say that, but see, I've always been a bit impulsive too. It was pure chance I saw the advert in the paper. And who reads the paper any more, right? Only people who would offer a post for lighthouse keeper. But there it was. Although I had never been a lighthouse keeper, my father died when I was a boy, and I spent five years with my uncle on the lighthouse at St. Abbs Head, a foggy promontory on the east coast of Scotland. My memory of those years has eroded somewhat, like the rocks carved smooth around a headland, but some highlights remain, like faded prints from a really old camera. There are also one or two actual pictures from that time, as yellowy as the memories. They appear to show a happy little boy in too much contrast and blown out color, against a background where sun and sky have fused into a single glare. I don't seem unhappy in those photos, though of course I had no friends. You don't have friends if you're part of a lighthouse family. I was too young, really, to do any duties with the lamp, or for my dad to trust me with anything responsible. Even the most basic stuff. Yet I absorbed his daily rhythms as if they were my own. I watched him about his work, and there was something in the watching that became cellular. It drew into me, like the sea draws into you, eventually setting its tides there, in the small waters of my life. I could name you all the parts of the lamp and tell you what they did. I knew how to prepare a wick, and how to snuff one, without setting fire to myself or the lamp...which for someone without the knowledge, would be easy enough to do. The life of the wickie was in my blood then. Maybe that was really true. Maybe I inherited it, and it simply unmasked itself in those years, passing by unseen influence from the father to the son, or in my case from uncle to nephew. But this was all a long time ago, and while I may have been nephew to a lighthouse keeper, I was also no keeper myself.

I guess you could say I had the basic measure of the job, but my knowledge, distant and seemingly sourced in another dimension, was rusty to say the least. This didn't matter though. To say that you came from a lighthouse family meant something. Not many candidates could say that. I also had a kind of trump card. In one of those bizarre twists of fate that no one can ever really put a finger on, my family just happened to be directly involved with the development of the Fresnel lantern. Some great great grandfather or the like, on my father's side, actually worked with Augustin-Jean Fresnel, and served a part in helping to originate the lens.

But my tongue was in my cheek because, well, I didn't even think my application was serious. And if they really asked me for details about the construction of a Fresnel lens, I'd be sunk. Still, I mailed off the application, forgot about it, had sex with Krys till my grin like a shore again, and did my best to forget about it altogether. I succeeded too well. Nine months later, when the letter arrived calling me for interview, I just stood there with the thing in my hands, staring at it, thinking...wait a second, did I really send this? Or did I just imagine that I did. There was a moment, right there. Perhaps one of those moments where everything might be different. I was tempted to crumple it and drop it in the trash. Perhaps I should have done.

And then the interview itself. A dark room on the fifth floor of an obscure office in the less affluent districts of a dingy city. Thus have the lighthouses fallen from grace. The selection panel did their best to appear nominally nautical. A ship's helm that had seen better days adorned the wall above the stair. But rather than lend authenticity to the proceedings, it seemed to suck it away. The helm frowned down from its old, salt-battered wood at the postures of those rooms and their occupants. An old painting of a clipper slicing through impudent waves, dark and bleak, hung mockingly behind the selection panel in the interview room. The frame was too clean and new and the picture looked like it had been placed there just that morning.



My panel consisted of two men and a woman. None of them looked like they'd ever set foot in a boat. Uncanny how you can sense this, but for anyone whose been around sea and boats, they'll know what I mean. I guess it's something like how a cowboy can tell when someone's never been on a horse. Not that I counted myself an *expert* in boats, mind I had enough experience to put seasickness behind me, and to handle wakes and the like near a harbour, but I was no salted skipper. Still, next to this panel I might as well have been Captain Cook. It unnerved me a bit, and I started to pay attention. My grin perished a little, like old leather. I simply assumed there would be a long trail of candidates better qualified than myself for this job. I mean, not many people know, but there's a whole subculture out there of wannabe lighthouse keepers. Of course, they don't *really* want to be. They want to write poetry on a rock. Or they want to walk up and down a path smoking a pipe and saying something like 'ahh, the glass is falling Agnes, best get them boats tethered.' It's the romance of the idea. But anytime it ever came up in conversation, I always got "Oh God, I'd love to do that...the peace, the solitude." And I'd frown, thinking back to those faded prints. I certainly remembered solitude, but I don't know that I'd call it peaceful. I was too young to conceive that I lacked something the normal human creature needs...company of its own age and kind. And a certain window exists. If you don't find that company within the season nature sets aside for it, some mysterious manhole rolls closes over in your person, perhaps never to open again.

Very few positions of the kind were still to be had, after automation and all that. It attracted the eccentric, the birdwatcher, the solitude-seeker. So when I gleaned the impression that I was the only candidate being interviewed, I straightened my back against the chair and had questions of my own.

“I thought I’d see a line out the door here” I joked, careful not to make it seem like an insult. My chair creaked dolefully, as if even it wasn’t amused.

The older lady glanced up from my app letter, over her reading glasses, and smiled tolerantly. She wore a spinster-bun hairstyle that made her look like she’d walked straight in from the musical *Oklahoma*. I found it hard to take it all seriously. Mostly because I knew they couldn’t possibly offer me the post. I had no keeper experience. A clock ticked for a long moment on a nearby mantelpiece, an awkward moment. Its sound seemed to echo in the fireplace, long out of use. When no one spoke, it was the loudest sound in the room.

“It’s a very remote island,” she said, still with that patient schoolmistress smile, watching for a response. “That cuts back on the pretenders some. It’s fine to be remote and do the solitude thing on a headland, where you can drive back to civilization. We see it all the time.”

I shook my head, not understanding. St Abbs was a headland. But my childhood still felt cut off and remote. An amputation. “This island, how come it isn’t automated?”

She nodded, patiently, rolling her pen. “We ought to explain something here, Mr. Stone. We are a non profit organization. Our resources are limited, as you can see. We can’t possibly acquire every light that comes up for auction or is at risk of being condemned.”

“In fact, not even one in a hundred” the man in the center interrupted. He was clearly the chair, but so far he had said little, just watching me in relative silence, contemplative. This man belonged in a civil service office, or perhaps in door-to-door insurance, though he didn’t have the verve for the latter. Pieces of his hair seem to stick to his scalp in awkward places and he had that drawn kind of look, like someone who’d been wound too long on the ratchets of a soul-destroying bureaucracy. Yet when he spoke he was surprisingly kind. Perhaps the withering was not yet complete after all.

“It’s a special sort of person that we require for this post, Render.” I noted his switch to first name terms as some kind of tactic. “Someone whose enthusiasm isn’t...shall we say...a bit unrealistic. You can’t be a hero on this island. But someone with some sea legs too.”

I shrugged with my hands. “I actually don’t have any experience. Like I said in my letter, my guardian was a keeper. That’s it.” I was beginning to think I’d played a bad joke on myself in applying for this. You know, like one of those conversations you wish you’d just never started.

He gestured that aside with an easy smile, lopsided. “Keeper experience isn’t as important as you think. We’ll set you at another lamp with an old hand at the job. He’ll train you up again for a month or so. Quite honestly, you’ll get used to the rhythms soon enough.” He smiled with skinny teeth, an oddly unhealthy smile. “It’s kind of a guilty secret, you know. The job itself is not actually that hard.” He adjusted his jacket. “But to answer your question, it’s not automated because the lighthouse isn’t the front line of defense anymore. Strictly speaking...” he glanced at each of the others a moment “...it’s no longer really necessary at all. Ships’ navigation has gone well beyond it. But we do offer an extra line of defense, you might say.” He tapped his pen on the paper in front of him. “It’s best if you think of this as being like the curator of a living museum. That’s what we’re doing here. It’s not enough just to preserve the structures. Traditions, living skills, ways of doing things...these are soon forgotten if not actually kept in practice.”

“A museum?” I’m sure I stared at him incredulous, with my mouth dangling open. A museum out in the wild ravages of the ocean? “With what audience?”

Another long silence. That heavy tick of the clock sounded over the empty fireplace, and in the fireplace, like the steady tap of a stick against flagstone in an echoey alley. The older lady removed her spectacles and met my eyes directly. “History, Mr. Stone. You must understand, we

have few options here. The government won't finance the upkeep of these lights anymore." She gestured sideways with her glasses, referencing abstractions. "So we buy them. Those that we can. If we don't...well, then they just disappear."

I shifted awkwardly. There was something unaccountably implausible about her case. "And what is the name of this island exactly?" I can't say now what prompted me to ask that question, but as soon as I did, chairs creaked uncomfortably, like a nervous wind passing through a copse. Seeing this response in adults tightened my stomach further.

"Well, it's not significant enough to have a formal name on nautical charts, but skippers have usually marked it as *Eilean Sithe* or *Carraig Sithe*. In the popular tongue it's known as—"

"—rock of the spirits" I completed for him. Even my Scots Gaelic, sketchy as it was, wasn't *that* rusty. I could feel a grin spreading towards my ears again. It was a reflex. I couldn't help it. "I mean...this is for real, right? Someone didn't put you up to this?" I actually glanced around, to see if there might be a hidden camera. Behind that mirror perhaps?

*Oklahoma* looked at me steadily. She didn't smile. An unfriendly wind came sweepin' down the plain. "Were it not for our need, we'd probably show you the door with that remark. But..." Her lips softened to a slight smile, though not a very warm one. "You'd be amazed at how superstitious people are. We didn't choose the name. It kind of comes with the island. Are you superstitious, Mr. Stone?"

I bristled suddenly defensive. "No...I am not."

"Well then. I don't see that we have a problem. For what it's worth, these colorful titles, Demon's Rock, Banshee Rock, they simply come from the sound that the wind makes during a storm as it blows through a cave running under the island."

The man in the center watched me steadily.

“Are you afraid of the wind, Mr. Stone?” He lifted his eyebrows. “Would that stop you from being a keeper on our little island?”

“No.”

And I can't explain why I was suddenly protective of an opportunity I had done my best to thwart just moments before.

The chairman relaxed a little, leaned back in his seat. His own smile, though with skinny teeth, seemed a little more genuine now, less tense. “There are some perks worth mentioning. You won't need to worry too much about formality. Peaked cap and all that stuff. The only outside source you'll really have dealings with is your supply boat, and he won't care if you just wear a sweater and jeans. As to museum duties, well you maintain the original equipment. A European cruise will drop by once every three months. Those passengers are paying a lot. You'll give them a 'lighthouse experience,' of course, and you'll make sure they enjoy themselves. As I say, only four times a year. It's really not that much.”

I rolled the scenario through my head, startled suddenly awake by the real prospect of it. “What about having friends on the island?”

His smile waned just a little.

“This isn't summer camp, Mr. Stone” the other man said, quietly glaring. The first time he had spoken. There was a disturbing sound just under his voice like the hiss of a kerosene lamp.

But the chairman sighed, and appeared to soften once again. “I think we're prepared, after the last time, to allow that...but only for two weeks at a run. Otherwise things get too informal, if you understand me. We know there are risks involved with isolation.” He exchanged glances very briefly with the others. “We're not unreasonable people and we're happy to mitigate those risks, Render. But...two weeks at a time. And at least a month between. Also, we can't run

provisions. So they must either supply their own during their stay on the isle, or else you cover them out of your own pocket. Understood?”

My reverie tilted on a sudden wave and hardened back to the present moment aboard the boat. Memory of the interview room gusted away from me. Now that I think of it, they never even mentioned the Fresnel lantern. Which was odd. But then everything about that interview was odd.

Two weeks later, I received the offer letter in the mail.

Mr. Render Stone  
Pumpleston Cottage  
Gullane  
East Lothian  
Scotland

Dear Mr. Stone,

After much contemplation, and a difficult process involving many suitably qualified candidates, we are pleased to offer you the position of lighthouse keeper at *Carraig Sithe*, with indefinite extension. Should you choose to accept, we hope that you will be able to take up your post as soon as possible, and of course at the very latest by the end of the subsequent month. Please liaise with Mr. Roehampton (details attached), skipper of your tender, the *Exulans*, to arrange a timely transference of your self and belongings. Once again, if you will indulge me this hopeful anticipation of a positive response, I wish you a serene and productive tenure on the island.

Sincerely

A. Knightman

Heritage Maritime Holdings.

Many suitably qualified candidates? I still wondered, after all, if my leg was being pulled, but if not, they had certainly done a magnificent job of masking the truth during the interview.

I knew I would take the job as soon as I read the letter, but I didn't know how to tell Krys. She wanted to go backpacking in Europe with two friends, Dirk and Karl. This would upset those plans. Or any plans, pretty much, for the near future. But this just gave me additional fuel. It cemented my decision. Dirk and I got on well. But I didn't care for this guy Karl. He put me on edge. Is it bad to say that there's a "vibe" about certain people? A kind of threatening aura? Well, I got that whenever he was around, and there was something else. Something that told me my suspicions weren't just my fanciful imagination. We were on another hike one time and Karl and this other guy had a row. They were both climbers. I wasn't. Anyway, next day this guy had a bad drop on their ascent. His primary line failed, snapped, and he would have fallen to his death were it not for the safety line strapped to Karl. I suspected foul play, but I couldn't prove anything. Modern climbing equipment is almost foolproof. Ropes don't just snap. And when I examined the remains of the line, discreetly, it looked to me like it had been cut part way through with a knife, to weaken it. I think Karl cut that line. Not that he wanted to kill. Just teach a lesson. And then take the credit for bearing the weight of the drop into the bargain. But like I

said, I can't prove anything. But I saw what I saw, and I believe I saw it in his eyes too. Grey, calculating eyes. Eyes that know things but keep them from you.

Grey, like the Atlantic. I can't now recall the exact moment when I first caught sight of Spirit Rock. There was almost a quality of trick about this, as if my attention was deliberately diverted by trivial inconveniences aboard the boat. And then, when I next looked up, it was simply there, already too close. The opportunity to see it at its coming into being, as it were, had been lost. As if it had its own agency, capable of affecting outcomes somehow, as if it didn't want me to witness the means by which it first entered my world. But I am letting my imagination color this account. I wouldn't want to give the impression that I have a vivid imagination, for I don't. It was precisely that aptitude I had—or thought I had—for holding a stony face against the attempts of the imagination to win over the mind, that earned me the post, I think. No one had to tell me the nickname of the place, after all.

But when I first laid eyes on the isle, if isle it could be called, I must confess that I became, suddenly, very still. It would not be accurate to say that I was frightened. Nor horrified. Nor wishing to turn back. Stillness is the word. And I must use words now, though at the time they fled from me into a silent sky wary of its own blue. My hands sought anchor on the wale, not against the sway and pitch of the boat, but against the silence.

*Carraig Sithe* towered above me, dark and brooding. The small lappings of water round its ragged base sent swift and oddly clipped echoes chasing their own tails up the lower part of the plunging cliffs. From the south side of our approach, imagine if you can a distorted hand closed to a knuckled fist, sitting half submerged in the sea. At the north extreme one bulge, one knuckle, rose up higher than the rest of the island, like a sore deformity, as if the hand had suffered an ancient wound from which it never entirely recovered. From this peak, which boasted the



principal ocean-facing light, the rocks fell away to a much lower, though still ragged, depression in the middle island area. From there, they rose steadily southward again, though not as far, to a secondary peak or knuckle, where a smaller light stood to serve the channel between the island and the land some thirty miles south. At boat level that shore was beyond the curve of the visible horizon.

So anyone approaching *Carraig Sithe* on the water saw this rock and this rock alone as the solitary feature of the world. And it was this world that demanded silence. As if its fateful shape had simple risen, fully pictured out in some dark dreaming, from the unguessable depths of the water. But it was more even than that. Like fate itself carved to a shape, if such a thing is possible. A sculpting of doom. Perhaps if I'd been blessed with the sensitivities I lack, I might have turned back there and then. But isn't that a property of doom? That we only see its shape for what it is when it's too late, when we have passed beyond its threshold and it already has us in its grasp?

I knew from my own research, admittedly casual, as I am lazy by nature, that the primary light on the north tip housed a Fresnel hyperradiant, an unusually large lens of which only a small number were ever made. And this because the rocks at the north edge of the island, while not great in measure, nonetheless fingered away some distance beneath the surface out into the deep, and were among the most treacherous a ship could ever have the misfortune to encounter. The rocks along the southern side of the island were far less severe and really no greater hazard than coming up upon the island itself in the dark, which aside from a close fog cutting visibility back to a few feet, was all but impossible. Still, a smaller lighthouse stood on that southern tip, guiding the occasional coastal vessel on its long journey to the port a hundred miles west.

As the tender finally purred away, leaving me alone on the causeway, I watched it dwindle to a point, standing there at the bottom of the old cliff stair with just a couple of smaller bags I could manage myself. A month's supplies and my larger travel bags we had already winched to the top of the island using the upper hoist, and it remained my task only to unpack them into the keeper's quarters.

Those quarters were modified by Maritime Holdings in the last decade to house a family and guests, so even though I knew space would be a little tight, I wasn't unduly concerned that my friends would be fighting each other over breathable air. And anyway, there was plenty of that outside the door. I had been careful to bring in supplies more than sufficient for myself and projected guests for over a month's stay, even though they weren't allowed to remain more than two weeks. This excess baggage earned me more than one dirty look from the skipper of the tender when we were running the winch. The winch itself was mechanical, but the loading and unloading was of course manual, and we'd both broken a sweat by the time we were done. He motored off into the early dusk without looking back once, a spearpoint to the arrow of his own wake. A wake soon erased by the ceaseless agitation of the sea.

The full karma of my choices pressed upon me. Eventually, I told Krys that I was thinking of taking up the keeper post and we had a full blown row. Metal things flying in a kitchen. That kind of row. But I wasn't doing the throwing. I was mainly ducking.

“You do that and we're through, Stone. I mean it! I don't want to live on a damned lighthouse.”

I think that's what she said, as I was pretty much dodging an airborne utensil at the time. I'm also pretty sure I corrected her “on” a lighthouse to “in” a lighthouse, which caused further metal rain. But see, I knew that she didn't mean it. Not really. Krys had this way of making

threats she couldn't follow through on. It's not that we were inseparable. We were what people usually call an attraction of opposites. And there was risk. This lighthouse thing could split us if I wasn't careful. I just didn't think that it would, and I intended to be careful enough to get what I wanted, which is what I usually do in our relationship. At the end of the day I knew my girl, and the fact was, I was her best chance at a larger life, a wilder life, and she wanted that, despite all her protests. Probably should have told her in person though, rather than just leaving her a note.

“Why do you always have to wreck things, Render?”

“Stop being so dramatic. It's just a lighthouse. It can't wreck anything. It stops things from being wrecked...that's the whole point of a lighthouse.”

“I suppose you think that's funny?”

I pursed my lips. “You're not being rational. YOU are the one who said you wanted a break from the rat race. Well, here we go. Not a rat in sight.”

“I've got a rat in sight right here. A fat motherfucker of...”

“Cut it out Kryz, really. If you absolutely insist on not going, I won't go. You know I won't.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh god, I'd never hear the end of it.”

I stood there watching the tender diminish till I could see it no more. At the foot of the cliff stair, where the concrete path opened to a naked fall into the water below, the guide rail was rusted within an inch of its life, and so accreted with lime and barnacles that it resembled a kind of disease. The entire rail canted sideways at an angle of about thirty degrees, and for a moment I marveled how something so important could have been so carelessly installed.

Then I groaned. What an idiot. A fool from the mainland with soft hands and a fondness for cake, who would be lucky to keep his feet on the slippery rock. Son of a keeper? Right. Storms,

you dense bastard. Decades of storms so powerful they had slammed the whole lower level of the island with epic force, burying it in fathoms of hurtling water, scoring its signature in the concrete path, tearing out the arm-sized bolts that fastened the rail to the bare rock. I had never glimpsed the signs of such force before. Sure we had seen storms at Abb's Head. But that was the shore and this was the open sea. I understood that much.

The rumor of it. The ghost of its passing. Ugly pockmarks riddled the rock nearby...tell tale traces of earlier attempts to secure the rail against the sea. And for a while, at least, perhaps they even succeeded. I felt suddenly vulnerable standing down there, as if, at any moment, a freak wave may rush in from the deep, sweep the steep rock behind me, and then plunge down again, washing my soul away to Davey Jones, and no one would be any the wiser. If the ocean had eyes, it would see me now, standing there alone. If the island had eyes...

And then I smiled and pulled in a deep breath. Because I *did* stand alone on Spirit Rock, and unlike its prospect as viewed from the water, it didn't seem so bad. I clamped down on my foreboding and determined to feel just like I was on an adventure now. An adventure, but I was tired. I had get myself and these bags up the stair, at least, before I could afford to slump from my travels. The other supplies could stay in the winch till morning, though being a cautious soul I figured I'd check the storm forecast just in case. I was assured that a sat-phone enjoyed good coverage even here, and that the lighthouse quarters also had a dedicated cable link to the mainland, mainly for emergency purposes. Luxuries that true keepers of the light, in its era as a workhorse lantern, would never have known.

\*

Those first two weeks I spent getting my bearings on the island. Oh, the weather was glorious! Storms? I would scarcely believe that they could have existed in this idyllic place. Did

I say idyllic? Have I lost my mind? No, not at all. Lying back in the full afternoon sunlight, atop the saddle of that solemn rock, with the fresh breeze whipping at your hair and your short sleeves, it was almost like riding a chariot in the bare sky. Of course it was the end of August. I understood full well, or thought I did, how the weather here would change in the winter. I could see the confusion in the gaelic that flickered the place at the boundary between a rock and an island, as if it were a bit too large for the former and not really sufficiently developed for the latter. Really, it was not that big of a place. Dramatic landscape and tortured shapes among the rocks made it seem larger than it was, and when you wandered off the few laid paths—never well advised, for some sheer cliff or deep crevice was ever close—the precarious manner in which you had to pick your way, step by step, gave the illusion of epic distances covered.

But once I had the measure of the place, and paced the main service path from one end of the rock to the other, I would estimate the entire area of the island as no more than 14 acres. Unobstructed, and disallowing the need for care, a runner could easily span its length in two minutes. The rock itself was an ancient volcanic plug formed by igneous intrusion. Molten lava hardened in an undersea vent and forced upwards out of the ocean, pushing softer rock aside. I tried to imagine those forces, that pressure from hidden things beneath, as I lay there staring at the sky. But the effort made me uneasy, and I curled to a sitting position. *Get a grip, Stone.*

I paced the main pathway from the principal light at the north end of the island to the smaller lamp at the south. It took five or six minutes on a calm day, at a sedate pace. The path wound and snaked around the rock like a thing possessed by its own madness, though by light of day I could see the logic of it. The pathway sought out those very curves and byways that were easiest carved from the stone, and avoided where possible the swiftest appointments with an early death. That said, it still had its share of hazards even on a calm day, and you could never

afford to let your guard down. At its most treacherous point, as it rounded a craggy shoulder to the main light, no guard rail was possible against the sheer drop on the starboard side. I imagined struggling round that dwarf headland, with a flickery lantern on a stormy night, the wind beating me raw. That prospect filled me with dread. The instruction I received in the notes left for my attention was to avoid being outdoors at all in a harsh blow, but if I found myself caught on the path for whatever reason, to lean hard into the rocks and grip the chains and the iron handles which, here and there, were fastened deep into the stone for just that purpose. The rock itself was too inhospitable in that place for an unbroken rail.

Nor was this the only place of hazard on the main path. Towards the other end of the island, across the southern part of the saddle or dip that separated the two lanterned peaks, the path, by necessity, became a rope bridge spanning a razor-like labyrinth of serrated fractures and small canyons as vicious in tooth as open shark mouths. The rope bridge, as well as being strongly secured at its terminal points, was fastened with hawser by hooks sunk deep into the rocks below, to prevent swinging during a gale. The entire structure, quiescent and safe enough to travel on a pleasant day, nonetheless sang in its hawsers with a stressed voice whenever you crossed it. Try as I might, I could never quite rid myself of the impression that it was something singing from the deep. A lonely song. It lamented. It yearned. I always hurried over the bridge as quickly as safe passage allowed.

In addition to this main pathway that stitched the north head of the rock to the south, there was the cliff stair that ascended to the keeper's quarters from the landing platform. Even on that zig zag stair, huddling as it did close to the cliff, there were clear traces of lime and storm blast hundreds of feet above the platform. The mind boggled as to how that was possible, and yet there it was, the evidence plain to see. Close in to the cliff, as you were on the stair, you could just

about convince yourself that it was merely your imagination. But if you stood out on the platform, at the very edge of the Rock, and craned, with the sun lighting the cliff, this ghost of ancient storms wavered into view.

On the west side of the island another path wound away from the principal light and down, along a very shadowy passage under an overhang of rock until, half way down steep slopes in that region of the isle, it terminated in a natural cleft housing the fog horn. The horn, decommissioned over a decade ago, squatted still in the rock, like some mythical beast ever on guard, about ten feet above the heads of any walker on the path below. And nearby, in a manmade cut set back into the stone, the shed for the compressors that ran it. In one of the old logbooks left for my attention, I found a short passage underlined in red. *Never walk the west path when the horn is active!* Apparently one time, long ago, a keeper made this mistake and his body was found on the rocks below, a trail of blood meandering from his ears like weird calligraphy. As if, in his sudden madness to escape the terrible sound, he had simply jumped to his death rather than endure it any longer. I'm pretty sure I'd heard that. Or maybe I just thought I did. Either way I could see it now, whenever I gazed on those rocks.

The path continued round to the south side of the island, though there was no reason to go that way. For all its failings, the upper route with the rope bridge was a much safer way.

Finally, as we are speaking about paths, a service umbilical, again cut into rock, ran along a file between the keeper's quarters and nearby stores. Here was kept all the main supplies servicing the two lights, including the bulk of paraffin, a fire hazard best placed at distance from the residence, along with spare lanterns, clockwork parts, and other service devices for the lights. A lesser amount of reserve fuel and more frequently serviced smaller parts were kept in stock at each of the light sub-stations on either end of the rock.

Aside from these paths, as I have mentioned, the island itself is hollow on its underside. A sea passage, navigable by canoe, or even by foot in calm weather if one is fearless enough and foolish enough to attempt the task, forms a cave entirely through the island from the west north west to the east south east. The passage, however, has twists, and daylight cannot be seen by staring in one end of the cave, a view possible only on the water.

People who have never worked at a light station sometimes fancy that the lights take care of themselves. Oh I had done my mandatory month of training with the seasoned keeper, as required by my employers, but that was in a lighthouse ten minutes from a city, and more like to a hotel, with wrapped soap and heated towels in the bathrooms. My own life story with my uncle was much more useful. Still, it served me. It filled in some details, and some updates, I might otherwise have had the arrogance to neglect. Although it was hard to take seriously at the time, the knowledge must have sunk into my subconscious, because I can see now that I would have floundered without it.

But I underestimated the work involved. I could see now the argument for automation and how the counter-arguments, though quaint, were implausible. As keeper of a “heritage lamp” my workload, had it been essential to life and limb, would have been entirely consistent with that of a full time wickie fifty or a hundred years ago. But it was not essential to life and limb. I managed a living museum only. The light served a helpful purpose, like an usher with a flashlight helping you to your cinema seat, but no ship would wreck on *Carraig Sithe* these days. Their impressive technological cocktail of sonar, seabed mapping, and GPS navigation would unerringly steer them many miles from the rock, and far more efficiently than any candle blinking wearily in the primeval dark, or the plaintive grunt of a fog horn sounding vaguely



through the mists. Most service lights were now in the category of ‘active aids to navigation.’ In other words, if one read between the lines, not strictly necessary.

Yet a peculiar thing happened to me. When I first arrived on the island, I treated the keeper thing as an amusement. I intended to perform the minimal chores to fulfill my responsibilities in the role, but I had in mind a sort of bleak isle vacation, where I would do what I have just described, lying on my back watching the clouds trawl the heaven for strange fish, or stargazing at night. Even with the lanterns blazing, there were strategic places on the paths around the island where you would never know that human light existed in the world. And the stars above the Rock on a clear night staggered the soul to its bottom.

But as I got into the routine of trimming the wicks and cleaning the lenses of soot for each night’s hours of revolution, priming the kerosene fountains and drawing supplies from stores, I started to take a measure of pride in these tasks. On the first and second nights I hurried through these chores as if they were a burden. Then I began to take a little more care, engrossed by the detail that each task entailed. This I had seen before, of course, but personal immersion is a different matter. Now it was my responsibility and if I did not do it, it was left undone. I became fascinated with winding the clockwork to run the mechanism and the hoisting of the counterweight that hung in the center of the main tower. I would sit there and watch it dropping slowly as the light revolved. The main light was a beast too. It couldn’t be left unattended for long periods. It was like watching over a fire. If you abandoned your post too long, any one of a number of things would go wrong. Air pressure to the paraffin would drop too far and the light would go out. Or the clockwork would get too low and the lens would stop eclipsing at the required rate.

The lantern at the southern end was more forgiving. It was a newer design with mercury floatation and a much smaller lamp. If you set it up aright, it could be checked only once an hour, but of course this was a bind for one keeper, who must make the walk from the north to the south tip of the island each time. Heritage Maritime Holdings promised that a second keeper would be employed to manage the southern light alone, but I hadn't heard anything further, and secretly, I now fancied keeping the job to myself.

Absorbed as I was though, I began to yearn for human company and look forward to the day when my friends would join me on the island. They, like me, were university types recently graduated. Unlike me, they had enough money to swan around as they searched for useful employment in the world, at a leisurely pace. On some days I missed human company more than others. It was never hot on the rock, since the gusty breezes from the west added their cooling breath even to the warmer days. But the nuances of summer called for company, for shared experience in this far flung corner of the world.

It was always worse in the daylight hours, when my thoughts couldn't hide from themselves among the shapes of the night's shadow. When the lights were turning, bold and oddly suggestive shadows swept the island, transforming the rocks into a rolling drama of fierce and mythic shapes. A fanciful imagination could easily be unnerved by this. But I found that it calmed me. It was as if the night took hold of my fears, though I could not, at that time, even have voiced what they were, and set them running in the dark, loose from their leashes, where they no longer sat growling at me with expectant eyes, as during daylight.

I even took to standing watch under the lamp as the old keepers used to do, or pacing the gallery outside the lantern room, scanning the sea for ships. And when I saw one, which was seldom enough, double checking on the status of the light. No: darkness was my friend. It settled

my mind and I could stand there for hours, tending the light, watching the lesser lights of distant vessels, barely glints in the dark, as they sailed low and smooth along the horizon, like the eyes of far off creatures.

These roaming shadows I speak of were spawned mainly by the south lantern. The higher peak at the north of the island blocked its light from travelling to the deep sea and hence interfering with the stoic signal from the northern light. The north light, by contrast, was blacked out by a screen in the lantern room facing the southerly direction, so that its signal beamed out on a wide arc from a little south east right the way round to a shade south west, but never deep back south, as its brilliance would be a distraction to drivers on the long coastal road even at this distance. The southern lamp, far less intense, served its purpose well in the channel between the rock and the mainland.

Thus if you were walking at night between the north and south lamps, you had to take care. The sweeping shadows cast from both lamps made for fleeting apparitions of solid ground where there was none, or yawning space where your feet could safely find a home. It was particularly bad on the rope bridge, where the peculiar symphony of shadows in that place conspired to create an illusion that the bridge was silently tearing loose from its moorings, flailing away to the side, and plunging you towards the cliff edge which, at the slenderest crossing of the bridge where the island narrowed briefly to a skinny waist, was but feet away on either side. The illusion could be strong enough that it tricked the organs of balance in your ears and you thrashed out to seize the ropes, almost pitching you over the edge for real. So you always carried a lantern. Only a stable light in your own hand could dispel these travelling ghosts and grant you steady assurance on your feet.

But I liked these shadows. The bear was safest out of the cage. And I got to know them well. Even at their most ferocious they were predictable, for the lights always swept the island in exactly the same way, and the rock shadows raced from their glare along the same paths. There was some variation caused by the drift in phase between the two lights, as they did not revolve at the same rate, the south lamp being much swifter, but this only had effect near the north tip of the island, where strong shadows cast by the great lamp could be glimpsed. Anywhere directly behind the northern light, down the spine of the island, was directly behind the screen in the lantern room, so only the southern lamp had influence.

If you positioned yourself at one fixed location, the play of shadows would always be the same. Thus on the lower curve of the path, at the foot of the stair leading up to the northern lamp, the hooded figure of a monk rose up, tall and prayerful, from a slanted canyon to one's left. In his hand he carried something, perhaps a book, perhaps a candle in a dish. As he rose he seemed to stoop or reach towards you, as if he had some urgent business with you, and his aspect grew more sinister, more menacing. But just before he plunged down upon you, his specter whisked away to a skinny ribbon in the south, as if sucked suddenly and violently by the head into a narrow tube, and all that remained of his ominous shadow, eccentric as it is to say it, was a spilled-open bag of scurrying mice, breaking formlessly over the rocks in all directions. Or, you could sit yourself upon a certain rock on a small switchback above the south lamp. Shadows there are most precisely formed due to the nearby brilliance of the lantern. The eclipsing shutters on the revolving lens create the flash pattern, and as they sweep north on the island make, here and there, a frightful tale. From this vantage then, the eerie semblance of a ship mounted up, many centuries in its grave. A galleon, as if on a sloping sea, but just as it seemed it would reach the safety of a harbor, an unglimsable calamity occurred. Unglimsable because whatever rose

from the deep to splinter the hull acted from below the visible margin of the shadow. And as the ship fell into two pieces and sank away, sank because the passage of the beam swerved east, those pieces shapeshifted to the semblance of faces, stretched out to inhuman length by a nameless distress, as if the stretching itself were a kind of torment. And worst of all, it's as if I knew those faces but couldn't quite place them. Each time I watched the spectacle, here comes the ship, now it breaks, now the faces, it seems that I hover on the brink of recognition. But as soon as it is over, my mind dispels the apparition.

I prefer the shadows to roam the island than to roam inside my head.

Daytime is a mixed blessing. I wish my friends would come. Some days I am of good spirit and can stroll around this isle as if I am on a lazy walk with a small dog along a seaside town. But other days I am not so lucky. Sleep is fitful as I have yet to find the right rhythm, and I do not like sleeping in the day. Tending the light during the hours of darkness can be done dozing in a chair, but there's a level of vigilance in your subconscious. A subtle change in the sound of the paraffin and you surface at once, like a whale from the deep. Thus on a bad night your sleep is ever broken. I took to staying awake until the dawn and then sleeping through till the late morning. But this was also not without its troubles. The shadows cast wide to the island, by light of the lamps in the dark, crept inwards towards me, like creatures approaching a campfire by stealth, and slipped inside my head as I slept.

I'd been on the rock about three weeks now. God, it seemed like an eternity. Not a bad eternity, perhaps. There were good days and there were bad days. There were days when I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in this world and wouldn't trade. And then there were days when tears of loneliness froze in the wind at the corner of my eyes, along the top of the island. No, just an eternity. As if I was already beginning to forget even what civilization was. As if all

that had been a kind of dream and had never really happened to me. In my worst moments, that set a kind of panic in me. What if that were true? That in fact I'd always been on this island, perhaps a kind of prisoner, and had only deceived myself that I had a life in the larger world. These thoughts sound foolish when stated aloud, but such are the effects of isolation. They prey on the mind in unpredictable ways, though only at certain times. At those times, one needs a defense against them.

Routine was one such useful defense. There is something about the monotony of repetition that gives the mind the anchor it needs. And the more physical the better. Hauling fuel from stores to the light station was hard labor, even using the dolly. Unsmoking the lenses was wearisome and time consuming, especially if just a little neglect caused things to get out of hand, which happened easily if another minor emergency surfaced elsewhere, requiring immediate attention. But these actions soothed the mind. They were dense with practicality, and with little space left over for contemplation.

I had to be diligent in my duties, otherwise the situation there could easily get on top of me. There were chores that needed tending to morning and night. Others once daily. Others every second day. Many others once a week. If you didn't attend to these, they ganged up on you and could easily break your back. It was like weeding out mushrooms after rain, long ago, at St Abb's Head. Even now I can remember my uncle lecturing me carefully and sternly, as he went away on business for several days and I was left alone with the house for the first time.

“Now, if there is any rain, remember to weed the mushrooms from the grass in the morning. If you do it each day, there'll only be half a dozen and it'll take you two minutes. If you leave it for a day, there'll be a hundred and it'll take you half an hour. If you leave it for two days, God help you.”

And being a kid I left it for two days, and there were thousands of the buggers. I was there from dawn to dusk weeding out mushrooms and was still doing it when my father returned. Chores on the island were like this. I couldn't afford to let my guard down. Any one of a dozen tasks could assume the shape of a bear if left unattended.

Still, and precisely because I was diligent, there were long periods where I had nothing to do, and had to find ways of busying myself. The guest quarters were a mess, with random stuff lying around, so I took it upon myself to make them presentable for my friends. The keepers' quarters too had seen better days, with shelving that collapsed at one end and cupboards half full of old clothes which had been folded for so many decades that they simply fell apart when you opened them.

It was during one of these cleanouts that I made a wonderful discovery. I hung on to any logbooks I stumbled across. Most of these were in a tied stack inside the top drawer of a bureau in the keeper's office, but I kept running into them elsewhere too, and just added them to the stack. At first I thought that's what this was, just another log book. Then I wiped the dust from the cover, which had worked its way right into the smallest valleys of textured leather, and I saw my mistake:

*Some Thoughts In Passing*

*Being The Journal of the Keeper of the Light*

*In the year of our lord, seventeen hundred and fifty.*

Seventeen hundred and fifty! My lips whispered the words in awe as I opened the book. It was a little fragile, but not overly so. It didn't threaten to crumble, though its pages had that

tearable feel, as if they would split at the spine if you opened them too quickly. They crackled like flames as you turned them. I was entranced, and not a little relieved, to discover that it really was a journal, and not just another log book. The log books contained such stuff as “40 canisters of kerosene received at landing platform. Two boxes of candles, 12 each. Made requisition for a hundred fresh wicks.” Sometimes they ventured into less pedestrian matters, but only in terse terms. “Heavy seas at landing today. One crate of food spoiled and lost when splintered in the water. Winch gate needs repairing.”

But from the first page, I could see that this was different. A private diary. Thoughts of an erstwhile custodian of this place, shared with no one. My god, that’s what I wanted to know about life on this island! I felt a sudden warmth of companionship across the centuries and secreted the journal in my own bedroom in a safe place. I actually preferred sleeping in the junior keeper’s bedroom as opposed to the head keeper, as the latter was too austere. That’s when I wasn’t dozing in the watch room up at the lamp.

For several days my mood brightened after this find. But I didn’t read it. I just kept it there like a birthday present as yet to be unwrapped. I actually whistled at my chores. Eventually, though, I could stand it no longer, so in the wee hours of one morning in the watch room, on a calm night, and with the hiss of the kerosene reassuringly stable, I set about some of the early entries in the journal.

*2<sup>nd</sup> October, Seventeen Hundred and Fifty*

*I discovered a tuft of green on this island! There’s actual soil on this place. It’s hard right of the upper lamp but cannot be seen from the path. I had to climb over bare rock to get there and*



*don't pray call me so reckless a soul had the wind not seiz'd my cap and threatened to carry it aloft into the drink. It's not much grass and of the wild sort no beast would graze. But it's short and its green as God's own for all of that, and large enough for a man my size to rest back on. I am glad I found this little sanctuary, though the wind can be fierce there and you must watch your footing as the cliff is near.*

And then:

*24<sup>th</sup> October, Seventeen Hundred and Fifty*

*I think old Boyston, that feisty salt who captains the tender, if skippering one calls it, marks me a touch mad. I fear I have taken a liking to this solitude. It will be more than a tenday till the relief arrives, but I find myself untroubled. That beady eyed skipper noted my reluctance, I'm sure. I already declined one round of relief and cannot decline again, without drawing attention to myself. But I have these ten days till those other fellows arrive. I know one of them and have worked with him before. He's a good man and his faith is sound, but he's dour. The other I do not know and always feel a little trepidant of unknown companions, whose characters have not yet been tested against the tooth of the rock.*

I fell into a contemplation for a moment reading this. First, I resolved to locate this patch of grass the first day calm enough to make the attempt. The very idea of green upon this rock was like a rumored apparition of paradise. I could scarcely believe it true. Would it still be there, two

and a half centuries later? Why not? What changed on the island? It was like the stern face of eternity, or so it seemed when set beside the pitiable lives of humans.

Then I wondered about my own companions heading for the rock. How would they fare with the isolation? I already knew it was one thing to contemplate this adventure with a bottle of wine and your feet up on a stool, sitting in a flat on the mainland two minutes from the nearest shop and three from the nearest pub. But it was not the reality. That reality had a habit of creeping upon you by stealth, and I had the feeling it wasn't done with me yet. I wondered how it would affect the others. Although I had read none of it in official accounts, I knew by legend that two keepers were said to have gone insane on the island. One was found curled up naked in the cave under the rock. The other was said to have murdered his family and set their corpses in little boats one calm night, each with a lantern at the helm, and pushed them off into the deep. But no bodies were ever found. Nor of the keeper himself who was said to have jumped from the cliff beyond the north light. All of this was many decades ago, long before I was born. Not sure where I heard that one.

But I must confess such yarns didn't frighten me. All lighthouses boasted such tall tales. Well, most of them. Yet some people seemed to have a lurking psychosis, barely masked. All it takes is a little something to tear the mask away. A little trauma. A little uncertainty. A little isolation. I witnessed the phenomenon myself when a bunch of us meddled with psychedelics in our freshman year. Most of us were laid back with it all, and for me it was a serene, if pointless, adventure. I never reached the pinnacles of revelation some dramatic types claimed for themselves. But this one guy on mushrooms, no sooner had the effect taken hold, when he lost it completely. He started yelling "I've got to cut my throat, I've got to cut my throat!" like that, a sudden maniac uncorked, and then he began tossing cutlery out of drawers onto the floor,

looking for a knife large enough to complete the task. Four of us had to restrain him on the tiles and it was all that we could do.

I felt I knew my friends quite well, at least as well as I knew myself. Perhaps my concern was without cause. I turned my gaze back to the journal, fascinated.

*27<sup>th</sup> October, Seventeen Hundred and Fifty.*

*Ah, winter is showing her teeth now and her bite is hard! The wind near cut right through me on the rope bridge last night and I tasted salt in the sky. Storms are coming. But for now we have the calm. And the fog in the calm. And the ice that follows the fog in the morn. Aye, that is treacherous weather, make no mistake. The light is useless on a night like that, with the fog closed round like a chill blanket, and each morn I dread a wreck be found on the rocks below. So far, God willing, no lives are shed this year and the savior's grace is with our ships' captains. May it hold. But even in such calm the risk is not with skippers alone, and there is much danger on this island. The freezing fog leaves ice in the dawn that clings to the rock stair ascending to the north lamp. The keeper who minds not his way will soon be unfooted and break open his crown on the stone, never to wake. If the cold be not too steep we throw salt water on the stone, freezing by its nature at lower mercury. And if the freeze be worse still there is powder'd salt we spread upon the stair, though this is irksome as it carries everywhere on the feet. It is a sore tedium to ring the bell for ships in this fog.*

Then one entry in particular captured my attention and I sat there, puzzling quietly over its possible meaning.

*1<sup>st</sup> November, Seventeen Hundred and Fifty.*

*Respite! The weather has backed off again and my sleeves are bare to my duties. I pledge that the chores of a lightkeeper are in truth a blessing at such times. God's face shines on the rock and my spirit lifts about my work. Weights to be carried seem less. Labor itself less draining on the soul. A fleck on the breeze still speaks the rumor of storm, so my time today is spent hauling more fuel to the light station. Late in the morn I confesse I saw a thing that unsettl'd me some. If this journal be read, then I deem it is the eyes of some keeper fall upon it. That being so, you will know the path down to the south lamp. After the rope bridge, the path descends a straight but canting stair, before reaching a trough of rock at its lowest point, then rising again a little towards the light. It was in that trough I laid down the wood in my arms for rest. I swear I spied a shadow up on the observation deck as it cross'd in front of the lanthorn. A shadow I took to be a figure. I swear it by the savior's grace, but as God is my witness I am alone on this rock and what I saw cannot bear sense. Against the lamp, from that angle of view, there is only the brightness of the sky and the structure of the tower. No shadow can be there, is the simple thing. When I ascended the tower I checked all around, but nothing amiss. I have put it down to a minor fever of the blood or a reverie I allowed in my distraction to grow too deep. Still, it unsteadied me. I must be wary for such reveries lest they seek to take possession.*

I wondered about this, as one time crossing the rope bridge the opposite way heading north, I fancied I had heard my name whispered on the wind behind me. Now I knew of these illusions in the wilderness, and had read of their kind, so was not greatly perturbed. The voice or

semblance of a voice that beckoned was not sinister. Rather just my own. Yet there was one distinctive feature I couldn't quite dispel. If truth be told, I had heard such phantom voices before, once while climbing with some friends, in a tent high on a snowy slope. The wind was fierce and the mind under vigilance can hear anything. But those whispers were like ragged shreds of paper blown in the breeze. You scarcely knew from which direction they came or what they said. This was different. The breeze on the Rock was light that morning. And the whisper called my name, distinctly, from a point that seemed precisely positioned on the bridge some twenty five to thirty feet behind me. Although nothing was visible there, I felt I could have marked the spot from which it came. I write this, but I repeat that I was not perturbed. The mind in solitude fills in the blanks for company it doesn't have. This is no great mystery or harbinger of madness. It is normal, in its own way. So I stood staring at that point a few seconds, imagining in my mind's eye, indulgent as it was, the shape of a person standing there upon the bridge, and we gazed towards each other, each taking the measure of the other, though of course no-one was there, and at length of just a moment longer I chuckled and went on my way.

*3rd November, Seventeen Hundred and Fifty*

*Fell ice this morning! The ropes on the bridge are freight'd with it, hanging like weighty chains. When I set foot on the bridge there was much creaking and wailing of the ice, like a living thing. At noon I descended the cliff stair. It receives the sun in the morning and was safe underfoot, but the landing stage in shadow till late afternoon is slick with a film of ice. The hoist bucket is frozen solid to the ground and the hoist itself to the rope that lifts it. If I cannot get it thawed, and*

*if the sea at the rock is choppy when the tender is due tomorrow, we may have trouble getting my companions onto the rock.*

*4<sup>th</sup> November, Seventeen Hundred and Fifty*

*Most of the ice thawed this morn, and I was able after grievous effort and some words I hope my God will forgive me, to unseize the knot on the hoist bucket. But it is still bitter cold aloft the island due to a Nor'Wester that cuts you like a knife into rope. My relief keepers arrived today, and we fetched them onto the rock body and soul, but mercy be my luck one of them is green at the lamp, having only been stationed afore at a river light, so I received from Boyston a mailing signed and sealed by the owners, giving me leave to watch over this apprentice another two weeks while I instruct him in the way of these large lamps, which oftentimes have a mind of their own. Of no less use to his life, I must instruct in him also the intelligence peculiar to our little island, without which himself and his spirit may soon be parted.*

I closed the journal gently. My own guests were due to arrive today, and I felt only a little pang at yielding my private island to the pleasures of others. Mostly I felt delight at the prospect. Solitude in the long daylight dragged, at times becoming a chain. I would be glad of the company, though there wasn't much scope for recreation or games on the rock. One couldn't fool around outdoors even in fair weather. There was no flat, open space in which to play a sport, and indoors, little in the way of space at all outside of beds and functional rooms.

Those who have spent no time at a lighthouse seldom appreciate just how windy these places can be, even a coastal station on days with little wind just a short distance inland. I could see from the top of the cliff stair that a fair chop churned around the landing station, and a stiff wind gusted over the top of the rock. It was too rough to land direct from the boat, so we'd have to land the party using the arm and hoist. A tricky operation at the best of times. I could have done without it.

I descended the cliff stair with the sun on my face. One of my favorite spots on the rock. The cliff cut back the wind there and you could be deceived in the belief that it was a placid day on a gentle summer morning. By the time I reached the landing stage I could already see the bow of the *Exulans* breaking spray as Roehampton piloted it with some caution towards the causeway.

There was only one landing to be had on the island, at least without picking one's way across rocks slippery with bladderwrack and riddled with ankle-breaking fissures. As the boat drew closer, I counted six people aboard. I recognized Krys and two of our friends right away, and then with some annoyance I recognized two other acquaintances of hers I didn't much care for. What the hell did she think she was doing?

It was too dangerous for the pilot to bring the boat within twenty feet so I threw the switch that sent power to the arm and swung it out over the boat. Roehampton caught hold of the bucket and lowered it into the boat. This was the most hazardous part, as in less careful hands the bucket might wallop someone on the back and knock them over the side. In this rough sea, even with those lifejackets on, it would be no easy task to fish someone out again. I saw all six passengers adorned with life jackets, which meant that Krys intended the entire party save the pilot to set foot on the rock, and once more I bit down on my mounting irritation and fought to concentrate on the task at hand. I was also annoyed at myself for having these thoughts. I didn't want the

first moments with my companions on the isle to be muddied with disdain. This was the hour I'd been looking forward to, after all.

The sea, though rough, was not stormy. It was simply a chore to get the passengers onto dry land, to unfasten and refasten the harnesses, swing back the arm, two at a time. We were there for twenty minutes.

"You might have put it off a day" I sniped sideways at Kryz as I relieved the last passenger from the burden of his harness. The unnecessary physical exertion had got my blood up once again.

"It wasn't like this when we set out. You know how it can storm out of nowhere."

I ignored this. It was true enough. But she knew perfectly well that wasn't really my complaint.

"Hey El, hey Dirk, nice to see you again. Hope you had a safe journey." The others, I didn't really know but I gave them each a friendly nod. I'd only met them once and, if truth to be told, I wasn't sure I liked them. And then there was Karl. The cool Norwegian who watched you with his eyes, as if suspicion were the bedrock of his thoughts, and behind the cool exterior a subtle danger brewing, like a flame sinking lower and lower towards a reservoir of paraffin. It was two years now since the backpacking trip, when I suspected he'd cut the rope. He still made me uncomfortable.

"Just right up this way folks," I thumbed towards the stair. "Shoulder your small packs. It's a bit of a haul, but not too bad." I grabbed a larger bag off Karl. "We'll take that one up in the hoist."

He smiled politely and seemed relieved. Perhaps I was making too much of things. And anyway, I had no proof. I also tried to press down my annoyance about the extra people. It



wasn't there fault, and I had at least sufficient presence of mind not to blame them for it. I could blame Krys, but even that would have to be handled carefully. It wouldn't do to welcome these folk onto the island with the poison of bad feeling behind my words and thoughts. I made a conscious decision to take pleasure in my guests. After all, I had been eagerly anticipating their arrival. But it was tough.

As soon as the guests were on the stair, I grabbed Krys by the arm so that she'd hold back, then I drew her to the side, making sure we were out of earshot before I spoke.

"Krys, I said THREE people maximum. And you've brought five? We don't have that many beds!"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh Ren, why do you always have to be so melodramatic. They brought their own bedrolls. They can sleep on the floor if they need to. It'll be an adventure!"

I wanted to say that wasn't the point, but then I remembered my new vow and bit down on my words. Even under the bite they tasted bitter. It was the essence of the flashpoint between me and Krys. Otherwise we weren't a bad couple. But every relationship I'd ever had always seemed to falter on this weak link, and part of my frustration was the knowing that this one would probably be the undoing of me and Krys. I would see a way to do something, and she would think that was unrealistic and didn't belong in the world of real people who earned a living. I would say, we should get satellite internet and tour in a van, managing websites. She would say, wouldn't it be more reliable just to work in a bank? Perhaps it was my fault. I didn't have a good enough reply, or one I could think up in time. And she was right of course. She knew the layout of the station, as I had discussed it with her before I left, complete with diagrams and maps. Physically, at least, there was room for people to stretch out extra beds in the small rooms, or even at the bottom of the light tower. But that sure wouldn't leave them much space, and the guests would be tripping

over each other. But that wasn't the point, as I saw it. The point was that she'd just assumed I would be okay with the extra people, without asking. And the point was that the living facilities on the rock weren't designed for that number of people. It was originally designed for a family of five, maximum. Either one keeper with family, or three keepers and no family. So now there would be a pressure for space, and tempers were likely to fray, and that number of bodies would interfere with the chores I had to complete on a daily basis. It was just inconsiderate in a way that really irked me.

But I knew she didn't do it with malign intent. We'd had the conversation before. It never went anywhere. It was just a thing about the two of us, a dynamic that somehow surfaced like a flow of charge whenever the two of us got together. Yet not all the time. Only some of the time. She was a good girl in all other ways. And I loved her. And I still didn't want to lose her.

I managed to salvage extra chairs from a store room so that the whole group could eat together, though it was a small table and an absurdly tight space for seven people. Dirk and Eloise were friends through Kry's and we had met a number of times.

I liked Dirk. He was a large, affable sort of fellow who walked with a cane. Quiet and considerate and slow to any anger. Always the first to encourage another with a positive thought. I would trust Dirk with my life. But I worried about that cane around the island. This really wasn't the environment for someone with a gammy leg, and again I tried to keep my frustration in check. Eloise, his girlfriend, almost seemed a bizarre inversion of Dirk, like something conjured backwards in a mirror. They were a real life demonstration of the principle that opposites attract. Bespectacled and bookish, with long black hair straight as stripped wire and just a little greasy, as if all that pent up sexual frustration somehow oozed out through her follicles. Eloise was an aspiring poet, forever working on her book. I won't be unkind and say

she was pretentious. I'd heard some of her work and thought it not bad, though I didn't count myself an expert. It seemed to me, though, that it held far greater importance for her than for anyone she read it to. For the most part, Dirk quietly acquiesced to El's demands and few sparks flew, but when they did, Eloise unmasked a more hectoring, schoolmistressly side to her personality I was glad to be safely remote from.

Impressions of the others I was forced to form by observation.

Karl surprised me in the store room. As luck, or lack of it, would have it, I had the ammunitions case open at the time.

"Guns?" he said, with genuine puzzlement, though it seemed to me that his gaze lingered on the rifle and the pistol just a little too lovingly. "You expecting a coup?"

"It dates from bandit days" I explained. "Pirates...or even just thieves, would rob lighthouse stores at gunpoint. Sometimes this was the only defense." I didn't tell him that I was the only one who carried keys to the firearms case, or where I kept those keys.

Juan, as he reminded me more often than I cared to hear, ran his own business designing T-shirts. He was an American with some kind of Native American or even Peruvian thing going on. I couldn't quite place it. He sported large but entirely undecipherable tattoos on his upper arms. It was never clear just how successful the T-shirt business was or whether he had ever actually sold a single shirt.

"Hey man," he said, within the first hour. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I really need to call my sponsor. They didn't tell me there was no cell coverage out here." He held out his arms in a shrug. "Krys says you have a sat-phone."

"Sure," I said, holding it out for him so that I was spared the intervening questions. "Just don't go to town on it, alright?"

“I hear you.”

“We have internet too, you know.”

Actually, that was a half truth. The cable link was flaky and intermittent. Other times the computer was just slow, taking three minutes to load a web page. That kind of thing.

Anthea was like the Anti-El. She had the kind of body she could use to twist the little finger of almost any man, and a pulsing, pleading sexuality that throbbed for expression like raw voltage. One had to put up screens against her. She was also new age and talked utter drivel at least fifty percent of the time...the one thing that actively seemed to provoke Karl, the Norwegian, from his simmering watchfulness.

“You must be a Virgo,” she said, thrusting her chin towards him.

Karl took a slow sip of his coffee and stared at her. “I don’t believe in any of that shit,” he said at last. “I believe in wind. Would you like to hear some?” He tilted his buttocks.

“That’s just because you don’t understand it! Seriously, you should have a full chart done. You might learn a lot about yourself.”

“I already know enough about myself. If there’s one thing I’ll never let fuck with my brain, it’s an astrologer.”

Anthea huffed impetuously and took off from the table.

Dirk looked across at Karl appraisingly. “Hey, I know she can be a bit much. We all know it. But cut her a break will you?”

Karl just glared at him.

So this was our brood. Against myself, I must confess that I liked them. They annoyed me. And yet I liked them. This was another thing Kry’s and I never saw eye to eye about. She wanted me to like people or to hate them. She could never understand how I could have one foot in both.

During the day, when the chores were done, they were a delight to be with. It dispelled the Robinson Crusoe loneliness of the island. The talk was mostly insane, especially when Anthea was involved, but it distracted me and I found myself smiling at implausible times around the rock, even in the middle of performing my duties. I began to look forward to our daily gatherings in the afternoon sun, as we were blessed for a stretch with fine weather, and it was more disappointing than I would openly admit if some minor crisis or repair coerced me not to be present. There wasn't exactly a picnic site on this hoary little isle, but up on the saddle, leaning back against the sun-warmed rocks, and provided you didn't try to get too comfortable, there was conversation and sky to be had, and the wheeling of gulls, and a blessed freshness in the air that kindled a warmth in the heart for the gift of human company.

So one morning, sat-phone in hand, I sought out Juan's whereabouts on the Rock, knowing that the coming confrontation would be awkward, and part of me feared it would spoil the rapport we'd all built up. Even Karl seemed to have lightened up enough to smile from time to time, which for him was a major shift.

I eventually spotted Juan by his droopy hair, sitting on a stone at the top of the wooden stair that led down, by a drop of about 250 feet, to the southern light.

"This place is awesome, Ren," he said quietly, glancing over his shoulder as I approached. "Austere, I'll give you that. But awesome. You could totally do a shirt."

"Totally," I echoed flatly.

He swung round more fully now, puzzled by something he heard in my tone, and squinted at me against the sun, shutting one eye down.

I went for it. “Look, it’s just...I *asked* you to go easy on the sat-phone. Remember? There’s a tariff on this damn thing for four hundred pounds. Four hundred! What the hell have you been doing? Calling day and night? Is your sponsor on Mars or something?”

He stood up and rushed into a calming gesture with his palms, face down, as if he were trying to soothe a snarling dog while at the same time backing away. “Hey man, I’m sorry. I really did have to call him. A lot. I swear I’ll pay you back as soon as I get home.”

“Don’t worry about the money,” I soothed. Actually, it was a worry, but I chose not to force it. “I’m just asking you to see that we’re in a special circumstance here. This was the only working sat-phone on the island. Now they’ve put a hold on my account. I can’t even top it up on the island. I’ll have to go into their office on the mainland and sort it out there.”

“They won’t let you do that online?”

“No.”

“But you don’t really use the phone, right? The net’s our lifeline out of here?”

“It’s one line, Juan. But on a place like this, you can never take anything for granted. You need emergency options. And we just lost one.”

Juan nodded gravely as the thought settled in. “Right. Right. I understand.”

“I’m just saying. That’s all.”

He was accommodating and apologetic and I didn’t want to milk the thing unnecessarily. I was being a bit overdramatic anyway, perhaps to play out my lingering annoyance at Kryz for going above my head with extra guests, even though I enjoyed their presence on the island. The truth was, I could still email Roehampton to have him come check up on us if I wanted. I didn’t know how often he checked his email though. Not often, would be my guess. Which meant that it might be days until I got a response. Not a threat to life by any means, but an inconvenience,

and I would need to talk to the skipper urgently about supplies. The last provision anticipated a month's supply of food for four, not for seven. As was typical for Krys, she'd forgotten to tell her extra friends to bring their own food.

The guests swanned around the island for several days, and they enjoyed themselves, but I knew what would happen. It wasn't exactly a holiday resort. Unless I gave them something to do, personalities would start to feed on each other and tensions would build. It happened everywhere, even with keepers, who bonded like brothers, or with keepers and their families. There are only so many ways you can walk around a rock 2000 feet by 700 feet at its largest dimensions, and most of that too perilous to tread off the paths.

So I let them do their own thing for the first few days. Eloise sat on a rock in the sun and wrote poetry. Juan sketched the north light station from different angles, looking for ideas for T shirts. The others busied themselves as they could, but there were few places to socialize outside. They sat around down on the landing stage and even chugged the tiny launch around the perimeter of the island when the sea was calm enough. That boat functioned for local service only. Anyone suffering a sudden and frantic bout of island fever would run out of fuel long before they reached the mainland. Though they might reach a smaller rock and die of exposure. It happened at last. Karl got bored with sunning himself up on the saddle. Even Anthea got tired with poking around in rock pools with her leggings rolled up, plucking out different pebbles to test their "vibrations."

Then one day the sky opened like a zipper and we all fell over each other in the cramped spaces of the living quarters. A generator ran electric for the living quarters, though it was prone to breaking down at inconvenient times and it was best to use it only when absolutely necessary. In this matter, Heritage Maritime Holdings showed some human insight. Even though the light

stations were sustained in their authentic historical condition, or close enough, there was no real need for the keeper and his guests to live by candlelight in a stone hovel. Even the light towers had some electric for ancillary lighting, so that maintenance could be conducted more sufficiently.

My plan worked a treat. Dirk was the first to voice it, clearing his throat as if it had been a spontaneous thought of the moment.

“Look, there must be something we can help you with around here. I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starting to feel like a fifth wheel.”

No one raised an objection. Instead, they all turned to me expectantly, like little children. Even Krys.

I played my part perfectly. “Well...let me think about it. I’m sure I can drum up something. Most jobs around here are pretty time consuming though, I have to warn you.”

Actually, if they were going to stay on the island for even a few more days, this change was essential. People were already starting to get under each other’s feet and tempers were ragged at the edges. It couldn’t be helped. Secretly, the Hyde to my Jekyll hoped the island would be a bit much for a couple of them and they’d just choose to leave when the tender made its next pass. But Krys could be persuasive with her friends, and that didn’t look like happening.

No dead weight was possible in our situation. The larger truth of this Rock was, if you weren’t working, you were in the way. With seven of us, even when working, you were still in the way. But I figured better that than lie idle. It wasn’t hard to find tasks for these good folks to do. But it wasn’t straightforward either. Even the simple chores around the place, especially associated with servicing the lights, required some supervision and instruction. Just cleaning the slits on the lens had to be done the right way or you chip the glass. The ball vent atop the lantern room had



to be checked and cleared of obstructions every morning. The storm panes on each light required washing inside and outside at least every second day. Not a job for someone with vertigo, especially on the north tower. Kerosene engines had to be cleaned, serviced, lubricated. Supplies shuttled from stores to one or the other station. For small bundles, this could just be carried down the main paths if you were careful with your footing. Larger bundles needed running on a hand cranked winch line to the north light platform, or by dolly. The hardest task involving stores, and also the most dangerous, was getting larger supplies to the southern light. A smaller storehouse existed down on the landing stage at the midrock, as it would be self-defeating to use the hoist and then have to bring them down again to the Southern end, but there was no proper stage possible round at that part of the island. So supplies had to be loaded onto the launch and taken round to the rocks there. Another, smaller winch line ran from those rocks to the southern light platform. This required planning in advance, as more than the slightest chop on the water made this exercise a risk to life and limb. I'm probably making it sound like I never had a moment of my own. But that isn't true either. If you keep up with the chores, you still have hours to fill, and this emptiness itself has set some keepers mad. Those who manage to keep themselves busy every hour of the day may even have something of an advantage, especially if alone.

The main paths on the island had been cut in stone sometime in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. A concrete overlay had been added later, at some unspecified time. In many places they were still quite serviceable, but in others, especially lower towards the sea where decades of storms had wreaked their savage will, the concrete overlay broke up into pits and cavities like tooth decay, well advanced on its journey back to bare rock. Across the saddle, at the rope bridge, the path of course was wooden planking. Also at the stair descending towards the south light. From island records recent enough to be recoverable, I saw that both these

stretches had been splintered to matchwood and torn away by storms at least twice in the last fifty years. The southern stair still looked fairly new, as if it had been rebuilt perhaps little more than a decade ago. That made sense as it descended to the lowest level and so was at the greatest risk from violent seas. But the rope ridge looked sorry as an aging dog. The planks creaked and groaned and the wires sang out of tune when you walked across it, as if they were threatening to snap. It looked like it hadn't been replaced for thirty years and was overdue for a storm that would reach high enough to wash over the saddle.

I was naïve enough at first to think that the highest the waves could ever reach. My imagination balked even at that. I could scarce imagine what violence of the atlantic ocean could raise waves so high that they could pound with force across the saddle some two hundred feet above the placid water. But then one day, when cleaning bird rime from the outside of the northern light, I received a shock. It just so happened that the sun chanced against the white stone surface of the tower at a particular angle and there, hooked to my ladder, doing my best as ever not to look down, I caught sight of a faint but ragged line winding around the tower. It could only be one thing: the remnants of ancient wave blast that had lashed the tower, dense with salt, long painted over, but imperfectly, because it was hard to erase entirely the determined signature of the sea. That was more than 500 feet above the water. What in God's name happened that day? A century ago. Two centuries ago. Who knows? If waves like that were lashing the north tower, anyone standing on the saddle would be swept sideways, straight out to sea. My blood ran cold at the image. In even my wildest dreams of storms raging on this benighted place, I had not deemed that possible.

One night, with my guests well settled now in their tasks, I lay with Krys in the dark, blinking after sex. I could almost hear the length of her eyelashes in the dark. Female blinking. But the sex itself had been oddly mechanical.

“That was nice,” I said, rolling on my side, and touching the back of my hand against her arm.

But I couldn’t fully hide the disappointment in my voice.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said noncommittally. “It’s this place.”

I hated the way my thoughts conspired to voice difficult things at the worst moments, but I couldn’t help myself. A number of small, nagging annoyances witnessed during the day ganged up on me.

“Why *did* you bring all those folks, Krys?”

I felt I heard her roll her eyes, though it was too dark to see. Rock backed up against the bedroom window.

“Not this again, Ren. Not now. Please.”

“It’s not personal Krys. It’s just common sense. I mean, Dirk for Christ’s sake, with that leg. Seriously, what were you thinking? You’ll be lucky he doesn’t break his neck on the stair.”

I heard her turn towards me sharply. I know I didn’t imagine that one.

“Is this about us, Ren?”

“No. Well...not entirely.”

She groaned. “Do you ever listen to yourself? You ran off to a *fucking lighthouse*. What was I supposed to think?”

I propped myself up on one elbow. I hated these conversations, because they embodied the essence of a lack of communication between us. To me, her side of things was deeply irrational, but I knew that she would never see it that way. Still, my tongue was like a runaway caboose on

a hillside railway. I couldn't stop it.

"I hardly *ran off*. We discussed this before I left. And what's with that guy Karl? He gives me the creeps." I hesitated a moment, uncertain whether the caboose had any brake lever at all. Apparently not. "And he's trying to pull you away from me."

Krys snorted in the dark. "You're imagining things."

"You know I'm not. I mean, come on. Don't tell me you haven't noticed. He turns on that cool and calculating Norwegian crap whenever I lose my temper a bit, so that I look like a raving hothead to you."

"Maybe you are a raving hothead."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

I was silent a long time. "Are we having a breakup here. Is that what this is?"

Now Krys was silent a long time. "No," she said. "No, we aren't." And there was something suddenly softer, more apologetic in her tone. As if she sensed a precipice both of us knew was near at hand, but neither of us wanted to step right up to.

"Then what?"

"Why did you have to come here, Ren? I mean...it's so damned eccentric, you know?" She turned on the lamp at her bedside table and shielded her eyes with the back of her hand, though against her own thoughts rather than the light.

"Sweetheart, we talked about this."

"Yeah, I know. We talked about it, but I didn't *really* think you'd do it, for crying out loud."

Now I was genuinely confused. "But I thought you liked the idea."

“Oh Christ, Ren, sometimes you can be so dim. The idea, sure. Like your ‘idea’ of setting up a makeshift hospital for sick lion cubs in Kenya, or your ‘idea’ of living off the grid in the Australian outback. The concepts are great. We just can’t do them. I mean, not in the real world.”

And I lay back against the pillow, because I just didn’t see it that way. Both of those were real ideas I’d had in the past, and both of them seemed workable to me. I knew practical details of each that Krya had never listened to. What if we truly weren’t compatible after all? The thought left a singular chill in my spine track. I had never really contemplated the possibility before. But then she rolled over and flung her arms over my chest, nuzzling into my side. Her warmth flowed into me and melted the cold away, like an implausible medicine that was really just a placebo. Such deluded beings.

After breakfast, Anthea hung around nearby. I didn’t have time for her zany observations right now. Then I noticed she seemed a little rattled and was waiting for others to wander out of earshot.

“I can manage on my own, you know” she offered, oddly subdued. She wasn’t looking at me, but instead fiddling with her shoelace distractedly. For her, this was highly irregular.

“I’m sorry?”

“Coming at my window after we went to our rooms. I wasn’t quite getting undressed, but I might as well have been.”

I stopped and stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I *am* a big girl, you know. I don’t need a daddy checking up on me...if that’s what you were doing. And if it wasn’t, well...you kind of creeped me out. If you wanted sex, you might have just asked, you know.”

“Anthea...”

“Come on, I saw you. You came at my window with a lantern. I saw your silhouette. If you were just checking on folks, you could have knocked.”

“Anthea, that wasn’t me. I don’t check at folks’ windows with a lantern. It must have been Karl. I can’t say I’m surprised.”

She shook her head. “Karl’s too big. This was a slimmer person, your build.”

“Okay, Juan then.”

She laughed nervously. “Give me a break. Juan couldn’t even pick up a lantern. His elbow would snap.”

But it couldn’t have been Juan anyway, I realized, because I’d been talking to Juan and Eloise for about twenty minutes after Anthea went to her room. He’d been showing me his ideas for T-shirt designs, which were all so dreadfully bad that it took the greatest tact I could summon to treat the conversation seriously. And it couldn’t have been Karl either, because to fetch the lantern he would need to walk right past us to the end of the corridor, unhook it from the wall, and then walk past us a second time. And that never happened.

I took a deep breath. “Anth, I promise you I wasn’t outside your window. I wouldn’t do that. And I don’t think any of the other guys would either. I mean, they’re odd sorts, but they’re not nasty.” Actually, I wasn’t this certain about Karl, but I just let it ride. “You were probably sleepier than you thought.” I held out my hand, palm up. “No really, I’m serious. I’m not trying to insult your intelligence or patronize you. This place can make you think you see things that aren’t there. Happened to me. Thought I saw a guy up in the lantern room. In broad daylight. If it can happen to me...”

She frowned into this thought. “But you were on your own.”

For that, I didn't have an answer. And for some reason it unsettled me, so I turned away.

But Anthea was poor at keeping secrets and rumors of her apparition spread like wildfire. Before I could stop it, Karl aped mischievously with the lantern at dinner, his back hunched over and a shambling gait. He was surprisingly talented in the role. Everyone laughed. Anthea, quite recovered in the brilliance of day, took it in good humor, and she could see it clearly couldn't have been Karl.

But to herself while they laughed, and quieter. "I'm pretty sure I was awake, actually. It was someone at my window and they rattled the latch, trying to get in." I was the only one who heard her.

Eloise was less relaxed. Withdrawn and pale at lunch, just picking at her food.

Dirk spotted it at once and voiced his concern. "What's up, love? Are you feeling sick?" But she just shook her head and batted away his attentions irritably. Later, she came up to me discreetly and asked if she and Dirk could swap rooms with Karl, because Karl's had no window.

"Sure," I said, surprised. She seemed shy and embarrassed to have been spooked by the morning's events, and I didn't want to deepen her discomfort by making a big thing of it. "Sure El, we can do that. No problem."

At some unconscious level, this incident bothered me. Not because I was afraid of a spook at Anthea's window, and not because that's what I thought it was. Not even because the general shape and manner of the apparition only really fitted one person, which was me. I imagined to launch an immune response against that thought before it even had the power to take hold. But when I had at least imagined a ghost on the Rock, for tales of a haunting went way back, as they did with nigh every light in existence, I never imagined it as a fleeting

shadow glimpsed in the glare of daylight at the top of the light tower, as reported in the old keeper's journal.

It had always been a face at a window, with a lantern.

\*

A week passed on the Rock and for a while it seemed that the group would really bond, almost like a family. Even Karl relaxed into himself and that brooding, bearded doppelganger who dwelled in his body, receded out of sight.

But then on the seventh day a furious row broke out between Dirk and Eloise. We all heard it from about half way across the island, like a seagull fight. I never saw Dirk yell at someone before. I didn't even think he was capable. But the argument itself shredded into vapors as I arrived, trying to calm things down. Nothing could be pinned to anything, or anyone.

"I want to leave this island," Eloise asserted, with her chin sticking out. "*We* are leaving."

"Well not for another ten days you're not," Dirk laughed, the residue of something caustic still rolling in his words. "You're the one who said yesterday that the austerity helped you with your poems."

She glared at him. "Just because I'm dyslexic doesn't mean I'm stupid. My poems are not 'austere.'"

"Didn't say they were."

Karl poked his head out his room. "Can't you guys keep it down?"

El glared at him. "Why don't you just mind your own fucking business for once?"

A tense narrowing crept into Karl's eyes. He didn't like that at all.



I intervened, sensing that threshold where someone might really say something they would later regret. “Look guys, don’t knock yourselves out on it. We’re like hamsters on a wheel here. This kind of shit happens on lighthouses all the time.” I floated an apologetic smile, hoping it would defuse things. “They even warn you about it in the manual. No kidding.”

Eloise turned her gaze on me, burning. “What about it, Render? I mean, we’re not prisoners here right? *Right?* I said I want to go home!”

I settled my weight carefully. This needed handling with tact. Unfortunately, the answer was also clear. “It’s not as straightforward as that, El. You declined the boat when it was here yesterday. The tender isn’t at our beck and call. Boyston has a tour of islands up and down the coast he has to service. Takes him twelve days. Then he starts over.”

Dirk frowned at me. “Who the hell’s Boyston?”

I clicked my tongue at my own lapse. “I meant Roehampton, sorry.”

Eloise continued to stare. The ferocity of her gaze burned towards the back door of tears. “But if it was an emergency he would have to come back!”

I took a deep breath, allowed my decision to reach its center of gravity. “I can’t do that either El. This isn’t an emergency. Not by a wild stretch. If I called that in, he’d chew my ear off. And now we have plenty of food, you’ll just have to make do until the next time the boat comes round. I’m sorry.” I didn’t even mention the fact that I had to pay for their food, at least for now.

Eloise stormed off in a huff, slammed her door behind her.

“Hey, Ren, I’m sorry” Dirk shrugged. “I don’t know what’s got into her, but it’s probably my fault. It usually is.”

This sounded more like the Dirk I knew. “Don’t worry about it. Just give her some space. Give yourself some as well, Dirk. Find a spot away from the crush for a while, that’s all. Take some time out on the observation deck. Or take the launch round the island for a quick spin. You’ll feel much better.”

Dirk nodded self-consciously, not looking at me, as if he were a small child who had been caught in the middle of some meaningless, implausible mischief.

I didn’t see Dirk or Eloise the rest of the day. I think they split to opposite sides of the island. The others took the hint and dispersed quietly to find their own spaces on the Rock. Even the gaudy colors of Anthea’s talk muted back for a while. The spectacle of Dirk shouting his head off, with tendons tight as hawsers in his neck, was unnerving for everyone who knew him, and not soon dispelled from the imagination. I let the chores go for the day just so that they had the extra space they needed to relax, and I didn’t get in their way. Karl, still fuming from his little clash with El, went wading in some shallows in the North West corner with a bucket. The only place on the island safe enough to do that. He came back with a regular little zoo of his own...crabs and starfish and anemone fastened to rocks. Then, when he saw others were only feigning their interest, he got bored with the whole thing and emptied the bucket out back.

Juan worked furiously on his designs now that he couldn’t call his sponsor, but he would soon run out of paper and I wondered how his energy would ground itself. I didn’t see where the others went or what they did. But I figured it better I just leave them to it.

I did take the opportunity, when the dwelling was deserted, to test out the face at the window thing. Anthea’s window faced onto the same rocks as my own. There was no path back there. Everyone was in the building and the outer door was locked. I suppose it was

technically possible that someone among the group, acting stealthily, could have slipped the key ring from its hook, quietly opened and closed the door, then picked their way along the rocks round the back of the house. But in the real world that made no sense. The idea of walking along here with a lantern was laughable. You needed both hands just to balance, at all times. When I ran the scenario in my mind, I tried to imagine Dirk struggling over the rocks with his cane. That ruled him out as soon as the image presented itself. As for Juan, he wouldn't even risk his bare ankles on those rocks by daylight. The idea that he'd have a change of heart after sundown, when it was three times as dangerous, was too dumb to waste time on. I already knew it couldn't have been Karl. Krys wouldn't. I knew her like the back of my hand. And I was talking to Eloise at the time, so it couldn't have been her either. It wasn't Anthea, unless she was making up the whole tale. That pretty much left just one person. Unless the island had a visitor. I didn't rule this out *entirely*. After all, even today, the firearms weren't just part of the living museum thing.

Far off down the rocks that way and you came to the cliff stair. Was it just possible that someone might had docked their boat at the landing stage in the dark, hauled balls up the cliff stair, then broken from the path to clamber over the rocks? But that was a perilous passage and they would need to be a skilled climber at least. And for what? Just to come peer in someone's window in the dark...and then go back to their boat? It made no sense.

So I scrambled along that way myself. Even in tough shoes with good tread, I risked breaking my ankle on freak angles or cracks in the stone, and that was in daylight. When I finally made it to Anthea's window, a distance no more than 50 yards, my feet ached with the effort required just to keep my balance. And it was impossible anyway. I'd have to stoop

down to her window as if I were imitating a dwarf. There's just no way that someone could have been there.

It was inconvenient enough to contemplate the return journey that I fiddled with the window catch to see if there was any way I could coax it open from the outside, so that I could just climb back in through the window, but it was hopeless. She'd locked it from the inside and I can't say I blame her.

When I made it back safely with two ankles intact, the others began to drift back one by one. Karl and Juan. Even Kry's seemed smiley and bubbly. People emerged refreshed from their pockets of down time, finding a private space on the rock, and doing whatever came to mind to loosen the knots of the spirit...draw, write, just gaze out to sea. It was a sparkling, clear day and perfect for it. I couldn't let the chores go completely for the day, so when the others began to return, I set about attending to the most important ones, like unsmoking the glass, so that I didn't fall a day behind.

It was already dark by the time I opened the door to the north tower. Around the inside wall of that tower, the spiral stair begins its long ascent to the lens house. But in the center of the space stands an open pit some six feet in depth, and into which the counterweights of the clockwork driving the lens, as previously described, descend to their full reach. This pit had no guard rail, for keepers have it burned into their soul like a brand.

And it was from the dark bottom of this pit I fancied that I now heard issue, softly but distinctly, a kind of bestial groan and vague animalistic shuffling. Like some unknown predator lurking there, carefully awaiting its moment.

“Hello!” I called into the echoey space of the tower, not daring yet to approach the pit. The sound cut to silence at once. My brain mossed thick with surprise. I knew that I had heard something.

I didn't usually throw the electrics in the tower unless it was a moonless night or closed with fog. There was more than enough ambient light to ascend the stair. But on this occasion I turned on the electrics. The lamp itself and its entire mechanism were working history, accurately preserved. But there was no need for a keeper in a museum to conduct repairs by oil lamp. So the electrics were provided, housed discreetly so that it wasn't the first thing that any visitors to the tower, landing by boat, would perceive. In this matter, Heritage Maritime Holdings showed some foresight and common sense. Dimly though, I wondered, who would ever be crazy enough to visit the island, except Roehampton.

The safety lights flickered on in the tower, but it still wasn't enough to see into the belly of the pit, so I struck a lantern and approached the edge gingerly. I had warned my guests over and over about the pit. Still, I worried. It wasn't a feature on a burned-in map of hazards for them, as it was with me. Perhaps I would have to construct a guard rail after all.

“Is someone down there?” I called, warily hoisting the lantern over the pit. “Is someone hurt?”

And there, staring back at me were two bodies, wet and glistening, Anthea on her back with her legs spread, Dirk with his pants round his ankles, making out in the bowels of the lighthouse. Two faces staring up at me by lantern-light, wide eyed and child like.

“Oh for Christ's sake, guys” I said, and dumped the lantern reflexively at the edge of the pit with a clatter too loud for the tight acoustics of the space, leaving them to clamber back out by whatever means they'd got themselves down there. Feeling vaguely nauseated, but for

reasons I couldn't quite articulate even to myself, I forgot my chores altogether and quit the place, leaving the door open on its hinge.

Later, I sat writing in the office, working by the light of the small oil lamp sitting on my desk. Not by choice but because the electrics in the guest unit was playing up. Safety lights along the corridor between rooms burned lower than usual all evening and the lamps themselves emitted a quiet, high-pitched whine just at the threshold of hearing that got on everyone's nerves. I made a note to check the generator in the morning. I didn't like working by oil lamp. It sooted the low ceiling in the office and I had enough of ancient equipment during the day. It wasn't romantic.

Paperwork too was a beast in this job. At least half of the total work. Receipts for fuel and supplies received. Weekly reports on the status of the lamps, to be emailed to H.M.H. I managed to negotiate a stipend for my guests because they were helping out to the point that they were really working part time. But then that involved drawing up a rota for chores around the island, and keeping a proper log of who did what. Replacement part requests for the mechanicals and the kerosene engines, along with a log of all components destroyed or worn out. Maintenance schedules. Balance sheets for wicks, kerosene, rope, soap, spare lanterns, oilskins. Accident or incident reports. I hated this part of the job so much that it was almost a relief to escape from the office and pump out a septic tank or clean up an oil chimney.

Dirk came to see me while I was writing, the door open. He hovered there like a moth, uncertain of the light within. "I put out that lantern for you."

I sat back in my seat. I hadn't even registered that at the time, and a sudden vision of what could had been, paraded luridly in front of my eyes. I could almost imagine the headline now. *Historic Lighthouse Burned Down by Seasonal Keeper and his Student Friends.*

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

The moth hovered a moment longer, played with the risk of its lamp. Dirk cleared his throat awkwardly. “Ren, don’t tell Eloise. Please. I’m begging you. It’s not what it seems.” He sighed deeply. “I really do love her. I don’t know what I’d do if...”

I turned towards him and dismissed the idea gently with the back of my hand. Truth was, I’d already more or less forgotten the whole incident. “Hey, you guys are adults. What you do is your own business. I can’t exactly say to people, no sex or whatever. I’m not a camp counselor or something.” I meant this to be light hearted, but Dirk seemed to take it more seriously than I intended, looking down and nodding gravely.

“It’s just...there’s stuff with the equipment here I’ve got to get on with, you know?” I leaned back into a sigh. “Whether you guys hang out with me or not.”

Dirk’s chest heaved deeply and he looked up at me at last. There was a shine in his eyes. “You’re right, Ren. Absolutely right all the way down. And I’m sorry. Truly I am.” He turned to leave.

“Dirk...”

He paused in the doorway.

“It’ll be fine. You guys’ll be fine.”

“You don’t think Anthea will...”

I shook my head. “Nah. I don’t see that.”

He nodded as if this was sage advice, patted the door jamb in thanks, then floated away. Really, I didn’t know what Anthea would do, having no more experience of the girl than Dirk himself...well, less actually...but in my mind’s eye I saw her as a creature with bright wings that would flutter on to the next blossom. On and away from the island if that’s what it took. I

didn't see her as wicked or manipulative. She had a good heart. But her passions couldn't be bottled. It would be like trapping a bird of paradise in a cage. I could see it that way, but I wasn't sure that Eloise could.

\*

"What's the matter?" Kry's pushed her hair back and twirled it into a knot, hanging free from her face. "Aren't you in the mood?"

I lay on my back, watching her eyes fill with questions, with vague unvoiced suspicion.

"It's not that. Just something I saw today." Now, in the dark, I couldn't get the image of Anthea and Dirk out of my mind. Like worms writhing in slime. It seemed to have been waiting for me there, just under the threshold of perception. Trusty old Dirk with his cane.

So we went at it mechanically until she slapped me on the chest and just pulled away. "Forget it. Get back to me when you're not phoning it in."

She sat on the edge of the bed and ran her hands through her hair. "And why did you leave the curtains open. I know the electric's down, but it's not like we need the extra light." She mock-mooned her face at me. "I've seen your ugly mug before you know."

I snapped out of my reverie with a soft click. "Sorry, what?"

"I said I've seen your sorry face before."

"No, I meant before that." I propped up on my elbows. "The curtains. You were talking about the curtains."

"Yeah, so."

"I closed them. I know I did. I remember doing it."

"You haven't rolled one and didn't tell me?"

"Talk sense. In here? The stink would fill the whole house."



She contemplated that for a moment. It was incontestably true.

“No...I’m serious. I closed them. You must have opened them again and you just don’t remember?”

She leaned right across me and planted her hand on the covers beyond my chest. “And why would I do that, genius? Just in case El’s polter-face fancied a peek in at our window as well, and he could get a good gander at us doing the rough sea shuffle?”

“Yeah, I see your point.”

Weather on the Rock changed quickly and sometime during the night a storm blew up, my first real storm on the island. I was awakened by a sound which I thought at first was an explosion down by the landing stage.

Krys, already awake, turned towards me. We never did close the drapes again, so we could see each other clearly with our dark-adapted vision. The sound came again. *Boooooom!* I seemed to feel the vibration of it in every cell in my body. Deeper than thunder. An ancient, primal sound from the bowels of the world. The window rattled in its socket. Screw heads holding the shelves in place on the opposite wall shuffled visibly like tiny safe combinations, turning. Flakes of plaster shed to the floor.

“God help us, Ren,” she said” her voice soft and hairy with fear, “listen to *that.*”

Rationally, my mind knew what the sound was, knew because it didn’t take long to figure out and anyway I’d been warned. But my body had never felt it before, my ears had never heard it. And now the warnings seemed abstract and naïve. The empty words of clueless pen pushers far away. It was the sound of waves the size of great ships pounding like the fists of a monster in the cave that ran through, and under, the island. Again it came.

Krys leaned over me, white faced. It was as if we could feel it, right under us, like a wild beast, a pissed-off creature roused from fathoms too deep for humans to count, thrashing upwards from its lair. “Christ, that shit could split the island in two.”

I pulled her towards me gently. “Oh I don’t think it’ll do that.” But there was a place inside the sound of my own words where conviction wavered. “This rock’s a tough old bastard. I’m sure it’s seen many storms worse than this.” My heart jumped around like a small monkey in a basket each time another wave thundered into the cave. It was like something greater than the forces of this world. Thor in his workshop.

For the first time, I realized that I cared about these people. What happened to them mattered to me, and I was a little disconcerted by the discovery. Perhaps part of me wanted to hold them at arms length, but I couldn’t. Certainly, finding Dirk and Anthea going at it in the tower was something I couldn’t unsee, and perversely my mind’s eye kept playing for me, as if I was a secret voyeur, though it disgusted me at the same time. But it wasn’t the deepest response. I feared for Anthea, because I understood, or thought I did, that her exuberance was just a way of trying to hold herself together, though against what or for what, I wasn’t sure. I feared for El and Dirk, because they were both seemed good people, but I wasn’t sure if they were really the people for each other. I feared for Dirk in particular, because I knew that if they separated, and not just over this, he would show nothing externally, but inside, a corrosive sense of failure might eat away at him. He seemed to have that kind of vulnerability. El would be hurt, but she would recover. Dirk, I wasn’t so sure.

*Boooooom!*

Krys dug the soft ends of her fingers into me and groaned. I clenched my hands in the sheets. But I was so glad of her company. I wondered if it could have been this sound, and nothing else, that pitched a previous keeper over the precipice of madness.

And then, inexplicably, just lying there listening to it, the fear in both of us withered to exhaustion and it became inexplicably soothing. When we woke up next, it was morning.

On the way down to the south light, crossing the saddle, I noticed that the rocks under the rope bridge were still wet from the night's fury, draining slowly, and the planks on the bridge itself were streaked from west to east as if lashed with a many-tailed whip dipped in seawater. It was a bad storm. I knew from the logs that most blows on the Rock failed to reach up to the saddle, so I was alarmed at what I might find as I descended to inspect the light tower and its service shed. Much lower down on the rock, the south light was the most vulnerable structure on the island.

I found some debris...unidentified wood from god knows where tangled up with seaweed, laid against the west side of the tower as if it had been carefully placed there. But I knew it was simply the idiosyncrasies of the sea, which at times made implacable force seem oddly delicate, or the delicate implausibly fierce, as in the slow erosion of a once proud and fang-toothed rock upon a headland, to a sorry stump, round as a woman's shoulder.

The tower itself survived intact with no real signs of damage, though the limestone dressing was still wet from wave blast from the west side, right up to the level of the lens house. Some splash water had breached the lantern room itself and drained down into the mechanism beneath. That would need to be disassembled and cleaned out before the salt water had a chance to inflict damage to the precision parts. But it wasn't serious. An afternoon's attention should take care of it.

After I completed my damage inspection, I fetched the trolley and unbolted the doors of the local storage shed, to move a reserve of fuel from the store to the base of the light tower. As soon as I turned the tap on the main tank, I did a massive double take. I was chagrined to see that the level had been allowed to drop down to 5% and had not been replenished according to the rota. There was plenty of time over the last few days, and a week of calm water before last night's storm, to bring a fresh supply round from the landing stage, and wind it up to the storage shed on the pulley. It was a tiresome task, but inexcusable to leave it neglected. You never let the light's fuel reserve get down this low. I knew I'd posted a copy of the duties rota at the base of the stair in the tower, so I locked up the shed and made my way back to the light. I was in no mood to compromise on this. I strongly suspected Juan or Anthea, but whoever was at fault, they either had to toe the line or get off the Rock at the next opportunity, with a loss of stipend to boot. All my sympathies of the previous night evaporated. I was fuming like a dangerous cache of fuel myself.

I stared at the entry on the rota. And then I stopped, and stared again. At first my brain couldn't even make sense of it. Not only was it myself who had been scheduled to replenish the fuel for the southern light two days previously, but my signature was right there on the sheet, declaring that I had completed the task. I sat down slowly on the bottom step of the stair, because there was no one to blame but myself. I knew that my memory wasn't perfect, and there was a lot of shenanigans on the island what with Anthea and the others, but I struggled to summon any scenario in which I could have forgotten the tiresome chore of threading down the cliff stair to the landing, loading up the launch, steering it round to the south side of the Rock, unloading it, working the pulley, taking the launch back, ascending the stair...it was inconceivable. But anyway, it didn't matter, because there was my signature on the sheet. And yet there was no fuel

in the store. Why would I have signed the sheet if I didn't do it? It didn't make any sense. I created the sheet. Could someone have stolen the fuel? What, someone on the island? Karl, Kry, Eloise? What would they use it for? Did they have some secret kerosene technology hidden away that they hadn't told anyone about? No, that was nonsense. Someone off the island then? Sneaking onto the rock during the night from the south end...the one place where you might actually be able to do that. But the padlock on the storage shed doors wasn't forced. and there was only one set of keys hanging in the house, in the corridor where all the rooms are. Nobody could just walk in there and take them without *someone* noticing. And we locked the house when we left it unoccupied. There's no way it could have been done.

So all morning I spent my time in a dark mood retracing the steps of a task my own signature professed I had already executed. The odd thing was that it felt like doing it again, too. I had a dislocated memory of going through all the same motions, but then that was inconclusive, as I'd done the chore many times. I could easily have been tapping into one of those earlier occasions.

Finished at last, I fetched a small chair with me up into the lantern room and just sat there, pondering the meaning of it. First Kry, with the curtains, and now this. Was the stress of the job getting to me in ways I wasn't qualified to diagnose? Was it a delayed reaction? I remembered my immense, though unverballed, relief when my friends finally made the journey to the Rock. I was on my own for weeks before that. But so what? I was a solitary kind of guy. Or thought I was. And a few weeks was hardly half a lifetime deprived of my own species and the milk of human kindness.

Early onset dementia? I must admit that frightened me. If only because it had always frightened me. Two relatives on my father's side succumbed in the older prime of life, before

their hair swept over grey. But for crying out loud, how early was early onset? I was still shy of twenty five.

A trick at my expense? I considered this possibility seriously. And then, when I thought I had dismissed it, I considered it anew. I just didn't trust this guy Karl. He had that poised catapult aspect, though served behind a smile, that put me on guard whenever I spoke to him. You know, one of those guys where you feel you have to watch every word you say, because he might take something the wrong way and fly off the handle. There was always an implied sense of threat with him. Still, he didn't seem like the *pranking* kind, unless I had him all wrong. Anthea neither. Eloise was watchful and broody. I guess anything was possible with her, like trying to read weather in a sky that couldn't decide what it was going to do for the evening, but still it didn't quite fit. I didn't think it was Eloise either. Krys? Nah. She didn't have the imagination for that kind of stunt. Or the sticking power to see it through once she realized how much of a chore it would be.

Eventually I just sighed and let it go. I must have believed I had done it, but actually forgotten, and in my conviction signed the rota. It was the simplest explanation. There was a lot to keep on top of on the island and things could easily be forgotten or overlooked.

I felt the burden of the thought lift from me. Most of all I was relieved that I didn't have to confront my companions after all. Truth be told, I wasn't looking forward to the day when they had to leave me again, though I knew it would come. Even Krys wouldn't be able to stay in the end, though it was possible she could stick around longer than the others.

So I aimed to lighten my mood and turn my mind to other fascinations by reading the old keeper's journal. I'd marked the place I read up to and as chance would have it, the very first entry following on, was an account of a storm.

*9<sup>th</sup> November, seventeen hundred and fifty.*

*Heaven preserve us, a mighty blow last night! Two of the little boats were unlashed from their moorings and one found turned over half way up the ramp to the stair. The other was nowhere to be seen. It was luck and nothing more that we didn't lose them both. The whale's mouth bellowed like an old beast all night. God, that sound! It would chill the blood of a demon. Barely any sleep to be had on this rock.*

*11<sup>th</sup> November, seventeen hundred and fifty.*

*I worry about our island tonight, that it is not quite a thing of God's world. Common sense would warn me that my imagining has run with its horses, but I needs have this thought out before it bests me. Sometimes this rock takes the measure of a man and then changes him. I have seen the like before with relief keepers sent to the isle. Now, with one of these young fellows, I see it again. When he shipped on the boat, he stepped up a jovial lad and had to be pulled in a bit at the reins, if you take my meaning. This is not uncommon, and he accepted in good spirit; I was not concerned. But come his first watch alone by the lanthorn a change crept over him, but its source, aye even its nature, I cannot rightly say. I will tell you only that he paces the rock after dark, that he grows a beard thick on his young face, and that he has taken to scowling at us from under lower'd brows, like a threatened animal. His eyes spark like a creature in a cave. I*

*have challenged him on it, but the matter is queer, as there is no dereliction of duty. Truth be, he is the most diligent keeper I have seen at this place. But his presence unnerves his companion, and me. I must dwell on this. In such a small family of souls, it pains me to banish one for no great misdeed. But I cannot allow this bad feeling to live on unaddressed.*

And then my eyes fell on an entry that seized all of my attention, and I sat up straighter in my seat, hardly believing what I read.

*17<sup>th</sup> November, seventeen hundred and fifty.*

*Sometimes, in this peculiar isolation from my fellow man, I question whether I am quite of sound mind. Yes, there be three of us here this month as the storms come on, but when you're on your business about the rock you may not see your companions for many hours at a time, and with the wind up in its madness or the sea crashing at the gates of the light, it's like you were born alone to this world. Ah, but I wander from my point. I took upon myself the final watch last night, after having slept but fitfully through the bluster. By heaven's mercy these winds eased back in my time atop the wooden tower, and when it came time to extinguish the lamp, were naught to speak of. I had judged well the thirst of the lanthorn and made a note to the next keeper to carry more whale oil to the top of the tower on the first watch of the following night. I descended the stair at a slow pace, not a little weary from lack of sleep the night long and hoping*



*to purchase some for myself in the morn. Imagine then the fright in my breast to step outside the tower and glimpse, aloft, the very fire ablaze that I could swear on my soul I had extinguished just a few moments before. I cursed myself, thinking I must have failed to sight some oil left in the lanthorn's trough and the flame, perhaps smoldering, had somehow rekindled. So I ascended the tower once more, with dawn threatening in the windows, and at length gained the lamp house, only to find the wicks dark and cool, just as I had snuffed them, and the oil trough drunk to its dregs. But I checked and I checked again, for the lanthorn left unkept with a flame on its hat could soon burn down the tower. I descended the stairs, troubled in my mind. I stepped out the bottom of the tower and felt an odd pull backwards on my gaze, bidding me look over my shoulder and up to the light. And when I do, what should I see but the lamp ablaze at full tilt, as if its watchman had fallen asleep at his post! Much frightened now in my spirit, again I ascended the tower, for an error in this matter would allow no forgiveness. But even before I reached the lamp room I could see that the lanthorn was long since out, and the sooty smell in the lofts of the tower was the familiar smell, distinct to any experienced keeper, of a lamp snuffed long minutes ago. Once more I descended the stair, for what choice did I have? I descended the stair, and quicker this time, suddenly fearful of the tower that I had been happy to call a second home. This time I did not look back, for I am only a little ashamed to admit that I feared spying even one more time the sight of that ghostly lamp blazing high in the rising dawn. I did not look back until I was down the rough stair cut into the rock and then far away up the path from the light. Only then did I glance back at last, and to my blessed relief, the lanthorn was out. But I cannot explain this thing, and even as I write these words it brings once more the chill. There was no whale oil left in the trough.*

I had an odd sensation then, myself, as if this journal were somehow speaking to *me*, directly, and only to me, across the centuries. As if it were a kind of secret that I alone had been intended to discover. But that was impossible. I didn't know this man and would never know him. He died hundreds of years before I was born. The wooden tower he spoke of. The whale oil. I had forgotten that's what it must have been like. I could hardly imagine such a world. Wooden towers...even the strongest could be smashed to driftwood by an angry sea. Lamps that were but naked flame and fixed in position, never rotating. Lamps with no lens, the image focused only with crude mirrors. Sometimes a ship was already in danger of wrecking on the rocks by the time its captain caught sight of such a feeble lamp. But these thoughts, a kind of mask to my fear, slid away and I became quiet and contemplative. A cold hand reached across the years and touched the back of my own, brushing it lightly. I didn't know what I'd experienced this morning down by the south light, but now I knew, at least, that one other human being had experienced the same. The particulars were different, of course, but the *frisson* was the same. I had no doubt that we had witnessed phenomena with but one cause, I just couldn't name that cause. Perhaps it was the rock of *Carraig Sithe* itself. Perhaps even...but the thought that tried to form pressed a sudden warning, and my mind dropped it like a burning coal. Against my own better judgment then, I continued reading, as if my eyes were compelled to scan the pages of the journal and couldn't stop. I only wish that I could have.

*21<sup>st</sup> November, seventeen hundred and fifty.*

*It is with a heavy heart that I make today's entry in this journal. Alas, tragedy is struck! From this date on, things on this island can never be the same. Poor Peter! I only hope in my previous entries that I did no misjustice to the man. God rest his soul! And as God himself is my witness, I will tell what transpired today on this rock, though I can barely bring my hand to write the words, for grief, and for a shaking with a kind of rage that may also be fear, thought at what, I tell you, I know not. It began in the early hours of the morning. Or my instinct tells me that there it began, so I will not fail to record that part, should it prove useful to anyone who may one day read these words. Yes. I now have fear in my soul for ever being able to leave this island. Methinks the rock itself will not permit it. But enough: let me tell of this tale before it bursts my heart. I awoke in the small hours of the morning, with a start, to a dreadful sound. How even to describe it. It was like the mournful bellow of a great beast calling out into the mist and I knew, by some inner certainty that I cannot here render to words, that it issued from this very rock on which we dwell. I saw at once that Peter was away from his bed, his bedclothes thrown back as if in a rush to quit his rest, presumably about his pacing on the night path. It was a peculiar disturbance of his sleep or his spirit we had been entirely at a loss to cure. There was even talk of strapping him down to his bed. But the man himself would not have it and I could scarce blame him. We are not a hospital for infirmity of mind. We are the keepers of the lord's light, God help us, and such treatment does not meet the dignity of such a custodian, even if he is ill at ease in his own mind. In the end, I simply would not permit it. As I stood out there on the foggy path, I heard the terrible thing again. The lorn call from its deep breast, a great yearning into the night, filled with pathos and loss. The sound of it chilled me to the inner hollows of my bone. I fetched up Ivan out of his bed, and with the first bleak grey of dawn stretching into the fog, we walked the west path in search of our wayward lamb. Our steps were slow and cautious, for I tell*

*you that we greatly feared the beast that we heard but could not see. Once more it bellowed into the chasm, and my companion and I crouched in against the rock to save ourselves from the dreadful sound. But that was the last we heard of it. As the sun brightened in the fog, its clutches began to clear, and woe the sight that smarted our eyes. There on the rocks beneath us, sprawled like a broken thing, lay Peter's body, a frantic look in his eyes, the blood trails long and fresh from his ears. I pray to the lord, but I tell you now, I fear for our souls in this place.*

*As God is my witness*

*Mortimer Fowle*

*Keeper of the Light at Carraig Sithe.*

I closed the journal slowly, as if its words were teeth that might sink into me. It was impossible. The fog horn wouldn't even be invented for another hundred years, and yet here it was calling out to me from the pages of this journal. Somehow that early morning in 1750, time had crossed with time, and these men who rang pitiful bells in the fog in a futile attempt to keep the ships away, could not possibly have understood the thing that they heard, and took it for a mythic creature, calling for succor to the deep. How it must have seemed to Mortimer Fowle that the misfortunate young keeper Peter stumbled upon the lair of the beast in the dark, that it roared at him with such ferocity that it ruptured his ears, and he jumped over the rocks, clawing at his head, to his doom. But what was I saying? That the rock was haunted? Haunted by its own future? And that I was haunted by the pages of a journal written centuries before, by a lighthouse keeper long dead? I wasn't prepared to accept that. And if Mortimer Fowle and his companion

truly never left this island...I was afraid, for the moment, to read further in the journal. I was damned if I was going to allow such a fate to happen to me.

But as dawn came up full and clear, no fog in sight, these thoughts began to seem foolish. It was after all just my *assumption* that Fowle had heard a fog horn. I had no proof of that. And what experiment would I propose to conduct in order to prove it? The very idea seemed absurd. I can't even say why the idea took shape in my mind. Maybe after all it really had been a creature. A whale breaching or calling in the mouth of the cave. That would launch a fell sound for sure. Even a man's voice down there seemed oddly magnified and inhuman.

Later that morning, we suffered a setback. A loading crane down on the landing stage sheared free from its restraints during the storm and teetered on the edge. Anthea, assigned causeway duties the night before, failed to tie it down properly. But there seemed no point in crying over spilled milk, so I gathered all hands in an attempt to rescue the crane.

Karl threw a rope impressively high over its gantry and pulled, as if in a one man tug of war.

"Watch yourself!" I yelled urgently. "If that thing moves suddenly, it could tear your arm off."

But the only response from the crane was to rock even more ominously on the brink. I looped another line through an eye on the cabin and pulled. "Get ready to drop it if it's too heavy."

My words fluttered off with their own foolishness, lost to the heroics of our effort. Of course it was too heavy. The thing weighed more than a ton. But as we grimaced on the ropes, Karl and myself at the front, the rest joining on behind as best they could, it seemed at first that we were making progress. The motor block rotated towards us, beginning a swing back inland.

“Pull!” I yelled. But we already were. My heels were digging into ruts in the stone and I was leaning back almost at thirty degrees. “Don’t wrap that line!”

But then things started to go wrong. The gantry groaned with metal chagrin and the mass of the crane started a gradual, almost slow motion pivot away from us. My heels began to skid. It was hopeless. We couldn’t keep the weight.

“Drop it!” Karl shouted. “She’s going over!”

We let the ropes go. No choice. For a moment longer it hovered there, like an apparition on the edge of an event horizon, as if we might yet reclaim it. And then it dropped, the arm of the crane thrashing like a spastic sea creature, rending first with excruciating, ringing agonies on the rocks below, before rolling away into the Atlantic. Soon enough, a slowly diminishing ring of bubbles was the only evidence it had ever existed.

In silence we stood at the edge, gazing in. “Well that can’t be good,” Kryz said. “How are we going to get stuff off the boat.”

“We’ll manage,” I said grimly. “They made do on this rock before diesel cranes were invented.” But I didn’t sound entirely convincing, even to myself.

Back in the living quarters, already half spent with the effort at the waterfront and still grieving the loss of the crane, another shock stood waiting.

“Net must be down again,” Kryz muttered. “It’s been off for half an hour now.”

A suspicion twitched and I leaned over her shoulder to check the machine, a sudden memory rising to awareness. It wasn’t just the usual red bars for a poor connection, there was a sucking pit where the connection should have been. The icon wasn’t even there. I groaned and leaned my hands against the desk.

“The comms cable to the mainland runs out right under the platform. When the crane fell in, it must have severed it.” I closed my eyes, incongruously, against a roaring sound building up in my ears. This really was bad luck.

Karl frowned and ran his hands through his hair. “Is that fixable? I mean, I have some diving experience.”

I shook my head, still frozen in the same defeated posture in front of the screen. “Too dangerous. You see what it’s like even for the boat. We’d need a submersible, which we don’t have on the island.”

But though I answered Karl, or my body did, my mind was elsewhere, already halfway through performing a different calculation. I knew we were in trouble.

Eloise must have caught something in my expression. “The boat won’t know what’s happened. I’m right, aren’t I?”

I nodded slowly. Oh, without any word, he’d come nosing round at last, but that could take a while. Perhaps longer than a month. Without contact, he’d just assume that we didn’t need supplies refreshed and miss us out on his circuit. Of course, if he got an alert, he would divert right to us, except that we’d just cut right through our only means of communication with the mainland. That was a freak accident. He’d never guess. Even the worst of the storms did little more than interrupt the link with the land. Without a sat phone there was no way to contact him. We’d simply have to wait until H.M.H. tried to contact us, which was unlikely, or until the skipper grew suspicious and came to check up on us.

Morning duties proceeded with a grim if futile determination and no one really spoke to each other, just nodding acknowledgment when we passed on the pathways about the rock. But as day wore on I relaxed a little. It was a major inconvenience, but it didn’t seem likely we

would starve. We had pretty good fishing gear, everything minus live bait, stuffed away in the back of the storage shed down at the platform. I knew this for a fact, because I kept moving it further back to make way for other stuff. It would be some effort to dig it out, but it was serviceable equipment. Live bait wasn't a problem. We could procure our own in the shallows. And there were several spots around the island where creel and even rods set up right and left to do their own thing, would likely land a fair catch. This eased my mind.

Socializing on the rock was a peculiar thing. Our dinner table was too small...like too big a family cramped around too small a space. But it hatched some eccentric conversations. There was no television or radio on the island, and H.M.H. did not allow alcohol, though in fact we had smuggled some in disguised as bottled water and personal hygiene products. But there wasn't much, so we saved it for special indulgence.

At lunch everyone was strung out over loss of the internet. Its virtual spaces helped to offset that sense of island fever and there was often a kind of Darwinian competition for the chair at the computer. They knew we couldn't contact the boat and so looked to me to see how I was handling the situation. I was very conscious of their scrutiny, but I had run it right through in my mind. It was inconvenient, but I was sure we'd make it till Roehampton came to check up on us.

All during the meal Eloise said nothing. She sat pale faced, prodding absently at the pork on her fork, but hardly eating any of it.

"Doesn't it bother you?" She said at last, without meeting anyone's gaze in particular. "Any of you?"

Karl wiped his lips with a napkin. "If the boss is cool with it, I am. Are you going to eat that? If not, can I have it?" Again, a barely concealed hostility surfed in his voice and El didn't fail to notice it.



She pushed her plate towards him, without looking at him. “I’m not talking about that. I mean, how we all just happen to have these infinitely extendable holidays, all seven of us, so that we can just stick out on this island as long as we want. It’s almost like...arranged or something, I don’t know.” She shook her head, unclear where her own thoughts were taking her.

“I’m not on holiday, El,” I reminded her. “And neither are you guys.”

She glanced at me for the first time, then looked away just as quickly. “Yeah, I know, but I mean, doesn’t it just strike you as *awfully convenient* or something?” She spread her hands, bearing knife and fork, in an appeal for understanding. In the cramped space of the dinner table, it was a large gesture. Conversation withered suddenly to silence as everyone just stared. Her cheeks reddened under the silent pressure.

“I guess not,” she said in dismay or disgust, and pushed away from the table, hurrying outside as if for air.

“I should go after her,” Krys said, laying down her own knife and fork.

“Yeah, throw her in the sea when you find her,” Karl jibed, through a mouthful.

“Leave it,” Dirk said, speaking to Krys but glaring at Karl “She’ll be fine.” And then he went back to chewing his pork, which was by far the loudest sound on the island.

“Put me with her on the rota, Ren,” Anthea said. “She just needs cheering up.”

Dirk stared at his food as she spoke.

I nodded absently, but I wasn’t really sure that would cheer Eloise up.

“We’re all just a bit strung out,” I soothed. “The damn crane. And now the internet. Give her time.” I chewed my own meat in silence for a few moments, slipped it over with a sip of smuggled wine. “I’d like us to relax a little.”

“Relaxing’s half the problem, Ren,” Karl chided. “We need something to *do*. Don’t hog this fishing business to yourself. Let us help set that up. It’ll be like a little project we all share in.”

And I liked that idea as soon as he voiced it. We spent all afternoon setting up catch sites around the island, watched over only by the great tower of the northern light, whose single eye sees all upon the rock.

It worked well. The first morning after we set the rods and pots, we had enough mackarel and lobster to feed ourselves for a week. Even Eloise perked up when she saw that we weren’t about to die a miserable death by starvation after all. Secretly, I had a greater worry about fresh water, but I kept it from the others. I should have thought to set up rain traps before the storm. We had supplies enough for now and surely Roehampton would begin to wonder if we didn’t make contact? But I felt oddly vulnerable as I didn’t really know the man. I’d only ever dealt with him on a business basis, and for supplies I was always the one who initiated the contact.

A rich supply of crab and mackarel kept us fed along with our pre-existing supplies. Anthea and Eloise made coop-style traps to extend our range of catches in the shallows. Spirits lifted and life on the island seemed a breezy adventure again. I almost forgot about Roehampton and his silly boat. Still, there stole into my mind, now and then, the odd account of Mortimer Fowle, and I couldn’t quite banish it.

On the fourth day of successful amateur fishing, I fancied we almost felt guilty at our success. This wasn’t the way it was supposed to be on a deserted island, after all. You were meant to struggle for food and never succeed, eventually having to eat your comrades. The notion brought an ironic smile to my lips. Fortunately, that possibility *did* seem far-fetched. I also took time to revise the rotas, so that a lighter load of duties gave people the space to recover

from the stress of losing our communications with the outside world, and having to find our own food, despite our success at the task. Those duties still had to be done, or at least I convinced myself that they did, and so I took up some of the slack myself for a while, knowing that I risked tiring myself out. I figured I would phase them back in slowly, when I saw that my companions were in good shape.

One night Karl, unflappable Karl, blustered back into the supper table looking drawn. He hefted the lantern over the table, as if he were checking the faces of each of us, despite the fact that there was more than enough light to see by in the house. The internet may have been down, but the generator was still working fine. Or at least no worse than it usually did.

“What’s the matter? You look like...” But a sudden memory sparked and Anthea thought better of completing the sentence. She fell silent and leaned back in her chair watching Karl, eyes big and questioning.

“You’re damn right I have.” He swung the lantern at me. “Render, I’m telling you, something else is on this Rock with us. Something followed me up from the south light. It was on the stair right up onto the bridge.” He paused to heave his breath like a stone. “I swear to God. Here...feel my heart if you don’t believe me.”

Instead, I eased his grip on the lantern, turned down the leap of its flame, which was smoking the glass black, and set it aside. “Alright, alright, I believe you. Just breathe easy and sit down will you?” I tried to float a smile, even though I was unnerved myself. “You’re scaring the natives.”

“I don’t want to do any more duties after dark,” Eloise announced suddenly.

I sighed, rather impatiently. “That could be a bit tricky, El. We’re a lighthouse, remember?”

But I could see that she was afraid. And my own heart tripped to see this big Norwegian staring at me like a spooked horse. “Okay, how about this? We go in pairs.” I turned to Karl.

“Did you actually see anything?”

“I felt it, bro.”

“Okay...I’m not saying you didn’t, right. I’m not saying you didn’t. But this place plays tricks. You know it does. That’s a long and lonely walk up from the south end. Just take someone with you in future, especially after dark.” I felt foolish saying it. There was no difference after dark than at any other time. We were alone on a remote island. Not exactly your stomping grounds for anything but the most insanely enterprising psychopath. As for ghosts, I believed that in wild places, a certain animal instinct or vigilance dialed up a notch, but that was it. I believed in ghosts of the nervous system, and that they were probably just our safety mechanisms looking after us. Or perhaps that idea was just my own nervous system, looking after me.

That afternoon, when the others dispersed to their chores, Krys and I set about cleaning the living quarters. It was my least favorite chore and there seemed to be ten times as much of it to do because of visitors. A part of me yearned again to be alone on the rock, as I knew I could control that stuff. Just there myself, a quick going over would be all that was needed in the rooms once a week. Now it was a daily exercise. But I didn’t make my thoughts known to Krys, and anyway, I remembered what I felt like when I really was alone on the island. I hadn’t forgotten so soon.

“You shouldn’t be so hard on them,” Krys began, fluffing a pillow, as I wiped a dried-in food splotch off the windowsill. That carelessness annoyed me. “They’re no keepers, Ren. They don’t have your experience.”

“I know they’re not keepers,” I said drily. “That’s why I only asked for three guests.”

She rolled her eyes. “Let’s not have this conversation again.”

I didn’t feel like having it again either, so I bit down on my tongue’s momentum. But one part of it at least had to be said. Something nagging at me more recently.

“You shouldn’t have brought that guy, Karl, Krys. He can’t be trusted.”

She dismissed me with a wave of her hand. “Nah, Karl’s okay. You just have to get to know him.”

I stopped what I was doing, and put down my cleaning stuff. Krys was an intelligent girl, brighter than me in many ways. Which is why I could never quite figure how she could be such a poor judge of character in situations like this.

“He’s *not* okay, Krys. That’s just the problem. You weren’t there when he cut that rope. And he shouldn’t be left alone with you girls till we can get him off the island. I mean ever.”

She looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. “What?”

I fought to retain my calm. This kind of conversation was the most frustrating interaction with Krys. A danger which, to me, was staring us right in the face, she just couldn’t see at all.

“This mellow business of his is an act. And he thinks I’ve fallen for it too, but I haven’t.”

“What are you talking about? Why do you always have to be so *dramatic*? You barely even know him. And that rope thing, as if you’re an expert on ropes or something...you’ve talked about it till you’re blue in the face. You still didn’t see him do anything. It’s all in your mind.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, took hold of the cloth she was folding together, laid it aside. “Just for once, sweetheart, could you do me the favor of trusting my judgment on something? Is that possible?”

She reached for the cloth, but I put my hand on top of it.

I knew it was a crux moment. She would either take this offered branch, reluctantly perhaps, or she would push it away, and we wouldn't have a future because one way or another it would just always come back to this.

She sat on the bed too. "What am I supposed to think? You have Karl pegged for some kind of psycho just because he looks at people a bit funny. Christ, if that's not judgmental I don't know what is."

I nodded, but I let that pass too. At least she was sitting. I didn't consider myself right over Krys in most things. Just this particular area.

"All I said was that I don't trust him. And given the right circumstances, he could be dangerous. I trust my instincts, and that's what they tell me. I'm trying to look out for our safety, especially the girls in the group."

"Oh, come on!"

"I'm serious, Krys. I want you to stay away from the guy, unless we're all together, like at lunch. I'll make sure he's always with either me or Juan from now on, with the rota. Even then, I don't like it."

"So you really think it was him outside Anthea's window? That's what all this is about?"

I was waiting for this, but I didn't have a glib answer. "I don't know what she saw, if she saw anything. No, I don't think that was Karl. I don't think Karl has *done* anything yet. I think he's biding his time."

She sighed and fell back against the covers. "You ask me to trust your judgment, but *based on what*, Ren? Based on some gut spidey feeling you have that the guy is just...I don't

know..." she flapped her arms like a floundering gull "...inherently evil or something. Have you any idea how crazy that sounds?"

"Do you remember when we were in Thailand? The guy who came up and introduced himself and joined us for lunch?"

She groaned. "That was different."

"How? How different?"

She didn't have a reply, so I seized the moment. "Then he invited himself along with us for the afternoon's bus tour. And I whispered to you, when I had a chance, which was nearly never, that we had to get away from the guy, or we'd be robbed or worse, taken home in a bag. And you said, don't be crazy he's just trying to be nice. Do you remember all that?"

She picked at her nails. "Of course I remember."

"And so finally we shook him off, but the next day we read of that couple found with their throats cut in an alley?"

"There's no proof that was even him."

"It was him, Krys."

And oddly, she didn't contest that point. Not this time.

"Well, that's Karl, Krys."

She let her neck flop to the side, looked across to me.

"I mean the same type of guy. The same thing again. Why can't you trust me this time?"

Her expression flowed to a complex emotion, studying me. And to my surprise she reached out her hand and put in mine. "Alright. Okay, I trust you. I'll do it. It just seems so..." she rolled her eyes again... "out there."

"I know. Don't think I don't know it."

She propped up onto her elbows and let her hair hang. “So what about his ghost story thing? Are you saying that was just an act?”

I pondered this for a moment. It was a very good question. “No, I think something probably spooked him. You know what it’s like on that path. Maybe he caught a glimpse of his real self.”

She threw the pillow at me and laughed. “What am I going to do with you? You’re insane.”

And before I knew it, she was on top of me, kissing me.

“My mad, rad lighthouse keeper. Pity you don’t have one of those kinky uniforms they used to wear. It could actually be quite cute.”

“Believe it.”

When the sun was over the cusp of the island and afternoon chores were done for the day, I set the table for our early evening meal, along with Kryz, Dirk and Anthea. Eloise, Juan and Karl still hadn’t returned from their positions around the island.

I made a point of checking the wall clock, though I’d got used to telling the time by the sun. With the exception of striking the light, or meeting a boat down at the landing, there was no real need for timing devices on the rock.

I began to grow anxious. “Dirk, you’re absolutely sure that El went with Juan, and not Karl?”

He stopped his cane-shuffle to look at me, puzzled. I hadn’t shared my suspicions with anyone other than Kryz. She grimly kept tight-lipped and continued setting the table.



“Sure, Ren. I’m positive. Juan and Eloise went up to the north end. Karl’s at the platform. I saw him heading down there myself on my way past the cliff stair.”

I breathed a small relief. “Okay.”

I glanced back towards the doorway and physically jumped to see Karl slouching against the wall in the space there. He glowered at me.

“What are you talking about, boss? I wasn’t down by the platform. I was up at the north lamp. I’ve been buffing that goddamn lens all afternoon. Toughest bitch I ever met.”

“You can’t have been,” Dirk set his cane to the side and sat on a bench, leaning back against the wall so that he could make eye contact with Karl effortlessly. “I saw you down by the platform not less than an hour ago.”

Karl raised his eyes in mock surprise. “Are you calling me a liar?”

But Dirk was a big guy despite his gammy leg and he certainly wasn’t afraid of Karl. “...No. I’m just telling you that I saw you down on the causeway, because I did. You were standing at the edge, staring right down at the place where the crane went over.”

Karl frowned at the sincerity he heard in Dirk’s voice. “And I’m telling you I’ve not been down there all day. It must have been Juan that you saw.”

“I’m pretty sure it was you,” Dirk retorted, but we all witnessed the shift of confidence in his words. Close up, it was an implausible mistake. You could separate Karl and Juan by their shapes anytime. Juan was lank and gangly. Karl was tall but lithe, like a panther. But at a distance, and especially viewed from an odd angle, it might just be possible to confuse the two if you didn’t look too closely. I could see it in my mind’s eye. Maybe...

Karl stared at Dirk. “Don’t every call me a liar, friend.”

Dirk straightened in his chair, but Krys blunted the moment.

“Why would Juan go down to the causeway? He took off with El to the south lamp. It doesn’t need two people to top up that shed on the landing stage.”

I shrugged. “Maybe he had an idea for a T shirt.”

Dirk snorted back in his throat. It helped break the tension.

But an hour later the others still hadn’t returned. And I noticed Karl’s door standing open.

“Where did the Norwegian go?”

Krys looked up in surprise. “I didn’t notice he was gone.”

A far-off alarm sounded somewhere back in my mind.

“Where’s the rota” I said. “There seemed no point in basing anything on guesswork, when we’d taken the trouble to lay it out in black and white. Maybe I’d assigned him some duty I’d forgotten.

“I think Karl had it.” Anthea said absently, biting on a peach. One of our last. “It’s probably in his room. You know what he’s like about bringing stuff back.”

I grunted irritably because I didn’t like going into people’s private rooms. On the rock, even that small amount of personal space was sacred. But I had no choice, and pushed into Karl’s room past the junk almost blocking the door.

Everything in his room was neat. Too neat. It was like a real human didn’t live there, but some kind of robot. I’d seen this before with Norwegians, but this took the cake. In a row on his desk, four pens were arranged by increasing order of size, like soldiers on parade. A tissue lay neatly folded in quarters, its edges perfectly aligned and positioned to coordinate with the line of pens. On a whim, or maybe I was too curious, I opened one of his drawers. Same story. Clothing folded in perfect squares, every inch of space used to maximum efficiency, as if he were packing a suitcase for an international flight.

But then in the drawer below that I discovered something that surprised me. Sketches. I had no idea he drew. And they were pretty good too. Views around the island. He could sell some of these, if he had the mind. I had seen Juan's "sketches" for T shirts of course, and I indulged him with good humor, but no, this was real talent. As I sifted deeper into the stack I found some caricatures, as if he'd hidden them in there, just in case. Bitingly incisive observations of me, or Krys, or Anth. I laughed out loud. They were so well done.

I sifted deeper. And the smile withered on my lips. More caricatures, but these began to take on a darker tone. Images of me, or Dirk, or Eloise. These were not loving renders. We looked haunted, in terror, diseased. Dirk leaning on his cane, a grimace on his features as if all the pain in the world pulsed in his leg. Eloise staring through her reading glasses, perched on a branch as a wasted bird, so fragile her neck might snap. I sifted yet deeper into the stack and the images got darker and darker, taking on a frantic edge, as if they'd been scribbled quickly with the charcoal, but still that flourish of talent. Myself and Karl wrestling on the edge of an abyss, as if either might cast down the other at any moment. The drawings grew thicker, darker, as if he had used almost an entire stick of charcoal on each one. And the art itself seemed to grow more accomplished the darker the drawings became. They had a writhing, organic feel, like vines growing in the night.

Somehow the raging dynamism of the shapes, the muscular energy of the line, pulsed with menace. My breath pulled hard. Other drawings, other themes on the island. A weird image of something clawing its way up over the edge of the causeway like some bizarre hybrid of the lost crane and a monster from the deep. I set it aside. *My God Karl, I thought, you've really been busy in here.* And then another. A well-sketched interior of the north lantern room. And its facility was eerily disturbing, almost as if it had been roughed out in seconds, in a kind of trance.

Wild strokes jagged all over the page and yet they contrived to conjure an unusual perspective distortion viewed up from the watchroom to the interior space of the lens. Something visually unintelligible hung suspended in the body of the tower, where the counterweight would be. And inside the giant lens was a faint impression, gestured yet clear...a wavering semblance of El's face, hands against her ears, her mouth stretched in a silent scream of primal terror.

A coldness ran to my fingertips as my gaze bled out to the spans of the sea, beyond the bedroom window. And suddenly I remembered all the small moments with Karl, all the implied threats, but I hadn't really pieced them together till now.

I dropped the sketches and hurried back into the corridor. "I'm going out to find Karl. You guys stay here." I made it sound like an observation, but really I intended it as a command. Then I noticed something that really troubled me. As you enter the main doorway to the hall, an emergency axe stands mounted to the wall by two quick-release braces. This is intended as a last resort to break down the door, or a wall, in the case that fire traps the inhabitants, or the station is impounded by driving snow during the night.

This axe was missing from its place.

In my mind, an entire scenario unfolded. Karl at the dinner table. His quietly smoldering hatred of Eloise. The drawings.

I yelled as I barreled down the narrow passage. "Dirk...come with me. Now!" No time to explain.

Dusk was throwing its shawl. I grabbed a flashlight. On second thoughts...

I doubled back quickly. Dirk pressed back against the walls of the corridor to let me through, bewildered and alarmed by my sudden and inexplicable passion. Moving quickly, I fetched the keys to the firearms case that were in my safe keep. I opened the case and tossed the rifle to Dirk.

“If it comes to it, I hope you won’t be afraid to use this. Have you ever fired a gun before?”

He stood, white faced, his gaze drinking the mystery of me in one gulp. “Yes, but...”

“No time. North tower. Let’s go. It’s Eloise...”

At the mention of El, his expression tightened and he jumped into motion. Without his cane, he grimaced at each painful pump of his leg, but then he lifted to that place where pain still exists but you hover above it by some higher necessity, like a hawk hovering over a field. I loaded the pistol as we ran and jammed it into my pants at the back, folding it out of sight.

By the time we reached the stair cut into the rock that led up to the base of the north light tower, Dirk struggled behind. Under my breath, I cursed my luck for having a lame companion, simply for speed’s sake, for Eloise, but I trusted my own judgment. Long seconds dragged as I waited for Dirk to catch up. I didn’t want to enter the light without that rifle at my back. Karl may have lost it completely. He wouldn’t be the first person it happened to. Even on this very island. I just hoped we could reach him in time to talk him out of whatever madness had seized him. Or before El paid the price.

The bottom door of the tower swung open as we approached and out stepped...Eloise. She drew up short, surprised to see us. And we drew up short. Her eyes went straight to Dirk, breathless with the rifle, but for now he could do little else but plant it and use it as a cane.

“What the hell are you guys doing?”

I stared past her, into the tower. “El, are you okay? You aren’t hurt?”

She looked at me as if I were a puzzle witching deeper by the moment. “No, I’m not hurt. Why would I be hurt?”

“Where’s Karl?” Dirk demanded tersely.

El wrinkled her nose. “Karl? How should I know? You sent me with Juan, remember.”

“Karl’s here” a voice drolled behind us, nonchalant at all the excitement. He approached along the path from the cliff stair, easy as a breeze, the axe slung casually over his shoulder. There was nothing menacing in his airs at all. He didn’t look like he was gouged with psychosis. All of a sudden I realized the entire threat had been manufactured in my own head, but my brain couldn’t stop the momentum of my tongue, or its suspicions.

“What about the drawings?” I demanded quietly.

He looked at me, as if I was a curious fish that flopped there on the rocks. And that wasn’t far off how I felt.

“What you talking about, man?”

“What the hell are you doing with that axe?” My tongue still running on empty.

Karl stopped in his tracks and dropped the axe so that its head clanged off the stone. “God, you are the suspicious sort, aren’t you Ren?” But oddly, he wasn’t rankled, just amused. “There’s some junk wood washed up down by the platform. I thought I’d break it up some, in case it comes in useful for fuel or something.” He shrugged. “It was too damp.”

“Could have spared you the wisdom” I muttered, but my brain was divorced from my words. Karl’s story was an entirely plausible response, even though my sense of dignity at my own actions badly didn’t want it to be. Yet despite this, despite it all, some odd sense of foreboding still tolled in me.

Eloise thumbed back into the tower. “Juan’s on his way down. We’re only just done cleaning the lens. Thing was sooted half to hell after last night.”

Just to rid myself of the awkward eye contact with Karl, I pushed past her, too roughly, and into the tower.

I entered an odd scene. Something essential was just wrong, off, and I couldn’t place it. I became very still. Karl and everything he presented for me was forgotten for this new thing. An odd, mechanical singing sound echoed in the space of the tower, but at first I couldn’t tell where it was coming from. Bright flashes from the sinking sun, glancing on the waves west of the island, caught just the right angle through the small windows of the tower and wove sinuous, hypnotic patterns around the walls. And that quiet, distant singing. Mechanical. Not a voice, but... my mind struggled at some unseen threshold of knowing. *What was wrong here?* The hairs on the back of my neck lifted horizontal, as my body detected a threat my mind couldn’t name.

Juan leaned over the spiral stair, half way up, grinning all over his face.

“What’s up, Ren? If you’ve come to help us with the cleaning, it’s a bit late.”

It was just Juan. Goofy and lanky as usual, with his droopy hair flopping to the side over the rail.

But my attention was drawn suddenly to something else. I saw that the counterweight cable was swinging ever so slowly in the space of the tower. My keeper’s instinct locked onto the phenomenon, and my sense of danger screwed tighter, though I still couldn’t place it. *That shouldn’t be happening.*

I let my gaze run down the length of the cable to the huge counterweight hanging at the bottom. The weight that rolled slowly off the drum in the watchroom and which drove the clockwork gears that turned the lamp all through the night.

It was the cable, dangling this weight, quietly singing its distress in the tall echoes of the tower's central space. My attention focused on the weight itself. It was far too heavy. And suddenly, like a dark avalanche, a backed-up mound of thoughts rushed past me either side and I knew in a flash exactly what had happened. I remembered the duty note I handed to Eloise. Remove the weights. 480lbs. Clean the drum. Reload the mechanism. Dyslexic Eloise. She had misread the note. Christ knows what weight she'd loaded it with. Oh my god. Instinctively, before the thought had even completed itself, I began to back away towards the door. Even as I did, the singing rose to new heights of distress and I saw the weight slowly stretching on its cable, the terrible sound rising towards some thin and anguished mechanical crescendo.

I screamed up into the tube of the tower. "Juan, get down from there! Now!"

But it was too late. The counterweight sheared off the end of the cable and plunged to land with a bone-deep whump at the bottom of the central pit. But it wasn't over. All the spare, wild energy of the system now transferred to the cable. I saw the peril at once and hit the ground where I stood. "Get down!" I shouted.

It whiplashed around a moment in the vertical space, as the force of the rebound snapped crazily around, along its length. Then it thrashed up violently into the space of the tower, its tip writhing like an angry serpent, ringing against metal and chipping from stone. Its untameable fury unleashed a din in the captive space like a nest of dragons shrieking. It lashed randomly against the interior sides of the lighthouse, slicing dust and brick from the structure as surely as gunshot.

Juan began to bound down the stairs, but destiny at times can move with a cruel certainty, almost akin to a will, and the roving tip discovered him. Before he could react, before I could even speak again myself, the cable wrapped itself around him, lashing his flesh with bloody



ribbons like a slave flogged raw at a ship's mast. Then it launched him off his feet and hoisted him screaming into the central space of the lighthouse.

The screams didn't last long. They died away down the long barrel of the tower.

And hung with this new mass, the cable soon spent the rest of its energy, having done its deadly work. The loops around his lifeless body unwound slowly, save for one. It still had him snagged by the ankle, so that he swung slowly, upside down in the tower, his long hair and his skinny arms hanging, bobbing up and down on the last of the rogue energy.

## Book Two: Event Horizons

I turned around at the softest noise behind me to see Eloise's face in a silent scream, her hands over her ears. Or maybe she really did scream and it was myself shocked deaf. She fled from the tower back in the direction of the hostel.

Karl and Dirk walked into the room slowly, their mouths hanging slack-jawed at the strangeness of the scene before them.

I stood in silence for a long time, not watching Juan directly, but somehow looking past, just under him, through a little window to the sea beyond.

"We have to cut him down" I said at last.

\*

Later, at supper, nominally supper, no one spoke. We all just sat, grimly, looking into our own thoughts or now and then, catching the gaze of the other before looking away. The table was silent save for the low hiss of the oil vapor lamps. A division existed between those who had seen...and those who had not. Anthea, Krys...had not seen, and their eyes wandered among us, fearfully.

We were too exhausted for fear.

It fell upon me to break the silence. I cleared my throat awkwardly. "There's...uh...the matter of how we deal with the body."

"What do you mean?" Anthea said quickly, surprised. Too quickly, as in one who had *not seen*. The others gazed upon her subtle mistake with quiet disapproval.

"I mean that there's nowhere to store the body," I said quietly, but calmly.

"What? We don't store it. He has to go back. To his parents. You can't even be thinking..."

I laid my hand on the back of hers, just to stop her. “Girl...we’ve lost contact with the boat, do you understand? It may be weeks till we see it again. We can’t keep a decaying corpse on the rock for that length of time.”

Krys, who had also not seen, but who was oddly subdued, seeing for herself the gravity in our faces, fought quietly for Anthea’s side of things. “But he has to go back, Ren. We can’t just—whatever you have in mind—dump him at sea? I mean we have plenty of salt water, right? Doesn’t that preserve, or something?”

I raised my eyebrows, and the others (who had seen) turned to look at her, because they understood. “No it doesn’t, Krys. Right now, the water in the shallows is our food supply. We can’t put a dead body in it. And where would you have us store him, anyway? I swept my arm around the limited space of the hostel. “In here somewhere?”

Her nostrils flared at the thought.

“Or down in the landing stage store room perhaps? Have you any idea how badly it would fester in there after only a few days?”

“We have a cold climate here,” she protested.

“Half our food is in there.”

Anthea ran her fingers through her hair. The thought of having a corpse somewhere nearby, with no place to house it, seemed to dawn on her. “Can’t we wrap him and just put him in sea, till the boat arrives?”

Karl leaned back slowly in his chair, met eyes with me for just a moment.

“You’re both missing the point” he said, catching first Anthea and then Krys in his line of sight. “We can’t let the parents see his body. That’s just...not necessary.”

“It’s their *son*” Anthea protested.

“And what would exactly would you tell them?” Karl pressed.

Anthea opened her mouth but Karl flew words into it. “Don’t even think to answer unless you’re prepared to look at his corpse before you do.”

Her mouth clacked shut.

“So here’s how we run it,” I said, making an effort to rein the whole thing in. “We take the launch out a little away. Far enough from our shallows. And then we sink him. That’s it. End of. If we’re lucky, sharks will make light work. Drowned in a storm doing lighthouse duty. That’s all the parents ever need to know. The body was never found.” I looked around each one of them in turn, even into Kry’s subtle defiance. “It’ll be more than a small mercy, I promise you.”

One of us, sitting in silence all this time and staring at the wood grain of the table as if the dedication of her study could rearrange it, merely sighed with her shoulders and went back to staring, without looking at any of us.

“Eloise” I said quietly, as soothingly as I can. “This wasn’t your fault.”

“Of course it was my fault” she said angrily, still without looking up. And then finally she did look up, staring straight at me. “And then again, you’re right. It’s not my fault. You still don’t get it, do you? Any of you.” She scraped her chair away on the stone floor with a nerve-grating screech that put my teeth on edge. “This place is damned. We’re all going to die here. Every one of us.” Then she stalked off to her room.

“Let me talk to her,” Dirk said apologetically, after a short while. “She’s still in shock.”

I nodded vaguely.

When the others not on night watch had gone to bed, I stayed up longer than wise, since I had the early dawn watch. Karl was on night watch, so I told him I'd help him move his stuff into Juan's room. Juan's room was slightly bigger than Karl's, so we could repurpose Karl's as a store. A lone light burned feebly in Juan's room as I cleared out the junk. Space was at a premium in the keeper's hostel. As I swapped over the contents from Karl's room into Juan's—this was the easiest way rather than physically moving the furniture— a bunch of his sketches spilled out in the corridor and I bent to scoop them up. Then I stopped, puzzled. Where were the darker ones I had seen before I took off in such a panic for the lighthouse? I couldn't find them. Where was the picture with that apparition of El's face in the magnified target of the Fresnel lens? It had to be here somewhere. I remembered it clearly. The heavy pressure of the line, the frantic dance of the charcoal tip across the paper, like a planchette. But no. It was nowhere to be found. Neither was the drawing with the figure on the rope bridge or any of the other dark images. Did I simply imagine that backwards in time because of the tragedy at the tower? Imagination, I knew, could play tricks on the rock. But memory too? A strange thought surfaced. As if Karl's bedroom *remembered itself poorly*. Then suddenly I lost patience with the whole subject, and I scooped them all up, caring not whether I crumpled them in the process.

First light and early watch wasn't really a watch. For the first night in many a decade the north light was dark to its purpose. Although I knew it very unlikely that any ship would wreck, since they all had their modern aids, I didn't doubt for a second that the fact would be reported and it wouldn't be long before I received a note demanding an explanation from Heritage Maritime Holdings. Already, in my mind, I was manufacturing a plausible excuse. Equipment failed after all. It shouldn't be too difficult. Perhaps this method of rescue was more effective

than any of my own fumbled plans, and I wondered why it had never occurred to me before. Of course snuffing the lamp would draw attention! It was the only thing that would.

The entire watch was given over to cleaning the tower floor and repairing the damage in the mechanism. Oddly, there wasn't much blood. I did it alone, as I don't think I could have coped with conversation. About twenty feet of cable was trapped and snagged around the drum, wound there in freakish knots. It took me hours to get it cut out and untangled. There was severe damage to the gears too, where the brake had failed and the cogs ran away with themselves, the teeth clattering and grinding over each other. Fortunately, we carried one spare set. But it was another three hours until I had them in place and the sun was already high in the morning sky, level with the lantern room, by the time I was done.

I was fatigued with the work, and I hadn't even started on the necessary chores of the day. Perhaps they would have to be left unattended just for once. That was anathema to any keeper, but then, this was hardly a normal situation. I'd just witnessed a companion, if not exactly a friend, pretty much hanged and flailed alive in the light tower. I needed a softness in the angular edges of the world, and Spirit Rock was harsh with edges. Even the sound of the sea seemed harsh to my ears this morning, though it wasn't rough. The waves didn't sigh and retreat as they did on a soft, sandy beach. Instead they boomed and sprayed from small hollows and coves as if, even in this lightest of winds, they never ceased from their gnawing at the foundations of the island.

Yet I found a moment of softness. One of those quiet compensations of natural beauty that comes the way of a lighthouse keeper, entirely at random. Or maybe my subconscious was simply in a sensitized state and I normally wouldn't have noticed. I cannot say. But the morning sunlight, glancing through the many prisms of the Fresnel, cast a softly glowing spectrum against

the dark inner wall of the watch room below. I descended the ladder from the lantern room just to be near it, to run my fingers over it, this apparition both of our own world and yet somehow not of it, as if it came from a purer level of being altogether. It was like a piece of God's world, floating, shimmering in ours. I scarcely dared touch it in case it should vanish under my fingers. And how do you touch light anyway? I wasn't sure I believed in God, though I knew that Mortimer Fowle did. For that elder keeper of the island, the job itself was a sacred duty and the lighthouse not just a sentinel to the ships, but a beacon of the Savior himself in the world. I wish I could believe it.

Soon now, too soon, even on a cloudless sky, the beauty of this fleeting apparition would vanish again. It was a chance angle between the prisms and the sun, living for a few minutes only, like the fragile impermanence of life itself. Already it began to skew and stretch across the watch room wall. Soon it would be gone altogether. But somehow in that blue, vibrating as it did like the bow of a violin, in the depth of that blue that was greater and purer even than the sea, I glimpsed for a moment a transcendence which anyone who was not a fool would say the world and its horrors ought to have. Ought to, whether or not it really did.

I watched it till it disappeared. Then ascended the access ladder back inside the lens space to trim the wicks on the lamp. The north lamp's giant Fresnel had eight bullseyes and from the inside, looking out, a 360 degree panorama of the island and surrounding ocean stood divided into surreal and hugely magnified segments. It was like standing suddenly in a hall of mirrors or a secret place where the world was stitched together. Through one of those unlikely windows I glimpsed the hostel building, with two figures issuing from the door, though I could not tell at this distance which of my companions it was. The whole image belled to an unnatural shape by the magnification of the lens. It felt like I was watching the world from a secret place no one was

ever intended to know about. A cryptic chamber known only to the nameless watchers who control our lives. A place where the distortion in the mirrors can be seen, for what it is. As if the fact that the world was a trick is always there, just beneath the surface, just eluding our attention. I didn't know the origin of these strange thoughts as I polished the inside of the lens. They stole upon me unbidden.

But I needed those thoughts. They kept the sounds and the images of the previous evening out of my mind. When I stopped, when I let my mind unfocus again to the distance, they began to well up, like storm swell, like sickness. I could still hear Juan's last screams as they died to nothing in the tower, and the dreadful singing of the wire as it thrashed around the stair. I polished harder, faster, like a plague wagon driver puffing furiously on his pipe, just to keep the pestilence at bay.

Through the light's many lenses, I glimpsed my companions coming and going from the hostel. Did they know that I watched them, I wonder. Anthea, stopping just outside the door to run her fingers right back through her hair in the wind. She might not have done that if she'd known someone was watching. It seemed a bit indulgent in the wake of Juan. As I watched, she turned and looked right up towards the lantern room, almost as if she sensed my gaze upon her. But I knew that she couldn't see me. From that position, looking up towards the light, nothing would be visible to her except the sun's glare on the mirrors.

I dreaded winding the weight up the tower, but it had to be done. So I set the crank into the socket and began to turn. Fortunately the newly installed gears ran true. The sound they made didn't remind me of the freakish accident and its tortured singing. My mind was able to set it aside.



Gradually the mental pressure subsided. The problem just didn't trouble me anymore. Something about doing all that physical work laid Juan to symbolic rest after the fashion we would truly lay him to rest later in the day. It was accomplished. Certainly, it wasn't Eloise's fault. Or anyone's fault. Fate, in its inscrutable ledger, simply filed an appointment for the boy that day. Even if he hadn't gone to the tower, a jug would have fallen on his head in the pantry, or he would have slipped to his death on the rocks on the way down the path. Which one of us controls the foolishness of life?

Days immediately following the accident were quiet on the island. No one said much, really. We nodded to each other on the paths, like hikers passing on long distance trails, though the distance was short enough you could shout from end of the island to the other and at least be heard. I wandered down to the platform each day, first to check the nets down there, and then, half-heartedly, to keep a watch out for the tender. It would sail out of the sunrise, I knew, on the day when it finally came. But each morning, there was still no sign. It was still well under a month, so Roehampton may not have heard yet. Perhaps, too, we'd simply been unlucky and no vessel noticed the darkness of the north light. If so, then no message would have winged its way to Heritage Holdings and no one in the world yet had cause to believe us stranded.

I wasn't too concerned for the others yet, as fish stocks around the island were more than enough to meet our needs, and even if we fished those, out we had the launch or could use buoys to set deeper nets. If that food supply really dried up, there was still the gannet colony blooming on the south end of the island, like white lichen. Thousands of birds. Fortunately it was far enough away from the hostel that the smell from their guano, and the squawking racket, didn't oppress daily living, though both could be bad down by the south light, especially on a day with the wind from the east side of the island. Such a diet of shag and gannet flesh, every day, would

set anyone mad, but at least we wouldn't starve. I confess I had no idea how we could set about catching the birds. Netting gannet on a cliff face is a different challenge altogether from netting fish in placid water.

The slide towards autumn rubbed away the bloom of summer from the island, as if it had only been an illusion. Now sitting on a rock staring out to sea, especially near the windy top of the island, took on a bracing quality, like a stiff whisky. I sat with Anthea and she lay her head against my shoulder. For once, it didn't seem just like a ploy for attention, so I put my arm around her and we held each other's warmth, welcome in the chilly wind.

"Why am I such a fuck up?" she sighed at last. "I can't seem to do anything right. It's like I'm jinxed."

I pondered that, not really knowing what to say. "You're not a fuck up Anth, you're just you. Lots of people would pay money to have your energy and spirit."

"Energy and spirit," she repeated, as if they were echoes in an empty bucket. "I'm sorry about Dirk. I didn't mean to. It just sort of...happened. See that's what I mean. It always just happens. I can do that. But I don't like it."

"Hey, you know, I think Dirk had a say in that too."

"Yeah, but I led him on."

There was a tear drifting slowly on her cheek, but truthfully that could have been the wind. And when she tossed her hair, the wind whipped it. I never entirely knew when it was an act with Anthea.

"I always lead people on," she said.

"So does Eloise...in her own way."

“Yeah, but not like that. I mean, everyone thinks I’m this bright, breezy new age girl. You know, tie dye colors, always plugged in, always switched on. That’s just such bullshit.”

“I know.” It wasn’t meant to sound like a criticism. She glanced at me quickly, then looked away.

“You’re a good friend, Ren. Sometimes I feel like I’m just this shadow or something, fading. Like if I faded altogether, no one would even notice when I’d gone.”

I hugged her a little tighter. “I’d notice.” I’d glimpsed pale lines on her wrists. Old and ketosed. She didn’t talk about them. But I knew what they were.

She slid her hand over my crotch. “Wanna play?”

I met her gaze earnestly. “Don’t spoil it, Anth.”

She let it slide away again then held her head in her hands, hair falling. “You’re right. You’re totally right. See, that’s what I mean. About me.”

“You’ll be fine,” I said, and still I kept my hand round her shoulder.

“I guess.”

We listened to the endless breathing of the waves for a while, as if we were watching something sleeping. As my attention settled on them I felt myself dilating into the vastness of time, just as if I were a drop of liquid droppered onto the surface of an eye and then the eye blinked. Blinked me away. I pulled myself back with a gasp. The waves had been sighing their unrequited yearnings forever, before man was even born on the earth.

“Is Eloise okay?”

“She doesn’t know,” I said.

Anthea groaned. “Why do guys always say that?” Of course she knows, Ren!”

“She’ll survive,” I said. “Dirk loves her.”

“Yeah I know.”

She was quiet some long moments. “I know it wasn’t you at the window. I don’t know why I even said that.” She did a self-block with her hand rubbed over her eyes. “Jesus.”

“The mind plays tricks.”

“Maybe. But...I saw a shape. It’s like it both was there and wasn’t. It’s hard to explain. Do you think the island’s haunted?”

“Well, I don’t believe in ghosts. But what lighthouse isn’t haunted?”

She laughed. “I suppose.”

The smile faded from her face, like summer waning.

“It’s just...I dunno. I felt funny.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I saw the thing at the window. It might have been a shadow, I suppose, or just a shape. But I felt funny inside. Like it knew something about me. Something terrifying I’ve always known deep inside and it was right there on the edge of showing it to me. Bringing it to the surface. Almost like, if I looked at it too closely I would cease to exist.” She shuddered.

“Does that make sense?”

I helped her to her feet. The wind’s chill was starting to cut. “I don’t think you’ve got the island spirit in you, Anth. You like being around people. I think we should get you back on the boat as soon as that skipper knocks some sense into himself and realizes we’ve fallen off the edge of the world.”

“...the edge of the world. It does feel like that, doesn’t it?”

“Something else too,” I added, continuing my own thought. “It’s going to get a lot colder here real soon and the Atlantic in winter doesn’t take any prisoners. We have to get you guys off the island before the storms really hit. Heritage will send assistant keepers. Real ones, I mean.”

“Why didn’t they do that already?”

“No one applied but me. No one with experience, anyway.”

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t get that. It’s still such a beautiful place. Raw. But beautiful. I’m sure there’s loads of people who appreciate that kind of beauty. I can’t see why they aren’t lining up.”

Once more, just out of habit, I scanned the horizon for Roehampton’s boat, even though it was late afternoon and it wasn’t the right time of day. No sign. I had passed beyond being disappointed. What if he’d forgotten us? There might be enough wood on the island to build a boat, but not for all of us. Our tiny outboard might make it to the mainland with the luck of angels, but such luck grew short with the onset of winter. More than likely it would sink beneath the waves.

A week later the south light, as if echoing the fate of the north, would be dark for a night, through no one’s fault or neglect. As I polished and prepared the lantern for the night’s work, I slid the heavy lens around on its carriage as I always did. Except this time a sudden cough of sparks issued from one of the chariot wheels that kept the lens rolling smoothly, and the wheel fractured in two, crashing the lens into its bed. It wasn’t seriously damaged and could be repaired easily enough, but it was a job that would take a whole afternoon and at least three of us to work with the lens. If it had been the huge hyperradiant in the north light, a repair would have been impossible without backup from the mainland. Our stores carried spares for most parts of the

mechanism, even those unlikely to fail. But we didn't have spare lenses on the island. If those were to shatter, then the watchful eyes of the rock would flicker shut.

If I were to share a guilty secret, the loss of four-hour watches on the south light would mean I could sleep right through to dawn. I was looking forward to it, having just returned from my stint at the north lamp. Just when I got under the covers, with the others already retired, Karl chimed in on the intercom that connected the rooms and the corridor.

It bugged me, because we never used the thing except at urgent need or in the shriek of a high blow. It was a relic anyway, from the 70s.

"Think you should come and see this boss."

Reluctantly, and without getting out of bed, I stretched over and lifted the unit from its cradle, thumbing the talk button. "Can it not wait till morning, Karl?"

A pause. "I really don't think so."

"Well, what then?"

"...it's easier if you just come and look. I'm in Juan's room."

Karl had already settled into Juan's room. Even though we needed the store, I thought he might have found it a bit ghoulish. But the Norwegian didn't seem to mind. As I lay there, I remembered that room also had the only window looking out over the south end of the island. Something in his tone...

"Alright, I'm on my way."

When I reached the room, Karl sat deep inside at the window, with the light off. I made for the switch, but he gestured me away, waving me in to join him.

"So what's this about?"

"You can see the south light from here."

“Well you can make out the top of the tower, but not tonight. The lamp’s dark. I told you.”

“I know you did. So then...what’s this?” He pointed out the window down towards the south point. I watched in silence. Nothing.

“Karl...”

“Ssshh, keep watching.” He raised his hands, as if he were a snake charmer coaxing a shy creature from a basket. “Watch this. I’m telling you the lamp’s lit.”

My patience wore suddenly thin. “It’s not lit Karl. It’s dark. I was right there when the carriage broke. There’s no one on duty at the tower.”

“Shine,” he whispered to the window, ignoring me. “Shine now.”

The island kept stubbornly dark. “I’m tired and I’m going to bed. And so should you.”

Wait. He grabbed me by the sleeve and I began to ponder what I might have to do should it become necessary to restrain him. There was no doubt he was stronger than me. But the thought died stillborn when, from the corner of my eye, I caught a dimmish wink of light from the south end of the island.

My attention latched onto that point at once.

Karl still had a grasp of my sleeve and pulled me closer. “Shine,” he whispered mysteriously. “Shine now.”

And again it shone. There was no doubt, none at all, that the glow came from the south light. But that was impossible.

“How are you? Is that...?” I couldn’t even frame my question properly, but Karl himself seemed to understand it.

“Not me boss.”

The light winked again, like the sleepy eye of a dragon flickering awake momentarily and then sinking back into slumber. But the signature of the light itself was all wrong. It was too dim and biased towards the red end of the spectrum. A slow, malevolent eye.

“Shine,” Karl repeated, whispering the mantra as if to himself. “Shine on.”

And it did.

A chill like the cracking of a door to a crypt opened onto my back.

“What the hell is *doing that?*” I breathed.

Karl let go of my sleeve at last. “So now maybe you’ll believe us.”

I still stared out the window, but the light didn’t wink again. There was just my own reflection in the glass. “I never said I didn’t believe you Karl. Same with Anthea.”

First thing in the morning, with mist still hanging over the rock like suspicion, I descended to the south tower and examined the lamp carefully. The lens was still entirely derailed, just as it had been the night before. And the wicks hadn’t been trimmed. They still bore their blackened, charred ends from their last round of service before the malfunction. This lantern couldn’t possibly have been lit during the hours of darkness. Even if someone had been playing a trick—and who would that be?—the blackened wicks told another story. That was the effect of at least an hour’s burning, maybe more. Whoever was last on duty should have trimmed the wicks more often, but as it happened, it was evidence. And if that wasn’t enough, there was no oil in the trough. In fact, I hadn’t even carried the allocation for the next watch up to the lantern room, because we hadn’t done with the repair yet. The oil can still sat, full, at the bottom of the stair. It was a puzzle, indeed.

But in the brightening mists of the morning, it shrank in importance. I began to make ready for the afternoon’s repair, making sure that everything was in place. It would take three of



us, but I aimed at four, just to make it a little easier on all concerned. More than that would cramp the workable space in the access between the watch room and the lantern room.

When everything was set up, I descended the tower without bothering to lock the door, and began the ascent back up to the saddle. The mist seemed to take on a quality that deadened all sound, such that even my footsteps on the rock had an unusual quality, as if I were walking inside an echoless chamber. It began to trouble me, despite myself, and I stopped several times. Once or twice I turned around on the vague suspicion that something was following me up the path in the mist, but hanging just far enough back into the cloudy occlusion that it couldn't be glimpsed.

I gained the saddle at last, irritated with myself for falling prey once more to these superstitious feelings. Taking only enough care to avoid slipping on the planks beaded with atmospheric droplets of water, I quickened my pace across the rope bridge. But only half way across, I froze in my tracks. And turned.

Now in my life before, and even before in this account, I may have said "the hair stood up on the back of my neck," but never before like this. I *knew*, at that moment, as surely as I knew that my heart still trod in my chest, that something was behind me on that bridge. It could not be seen. But it was there. I could point to the exact place where it was and I sensed its presence in space as surely as if a great hand had sketched it in position. And yet nothing could be seen. Only a curtain of mist that concealed the opposite, ascending arc of the rope bridge, which I had just come down.

"I know something's there" I called, and my voice sounded oddly tight. Again that deadness. As if the mist seized hold of my voice and gagged it.

No response. Just the quiet creaking of the bridge and the strain on its wires as I shifted my weight in the silence.

I pressed on with my teeth clamped down, steeling my nerves against the sense of being a helpless prey to who-knows-what and the something, somewhere out there behind me, trailing my steps at a discreet but measurable distance.

But once more the sense of something treading behind grew so powerful that no sane man could ignore it. I could feel it like a slow pressure growing at my back, spreading out over all the nerves and muscles there. I swung round. "What in god's name are you? Who is there?" I yelled into the mist. It swallowed my words like a greedy throat and no answer came.

I was loathe to turn my back, but there was no way for me to proceed safely up my side of the bridge in reverse. So with every muscle on my neck and shoulders clenched as if expecting a blow, I breathed hard and took one step, then another, towards the far edge of the bridge, which now began to unfold from the mist.

And then as if a spectral hand reached out, but its fingers were the just-imagined shapes of words, I seemed to hear the thing speak.

*Only you.*

These words dislodged from their place behind me and suddenly, just like a predator, the presence could not be fixed. It was around me in the fog, circling, circling. It was everywhere.

*Only you.*

As if it were a delayed answer to the frantic question I had hurled into the mist. But the answer made no sense.

I didn't mention my experience to the others, but I didn't have to. They could tell something had spooked me. Since Juan's death, meals became these taut, awkward silences. People chewing their food and looking at their plates and then chewing quieter when they realized it was the only sound.

"Any news on the boat?" Anthea said, finally looking up from her food. There was a demanding expectation in her eyes and I didn't meet her gaze easily, looking away. Even though it wasn't my fault, the others associated the boat, and Roehampton, with me. It was particularly awkward because it was Anthea, the most naturally joyous in the group. I could see the strain of the wait in the dwindling line of her smile, the cracks around the corners of her eyes, as if the aging process was opening a small shop in her.

I waffled. "It should be any day now. Heritage haven't heard from us because we trashed the undersea link, so they'll try to make contact. When they don't get a reply, they'll contact Roehampton. If he's at the furthest point of his tour, then it could still be a few days till he's back here."

"But if it's an emergency they'd send a boat right away. Or a helicopter."

"They don't know it's an emergency, Anth."

"You're clutching at straws" Eloise said, and pushed away the uneaten remains of her meal. Insomnia seemed to lurk in the shadows under her eyes like a cat under a chest of drawers. "Why don't you tell them the truth, Ren?"

I looked at her in open surprise. She was still staring at me, fierce with an accusation I couldn't fathom. "What are you talking about?"

She wasn't pale anymore, but her features were drawn, as if whatever private anxiety troubled her nights had settled in too deep to be a separable symptom any more. It had simply become her.

"You know what I'm talking about. How did we come to be here, Ren? Don't even pretend you don't know what I mean, because you do."

"Not this again." But as I started a longer retort, she let her gaze slide away on purpose and engaged someone else.

"Karl. You're probably the coolest head in this group. Icy even."

If it was intended as an insult, Karl didn't flinch. However, El did nothing to soften it either. I swallowed against a small, nameless dread. This thing was new in her. I couldn't tell where it was leading us.

Karl shrugged, still eating his toast. He was mildly amused by the whole conversation. "How did I get here? I climbed on a boat and a boat came."

He grinned broadly and looked around for support for his little joke. Only Krys smiled, and it wasn't an open door.

Karl cleared his throat and chewed slower. "I'm not on trial here."

"No, no you aren't," El said carefully, but the hook of her attention was into him and she wouldn't let him wriggle free.

I watched in quiet astonishment. This definitely wasn't the Eloise I knew.

"I'm simply asking how you got here."

"I told you" he said, mid-chew, more defensive now.

“No you didn’t. No one’s accusing you of anything Karl. I just want an answer.” She reeled in a long ribbon of breath and for a moment her gaze unfocused to the distance, though her facial expression barely changed. “If I’m right, you won’t have one. None of us will.”

“I told you. I got on the boat.”

“What was the name of the boat?”

He frowned irritably. The *Exulans*.

“Good, good. But, see, here’s the problem...you heard that *here*. We all did.”

Karl coughed once, like the warning call of a woodland animal. “What are you on about girl? You sound looned!”

But El remained calm. “Maybe. Indulge me though. Specifics, Karl. What harbor did you board the boat at?”

Karl huffed irritably. “I don’t remember that kind of stuff.”

El watched him closely, as if she were examining a fossil found on a beach. “You don’t remember where you got on the boat that would take you to the most unusual location you’ve ever visited in your life.”

Karl dumped his crust on his plate, suddenly annoyed. “Of course I remember.” But then his face flickered with confusion. “I...”

El nodded in silence. She let her gaze slide sideways to Krys. “What about you, girlfriend? Do you remember how you got here?”

Krys didn’t eat at all. She sat with her arms folded, impatient with the turn that the meal talk had taken. She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin and threw it down. Then she made to scrape her chair.

“This is so...”

But Eloise stopped her, seized her by the back of the hand. “Please. Just this once. Indulge me.”

She sat back slowly, pulled her hand away, looked at the others, at me.

“Okay. Sure. Ren invited me here. And I invited *you* here. Remember?”

El dismissed this with an impatient flick of her hand. “I said particulars.”

Krys straightened up in her seat. “Okay. Ren invited me and I took the train to the harbor at Aberdeen. Then I took the ferry to the island, and the *Exulans* brought us from there. Good enough?”

That’s right, I thought. You tell her, Krys.

El tugged at her lower lip. It wasn’t playful. “What was the name of the island?”

“*What?*”

“You said you took a ferry to an island, so you must have bought a ticket. When you bought the ticket, you must have known the name of the destination, right?”

Krys sat a few moments in silence. Her efforts at recall, nonchalant at first, played over her face like Scottish weather, until the futility of the exertion threatened towards some crisis of revelation.

“It’s alright,” El said quickly. “No, really.”

Krys stared at her friend, suddenly out of sorts. “I just can’t remember, that’s all. It doesn’t mean anything. You’re making something out of nothing.”

“You don’t still have the ticket by any chance?”

“What?”

“The ferry ticket. Do you still have it?”

“No.”

“What about the train ticket?”

Stony silence.

Dirk broke into the conversation. “What are you driving at, El? I remember exactly how we got here. Krys phoned us at home and invited us. You took the call yourself and I was sitting right beside you when you answered the phone. I was for getting the bus to the ferry but you said your uncle Ben made the journey once a week and could take us to the harbor. So we waited a couple of days and came up the coast in Ben’s beaten up Cortina. And here we are.”

“And here we are,” Eloise echoed. “The thing is, I remember us coming by bus. I remember it distinctly.”

Dirk’s smile, open and helpful, collapsed to uncertainty, tainted with irritation. “You’re mistaken, El.”

“And on the way I got sick on the bus and he had to make an extra stop. The other passengers weren’t happy.”

“That didn’t happen.”

“You’re right. It didn’t. None of it did. Neither did the car journey.”

“Oh come on! This has gone far enough now. We came here with uncle Ben.”

“Dirk, can you even hear yourself? I don’t *have* an Uncle Ben. I’ve never had an uncle Ben. And I don’t have any relatives at all who have a battered old Cortina.”

“Sure you do,” Dirk said, pissed now for real. “He’s in your family photos. And he’s in that one where you’re throwing sticks for your puppy in the park.”

“Go and get them,” Eloise said empathically.

“I will not. Why would I do that?”

“Go and get them.”

“...alright damn it, I will.” He dropped his cutlery with a clatter. “If it’ll bring this to a head.”

Dirk leaned on his cane, groaned, and levered himself up from the table.

“What are you getting at Eloise?”

I could see that Anthea moved quickly to deflect the conversation away from dredging in her own memory. It was unconscious, a natural defense mechanism. But I saw it for what it was because I was just about to do the same thing.

“Don’t you get it guys?” she began quickly, too quickly, and now she was on a roll, she couldn’t stop. “We’re in a situation here. I don’t know what the situation is, but something’s wrong. These memories, these things we think we remember...buying tickets, coming on the boat. That never happened. They’re fake. Illusions.”

I pinched the top of my nose . “El, that makes no sense at all. We had to come here somehow, right?”

“And what about you, Ren?” she said. “You got that letter from Heritage, right?”

“Right.”

“Can you remember where you put it?”

This caught me off balance a bit. “Um...not right away, but I’m sure I can find it.”

“You know, you should do that. I’m not kidding.”

“It’ll be in my room somewhere. Look. You didn’t answer my question. A lot has happened on the island since we got here. It’s not Harvard psychology that we’ve forgotten a few trivial details about tickets and bus times and so on. You’re baking a shit cake, El. We’re all strung out enough already.”

“Just try to find the letter, Ren, when you have the time.”



“Sure. I can do that.”

Anthea spooked the most. She couldn't let it rest, even if she wanted to. She really wanted to. “What do you mean illusions? If we didn't come here by boat, then how did we get here?”

Eloise sat back in her chair and all the air emptied out of her as if she were a doll. “We didn't. We've been here all along.”

I wrinkled my nose as if the idea was a smell too offensive to process. “All along? What are you talking about? You think we were here before Roehampton dropped us.”

She looked at me slowly. “Roehampton doesn't exist, Render. The service boat doesn't exist. It never existed. No one's coming for us.”

“Okay, I've had about enough...”

“No, wait. Don't shut it down. Not yet. We've got a small opportunity here. A narrow window only, before things reset. Dirk won't find those photos. But *in a day or two*, he will. The gaps in the story will close over, sew back together. Badly, but they'll stitch. You won't find your letter. Not right away. But you will eventually. That's how this thing is covering its tracks.”

“What thing?”

She sagged with a suddenness of total defeat. “I don't know. That I don't know. This place. The island. Somehow.”

I scoffed from a deep place in my belly I'd almost forgotten existed. “That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.”

“Yeah?”

Anthea wagged her head, still not getting it. “But if we didn't come on Roehampton's boat, then when did we come?”

Eloise rubbed her hands through her hair, the stress suddenly visible in the shaking of her fingers. She began talking with a tremor in her voice, as if she was giving external form to private thoughts for the first time. “At first I thought we were just wrecked here, you know. And we suppressed it all. The trauma. But that doesn’t make sense. We find food too easily. No island has fish stocks like this. You see, there’s a logic...you just have to think that through.”

“Eloise,” I smoothed, “NONE of what you’re saying makes sense.”

Dirk shuffled back from his photo hunt. He stopped, stared at his girlfriend for a long moment, then dropped the prints he was carrying on the table.

“I could have sworn uncle Ben was in those pictures.”

El glanced down at the shots. Nodded slowly. One showed her as a little girl, tossing a forked branch high for a puppy. Another child in the background playing with a ball. There was no one else in the shot.

Dirk didn’t sit. Just stood looking back and forth between the snaps. “Maybe there’s one missing from the set.”

“Don’t worry,” El said noncommittally. “I’m sure it’ll show up.”

Later in the evening, when I knew that the others weren’t watching, I made to dig out my offer letter from Heritage Maritime Holdings. But I was unnerved to discover that it wasn’t where I remembered storing it. I definitely brought it to the island with my other stuff. It wasn’t to be found at my second choice for where I may have stashed it either. I had enough sense of the thing to know it was important. This was my justification and authority for taking on the role. It wasn’t just something I would leave lying around, or stuff into a loose pad with other superfluous papers. I was usually very fastidious about such things. And it bothered me. But I

figured the opposite, then, had to be true. That I'd been so careful with it, on arriving, that I'd actually put it somewhere rather special and unique, somewhere that my habit-forming mind had now forgotten. I decided to start a deeper search when I had the time. I didn't doubt that it would show up. El's notion that the letter never existed just flowed off my unconscious like the laughter of water. I couldn't take it seriously at all. I remembered opening the letter. I remembered my "oh shit" moment of now I'm actually going to have to do this. I remembered the interview room. The very smell in that room. And the secretary's perfume, cheap and violently unmaritime. I even remembered the angle of sunlight through the window and the secretary's footsteps summoning specks of dust from the carpet into the sunshaft as I waited to be called.

Didn't I?

I felt suddenly chill and a touch claustrophobic in the hostel room and decided for a quick brace of fresh air before darkness fell. I was on the middle night watch for the north light and needed to get some sleep in the first hours of darkness.

Weather on the watch was quiet, but a fog fingered its way slowly up the tower as sea haar often does. Soon, it seemed like the light itself was floating on a too-bright sea and the brilliance of the moon added to the sense of buoyancy high up there in the lantern room. Just a mile away from the island, the waters might be basking in clear air. That was no use to the big ships drifting past in unseeable deeps, like silent whales. But then I had to remind myself we were little use to them anyway. They had their GPS, their scanners. And they could doubtless see us far better, in weather, than we would ever see them. Eventually the top of the haar drifted along just beneath the level of the observation deck. It felt then as if the lantern room were the bridge

of a disembodied ship. A cabin of the spirit somehow loosed from the world. And I was adrift in that cabin, floating through clouds that were also waves, through waves that were ripples in time, in being. It seemed as if I could actually step out onto those clouds.

Then the fog lifted above the level of the lamp and all was stifled and obscure. The light's beam echoed back to the tower from the fog, as if it were a blaze in a smoke filled room. Shadows flitted in the lantern room and in the watch room beneath. It was my least favorite weather. I snuffed the lamp. In such conditions, it was no use to anyone.

*January 4<sup>th</sup> Seventeen Hundred and Fifty One*

*I find myself alone again on the rock, as the boat bringing relief keepers wrecked off St Kilda a week ago. I didn't know those men, but I pray God grant rest to their souls. It hasn't been the same here since Peter's death. I must confesse that sleep is slow in coming these nights, and troubled when it comes. Sounds wake me up, though usually they are nothing, and I am like an animal in a forest, asleep but with ears perked up, lest something that should wish to devour my soul approaches slowly, and with stealth, in the night.*

Fowle, I thought silently, as I read this, take care. This is how men go mad. Oh Mortimer, madness is what steals up on you in the night, don't you see? And then, when at last you first notice, it's too late, for you have been mad for some time. I felt for him deeply. What dreadful luck with Peter and then with the wreck, depriving him of human fellowship when he needed it the most. Here I counted myself fortunate where the old keeper was not. The next entry was a poem.

*January 9<sup>th</sup> Seventeen Hundred and Fifty One.*

*Sequester*

*"Fetch him off his feet sir" said the opposite captain*

*just as he fainted back against the cloth*

*like in paintings*

*cannon ripe as blistering fruit.*

*Feasting he'd been on poorly chosen meals.*

*Blood and such, and men's lives.*

*The wine, so deedily by his steak, now in his hand.*

*And beside the plate, a paper open at this passage:*

*'No doubt then that the cause of all this grief*

*was never Satan at all, but Sequester, the son.'*

*"Sequester" he said, with a smile*

*And flowed right under his own table.*

It was an insane entry. A man breaking loose from the moorings of his mind and I so much wanted to reach out to him, back across the years. If only I could throw him a lifeline. We could not have been so different, he and I. Neither the rhythms of *Carraig Sithe*. Perhaps this verse had been composed right here, in the watch room under the north lamp. Though in his day it was a wooden tower and the lamp a rude, open flame. And then a sudden, inexplicable urge. I felt as if the book in my hands became a window pane, as if I could just rub away the morning's

condensation on its surface, that thinnest membrane that separated times. *Can you hear me, Mortimer Fowle?* I scribbled in the margin, feeling foolish.

But my train of thought was interrupted by a great bellow sounding through the fog. It was physical, playing in the very marrow of my bones and my mind grew suddenly still. A brief silence and it boomed again. Dust on the watch room floor danced in position. I saw the lantern room windows shake ever so slightly, and the stars, now visible again above the top of the fog, blurred for a moment through the glass.

This couldn't be happening.

The walkie talkie resting against the wall to my left crackled to life. It was Karl.

“Boss? Did you hear that?”

I reached absently for the thing, waited a moment before I answered, but I don't know why. Maybe I just didn't want to commit it to words.

“Hello Karl.”

“Did you hear *that*?”

“...yeah. Yeah I did.”

A silence freighted with thoughts at the other end. “I thought you said the foghorn was decommissioned on this island?”

Static crackled on the link. “It is.”

I heard him thumb and suck a breath to speak, but once more the foghorn answered for him. I heard it doubled...all around in me in its primary voice and in miniature, sounding through the walkie talkie from Karl's position at the hostel.

“But...”

“I don’t know, Karl. Maybe they didn’t do it right. I think there used to be a sensor. When it picked up moisture in the atmosphere it would send out a test beam once every three minutes. If the beam reflected back, it would turn on the horn. It didn’t take much power. Perhaps there was some residual still in the system?”

The mike opened, remained open for a few seconds, closed off again.

Karl came back on. “Ren, hold on...”

I heard rapid words at the other end, a snatch of conversation, but I couldn’t hear what was said. Karl, distracted now, jumped back on the mike. “But the horn?”

I shook my head, oblivious to the fact that we were talking on radio. “Maybe there was some air still in the tanks.” I knew it was nonsense even as I spoke it. Compression would have leaked away to nothing years ago. Yet somehow the system was being tripped. Perhaps the whole machine hadn’t been shut down properly. My god, could they not even do that right?

Karl’s mike was still open. Another hurried snatch of conversation. Tense voices. “Ren, stand by.” He cut out for long seconds.

“Boss, we’ve got a bigger problem here. El is missing from her bed.”

I snapped back suddenly alert. “What do you mean missing?”

“She’s not in the building, Ren. She’s gone walkabout.”

I was already on my feet, bounding down the stairs of the tower.

“Where’s Dirk?”

“He’s on watch at the south lamp.”

“Does he have a radio?”

“Yeah, but he never switches it on.”

I cursed under my breath. “Okay, take a lamp and get down there. But don’t tell him why. Come round the east path. I’ll take the others and come round the other way.”

His silence crackled with voltage. “But boss, that’s the path...”

“...that leads to the horn. Yeah, I know. So we need to be real careful. The horn sounds twice, then a two minute silence, then another pair. That’s what it says in the log. If we time it right, we might be able to make it to the compressor shack and disconnect it from the generator, if that’s the problem.”

“That sounds pretty risky boss. Can’t it wait till the horn goes to sleep?”

“I’m worried for El, Karl. I think she may have lost it.”

“Kay, kay” I could hear his mind churning as he digested this. “But we don’t even know if she’s on that path.”

“Right. But we can’t take that risk. If she wanders right under the horn...”

“Oh Christ.”

“Exactly. Look, just get to Dirk. Go! Now! I’ll meet you round the island if I can. Don’t forget to take a damn lantern!”

He miked something, but it was a hurried mumble and then the channel blew out dead. I bounded out of the tower just as the horn sounded again. It stopped me. In the standing fog at the bottom of the north tower, the moon was bright enough to shine downwards into the haar, lending an eerie glow, but visibility was down to twelve feet horizontally. The horn boomed again, and this time Mortimer Fowle’s description rose into my mind, *like the mournful bellow of a great beast calling out into the mist*. But to me it was worse even that. It was a doomful thing, calling from the end of being and time. It seemed to lament the very waking of the world, as if chaos or nothingness should have been left in peace to slumber, and never to give birth to life at



all. I cannot say from what dark pit of the spirit such thoughts came to rise. Only that they opened in me as a natural response to that dreadful sound.

Then I sprinted as fast as I could towards the hostel at the center of the island, without breaking my neck in the dark. I grabbed a lantern myself and then the rifle, though why I needed that and what I thought I was going to do with it, I wasn't sure. El's bedclothes were neatly folded back on one crease, like the meticulous care of a sleepwalker. But we checked every room. She was gone.

"Did you guys search the store when you ran out after her?"

"I'll check," Krys said quickly. "We haven't been outside."

"So why did you lock the door again? You knew I was coming. I had to let myself in."

"We didn't. Eloise must have locked it again when she left."

I pointed to the hook at the end of the corridor. "But the keys are still hanging on the ring." These words were more for myself than my companions. I couldn't suppress the notion that something had come into the building and taken her. That its voice was the fearful thing I heard out there in the dark. But that was nuts. I sounded like Mortimer Fowle.

I lit up my lamp, Anth with hers close behind me and Krys running to check the store. "Bring ear defenders!" I called after her.

In just a minute, she was back.

"Anything?"

"Nothing." She tossed a pair of ear defenders to me and another set to Anthea. "She must have gone down the path."

"Shit."

Safety lamps graced the railing part way down the path, but again, the damp played with the generator and they buzzed and flickered ominously as we picked our way down the stair. Finally, they hummed to silence with a sound like an insect incinerating at the base of a hot light.

“So much for that,” I breathed.

“The horn runs on that generator?”

I shook my head. “No. It has its own, along the east path in the compressor shack. That’s where we’re going. We need to be real careful. These defenders were for working in the compressor room. But they won’t help us under the horn.”

Slowly, we made our way round to the east side. Each time the horn boomed, it was as if it came from the throat of the island itself, and its entire body shuddered with the effort. We passed the rock stair, paused and looked at each other quickly. Then we carried on, south, on the coastal path, as we called it. We were doing the very thing that all the old log books warned every keeper on the rock never to do...travel the coastal path when the fog horn was active.

We advanced with great trepidation, stopping often to take measure of the horn. I had been this way before, of course, but in daylight and with good visibility. I could not remember how far it was round to the horn. We had only the sound to go by and the risky part of it was, I knew that the full force of the horn was being cut back by a small outcrop somewhere round the way. A steep cliff sheared off to our right. If El had lost her footing in the dark, she was gone, but the haar was too thick to scan the rocks below. Even picking our way along the path, the small glow from our lanterns formed a dimmish cocoon around us, reflecting back half our light.

And suddenly the horn. It was so loud I could feel it tearing at my ear like an animal, even through the defenders. Anthea slipped on the stone. I only just caught her from the edge.

*For God's sake watch the edge* I mimed, as our ears were still singing like birds in a tree. We passed round the outcrop protecting us from the full brunt of the horn. But there was still no sign of Eloise. And I wasn't close enough. I needed to be near enough to the shack to make a sudden dash after the horn sounded, and that alone was madness so close to the cliff.

I picked my way forward carefully on the path. This route wasn't serviced, and a combination of storms lashing the cliffs from the west, and rocks dislodged from above, made the path treacherous.

"Just take it one step at a time," I said. Beyond a distance of about twenty feet, the lantern was just shining fog back at me. Hefting the lantern toyed with my balance and left me only one useful arm if I slipped on the rock. I was quite prepared to toss it into the sea if my foot so much as faltered momentarily in its hold, but that would be a sore loss.

I stopped. Held up the lantern as a signal for the others to halt behind me. Silence on the path. Only the quiet mourning of the waves far below. Surely it had been longer than two minutes since the horn last sounded? I grew anxious. If we approached too close to the horn by accident, we could be smashed deaf by the thing, never to hear again. And I couldn't remember this section of the path.

Still the horn didn't sound. It was definitely longer than two minutes now. No clearing of the fog, so it couldn't be that. Maybe my earlier speculation was correct. The horn had triggered and there was residual compression still in the system. It didn't make much sense, but...

I signaled the others to advance slowly and then stopped again at once when I realized I could no longer hear their footsteps behind me. And then with that realization, a deeper and more unsettling one...that I'd been too absorbed in my own thoughts and in fact I hadn't heard them for some time.

I turned back warily, but it was impossible physically to turn round, as I stood on a narrow strip of path barely wider than the track of my feet, and less than an arm's length away, a plunge to certain death. But the proximity of that peril had the opposite effect. It steadied my feet. Calmed my nerves. Some instinct for self preservation.

Again I advanced slowly until I reached a slightly wider segment of path. There I managed to turn round. There was no sign of anyone. Not even a hint of their lanterns through the mist.

“Anthea! Krys!”

The rocks seemed to catch my hollered words and flung them out to sea.

“Krys! Damn it, I told you guys to stay in sight behind me!”

Nothing. A gull screeched somewhere, high on the island. Perhaps it was above the level of the fog. Moonlight still shone down into the mist, and I guessed there was intermittent cloud cover in the clear air above the island, as the moonbeams played now and then like guitar strings into the fog. For a moment it gave the illusion that it was one of my companions approaching with a lantern, but the light wasn't right and I realized my mistake.

I called again, but my yells just toured the scowling faces of the island, before bounding back to me in small, broken fragments. I hoped to God they hadn't fallen over the cliff. But no, I reassured myself. I would have heard the fall.

I rounded a rock and glanced up.

Froze right where I stood, so fierce was the shock.

There right above me, so close I could almost reach up and touch it, was the silhouette of the great foghorn, just crouching there in the mist. Somehow I had come right up on it unawares.

“Oh Jesus,” I breathed. But there was no running from that place. The path right under the horn was too narrow.

One step at a time I told myself, like a mantra, glancing once more at the horn, as a man might do if he were to find himself before an opening to a cave, in the mouth of which lay a sleeping bear.

But then I paused, perplexed. In the open maw of the horn, I saw something, a shape that didn't make sense, and the mist made of it all one thing with the structure of the horn. I raised the lantern slowly. And there, wedged tightly into the space of the horn's mouth was Eloise, a look of terror in her eyes and her hands clamped over her ears. Dried blood still left sticky trails through the rigor mortis on her fingers.

I stumbled. Only a primal instinct for survival flung my body inwards towards the rock rather than outwards over the sea, and I survived. I dropped the lantern. Or perhaps it would be better to say that I threw it before I could stop myself. It bounced off the edge and then went cartwheeling into the abyss, strobing as it tumbled. After long seconds it smashed on the rocks far below with a sound pitifully small for the gravity of its loss. I looked back up at the horn. Mercifully, the grisly details were now eclipsed from me and all that remained visible in the moonlight was the oddly fused silhouette and one of Eloise's feet, shoeless, dangling from the mouth of the horn. Come morning and clear air, we would have to get her down. But it was no job for one man without help in the middle of the night. Though I could no longer see her face, my mind remembered it like an afterimage, and my skin crawled at the memory of the terror written on her features. What in God's name could have possessed her to climb in there?

But the extreme hazard of my own situation came back to me with sudden force. I had not rid myself of the dreadful fear that the horn might sound again, at any moment. I managed to

grope my way along the inward lean of the rock until I came within reach of the compressor shed. I forced open the door and peered inside, aiming to sever the connection between the tanks and the generator. Visibility was poor. Moonlight, brightening diffusely in the mist, shone downwards and in through the door. I'd also pocketed a small flashlight which barely cast a circle at my feet, but at least I could see into the shed, after a fashion.

There on the floor lay the long-severed connections between the generator and the tanks. By the frayed ends of the cables, lying now in little bronzen pools of their own rust, the horn had been severed from its vocal cords many years ago, just as we'd been told.

And for the first time not just a chill feeling, but a dire instinct for the very survival of my soul crept over me. *My God, we've got to get off this island. The Devil, or something, lives here.*

But I didn't have time to pursue the thought. As I staggered out of the shack I became aware of the faint but distinct glow of a lantern through the mist. This wasn't moonlight now. This was definitely a lantern. But it was the wrong way down the path. It was coming up slowly from the south end of the island, instead of following me down from the north. It couldn't be Anthea or Kryss, unless they had somehow got past me in the fog. But then I scolded myself for irrational idiocy. I was on a path the width of a woman's waist and the only other way down to the south end was over the top of the island and across the rope bridge. There's no way they could have got past me. But why would they go over the island? It made no sense.

Then a sudden hope seized me. "DIRK? Is that you? CARL?"

No reply. Way along the path, winding slowly, the lantern continued to approach, an orange bobbing through the fog. Even allowing for precarious progress along the path, it seemed to be taking an awfully long time to come. I tracked its progress, wandering. Why didn't they respond to my calls? I advanced a little in their direction. Part of me was still alert to the

possibility of Dirk stumbling upon Eloise. If it were within my power, I would spare him that at least till morning. I wondered why there was only one lantern, not two.

Slowly, slowly the lantern approached. My thoughts settled to a watchful silence. There was an eerie property to the light's travel, almost as if it weren't really being carried by a living being. But I couldn't put my finger on it. I felt strangely naked without my own light, as if, suddenly, a lantern had become a currency of power in this benighted place.

"Who is that?" I said, much quieter now, as, finally, it made its approach. In the last dozens of feet, I heard the thing before it appeared, and somehow my heart startled, like an animal. It shuffled into view, a hooded figure with a deep cowl concealing the head, holding the lantern aloft. My heart beat with such clarity I could have sworn it floated in the air beside me, outside of my body.

The thing swung the lantern over the edge, turned, swung it back towards me.

"What kind of thing are you?" I whispered in a voice unfamiliar even to myself, and my words were lathered in dread.

The creature, if that is what we call it, flung back its hood and I cannot tell you the horror I then saw before me. In place of a head, where the beastly slump of its shoulders joined the top of its body, was a dimly familiar shape which at first I failed to recognize, as the brain cannot understand a context in which it struggles for sense, but in a long second of frank confusion and mounting dread, I knew it to be the gaping mouth of a fog horn.

It raised its lantern slowly on the misty path and opened wide its arms. Then it seemed to lean back slightly and its great horn of a head bellowed into the foggy night, as if its very cry was a mourning of the existence of all life. I clamped my hands over my ears at the din and began to back away. For what else could I have done? But on the path behind me, as last I

turned, the thing bellowed again and then seemed to shuffle from side to side as if it were blind, and, as God is my witness, as if it could only make me out vaguely through some dim impression received back to it from the dread sounding of its horn. Worst of all, that cry seemed to tap some essential grief within me, some irreducible disdain or dread for the fact of my own being.

I fled. Don't ask me how I did this on that narrow path. I can't tell you, save to say that when the soul knows its danger, it finds resources it scarce knew it possessed but moments before. And my soul felt its danger. For a long time I heard the thing on the path behind me and my only consolation stood in the fact that it grew more distant. But with each terrible din I felt its pull upon my spirit. It wanted me. And it had the ability to take me in its power, if only it could quite find where I was. I don't believe I have ever known that quality of fear and I pray that I will never know it again.

When I made it back to the hostel at last, none of the others were there, and in my weakness of fear I am ashamed to admit that I dared not go looking for them in the dark. That thing was still out there and although I could no longer hear it, I feared that it knew my general direction and, slowly but surely, it would work its way up and round the path to my position. I sat there quivering in the hostel, though it was not cold. Every light the generator supported I turned on and I sat with a lantern and a candle before me in case the electrics failed. And then again, I sat with the rifle in my arms watching the door. I am glad that none of my friends came through it while I was in that mood, because I doubt I could have stopped myself from shooting first before I discovered who it was that pushed back the door.

The next morning, late in the morning, Dirk came up to see me. I knew he'd been told, though I hadn't been the one to tell him. I felt guilty about that, but I just couldn't face it. I already felt exhausted for the day, fetching El's body down from the horn along with Carl. That



was no easy exercise, and the truth was that either or both of us could have pitched over the edge with the corpse at any moment. I managed to rope us to the rock and it gave us some security, but it wasn't mountaineering.

Dirk wore a coat and thick scarf wrapped around almost right up to his mouth, even though I didn't think it was really that cold. He'd asked to see the body and I didn't feel it was my place to refuse him. I was standing at the edge of the landing platform, raising and inspecting the creel we'd set the night before. For the first time, the takings were worryingly thin.

"I want off this island, Render" he said to me quietly.

It seemed to me that he watched me with suspicion as I raised and lowered the nets, as if I might be disposing of something I sought to conceal.

"Why hasn't the boat come? No bullshit."

I stopped what I was doing. "I honestly don't know Dirk. Even if Heritage haven't received a message, Roehampton should have been back to check on us by now."

Dirk shrugged, not much impressed with my argument. "Maybe something's happened to nim."

I turned towards him sharply. "*What did you just say?*"

He looked at me nonplussed. "I said maybe something's happened to him. So what's your plan? I mean, we can't just wait here to starve."

"I'm working on it, Dirk." My heart was suddenly beating quickly, and I didn't know why. My brain tried to rewind the conversation, searching frantically for something I thought I had heard, but the moment slipped away.

It was a lie that I was working on it. But after Eloise, I began to search out possibilities. We might be able to cannibalize the compressor shack or a smaller storage shed for a floatable

vessel. We had rope and tools too, kept at the keeper's station, and that was a factor heavily in our favor. We wouldn't need to do the desert island thing of cutting down trees, hollowing them out, and lashing them together with vines. There weren't any trees on the rock anyway. But the truth was—and I didn't share this with the others—there were also some things that counted against us, and they counted quite heavily. First, rocks were treacherous everywhere near the island. Roehampton knew the exact route in and out, but I didn't have his expertise, and even he wouldn't attempt it if the chop was up. Then there was the condition of the materials we would have to use for a raft. There was some furniture in the hostel, but mostly it wasn't large enough. To get the surface area, we'd need to break up the shed, but its wood was brittle in many places...a veteran of too many storms...and I wasn't sure how it would hold. Or even if it would. I wanted off the island too. But I didn't want to drown in the bitter and freezing Atlantic, just a few hundred yards from the rock, and with the lighthouse still in full view.

Dirk still stood, watching me, eyes narrowed. I had the feeling, still, that he was on the lookout for some subtle slip of body language that would confirm unvoiced suspicions.

“What happened to her? Why would she do that? You were the only one around.”

I took a long, deep breath. “I saw something on the path last night, Dirk. I saw something on the path and it wasn't one of us, do you understand me? That's really all I want to say about it.”

“And conveniently again, you were the only one who saw it.”

“I didn't kill her, Dirk. Come on, use your head now. Why would I do something like that?”

That question got to him, and he turned away, shaking his head. “How did she get those marks on her neck?” The suspicion darkened back, deep and threatening. For a moment I thought he might actually grab my head and force it under. “It looks like hands at her throat.”

I winced inside. I’d seen that too, and it gave me the creeps. But I hadn’t noticed until we were done struggling with the body on the narrow path. That could easily have happened at some point in that grim and clumsy process. “It was an ugly business getting her down from there, Dirk. I wouldn’t have wanted you to see that, which is why we didn’t tell you till later.”

Dirk himself seemed to accept this, but for myself, I thought I’d heard it said somewhere that bodies don’t bruise after the heart stops. I rubbed the thought away.

He stood looking out at the sea for some time. It wasn’t rough or particularly broody and that in itself seemed to upset him. The ocean didn’t serve enough drama appropriate for the loss of his loved one.

“I’ll help you build any makeshift boat that can get us out of here, Ren. But I want you to know, so that we’re clear...I don’t trust you anymore. I think you killed Eloise. And while I’m on the subject, I think you killed Juan as well. I don’t know how you did it, or why. And I don’t have any proof. But if I find some, I swear I’ll cut you into pieces and serve you for lunch in the hostel.”

“Dirk, I swear I’m innocent! My heart just about packed in when I saw her there, tucked into the fog horn. I almost took a nose dive over the edge and that’s the honest truth. For Christ’s sake, Juan was a freak accident. You saw what happened there. How could I possibly have done something like that? How could anyone?”

“I don’t know. For what it’s worth, the others think I’m crazy. Grief and all that. And they’re certainly right, I grieve my girl and I’m not even begun grieving. But if it were up to me,

I'd have you bound and gagged and tossed in the storage shed until I can get the evidence I need.”

I stared at him and for the first time struggled to remember where I'd last left the rifle. Would it come to this then? A hold off against each other on the rock, with firearms?

He avoided me for the rest of the day and I wasn't much for company myself. Amazingly, no one yet twigged to think of the guns and I found the rifle where I'd left it...under the bed after the night's vigil. The ghastly business of fetching El's body down with Carl seemed to birth some new respect between the two of us, and he fought my corner against the notion that any foul play was involved on my part. Kry's didn't believe it anyway, but Anthea was easily swayed. The physical effort of recovering the body had blunted the other thing, but only temporarily. Now I was alone with myself in the daylight, there was no escaping the image that came back to haunt me. What in the name of God was that? And I could still hear its terrible cry as if it dinned right that moment in my ears. No one cared about the lighthouses anymore. Heritage could go screw themselves. If they didn't even care enough about their own staff to check up once in a while on whether they were still alive or swept off to sea by a giant wave, why should I give a toss if their lamps were lit? Anyway, it was impossible. I knew we weren't really saving lives by striking our lamps. We were just a piece of useless nostalgia. Irrelevant and pathetic. A decorative indulgence sponsored by wealthy shipping companies because their skippers didn't want to see an old tradition slip away entirely. But no one would be wrecked on our rocks. It was decades since the log books recorded such an event, back in the days when the lantern was the only guardian of the watch between the lives of sailors and the fangs of *Carraig Sithe*.

But there was a kind of solace to be had in the lantern rooms. None of us ventured there now after dark, but they didn't have that menace during the day. Others knew it too. Often I would seek that solitary sanctuary only to glimpse another figure—usually Dirk or Carl—already installed in a chair beside the lamp, or leaning out on the observation deck. We turned away from each other, understanding on some intuitive level, I suppose, that we needed to give each other space.

In the mornings we worked on the raft, but progress was slow. None of us had experience building seaworthy vessels, even had our materials been ideal, which they were not, and the consequences of even one minor error could be fatal. So we built prototypes and tested them. The first sunk without trace, within the first minute of being set on the water. The second also sunk, but it was in shallow enough water that we managed to salvage some of its materials, though badly damaged. We didn't have an infinite resource and one more sketched attempt would be all we could afford before we had to try out the real thing. On calm days, the divers among us, myself and Krys and Carl, mapped out the nearby rocks under the surface as best we could. But it was far from adequate and it was too dangerous to even make the attempt more than fifty yards out from the island.

I lay in the almost-dark with Krys sprawled across my chest, the two of us breathing as one animal, rising, falling. I kept a shielded candle lit on the bureau. I'm not sure it was meant to keep horn-faced beings away from our door, but the gentle warmth of its flame seemed to offer some small reassurance. I hadn't shared what I had seen with the others, apart from those few words to Dirk. Through the window I could just make out the dark shape of the Northern Light. Despite my new reluctance for the night, and my feeling that striking the lamps was an absurd and empty ritual, I felt inexplicable guilt for this eye I had allowed to wither shut.

“Krys...” I began, quiet enough that I hoped she was asleep, that I hoped she wouldn’t hear me. I swallowed. “I think...I think I may have killed those people.”

She snatched her head up off my chest, fully awake at once, hair hanging in the dark. “No you don’t. Now you stop with that shit right away. I’m serious. I know you, I’ve known you for years and you’re no killer, Render Stone.”

“But what if...” I mimed the next words to her, just in case anyone should be listening, though it would have been impossible to hear us in the quiet of the bedroom with the door closed. *What if I’m not in my right mind?* “In other words, the island. What if...I don’t know, I don’t even know what I’m saying. What if the island can somehow affect your mind...especially when you’re alone. If it can...”

“It did affect her mind, Ren. That’s exactly why she went crazy.”

“But we all heard the horn.”

She didn’t have an answer for that, and I felt a pang, because a naïve part of me somehow hoped she would. Normally, away from the island, she had always been the calm and natural wisdom I seemed to lack.

Then her face brightened, almost as if it actually took light in the dark. “What about a ship? Could it have been a ship’s horn that we heard? After all, the light was out. They might have wondered...”

I thought about this for a moment and it seemed like a ray of hope. “Yeah, actually. Yeah, it could have been a ship.” That might explain how we only heard it a few times and then it stopped. My teeth set back. I remembered what I saw on the path. But the fact was...I was the only one who had seen it. This is what really scared me. The part I didn’t dare tell, even to Krys.

When I was seeing the creature, what was I really doing? Were my hands round El's throat at that very moment? Surely not. But...

Trying to build a raft was backbreaking work. My palms blazed red and raw with pulling on rope. And since we lost the crane, there was no easy way to negotiate the unlikely craft from land into the water. If it broke up one more time, we were done.

Carl stood staring into the slowly sloshing waves at the edge of the platform, but the sea returned to him only the elfin jig of his scattered reflection.

"I tell you this place has it in for us," he said. "The boat and its pilot go missing, so we can't get off the island. Then this crane falls into the murk, so even if the boat did come, we wouldn't be able to get any heavy stuff onto the rock. Then we lose the internet..."

It was beginning to tick me off. "Look Carl, give it a rest will you? You start thinking like that and it takes over your mind. We found this stuff to make a raft, didn't we? Make yourself useful and tie off this bundle."

He eyed me incredulously. "You're not seriously expecting us to head out to sea in that thing?"

"We don't need to head out to sea" I answered irritably. "Aiming for the mainland is what I had in mind. And no, this won't support all of us."

"Who's the lucky guy?"

"Two of us."

Reality narrowed in for all of us, and Anthea shielded her eyes from the sun. "How's that going to work, Ren?"

I understood the question only too well. Sexual stereotypes didn't come into it...it was a survival issue. The best chance of surviving on the water and making it to the mainland was for two men to risk it on the raft. I trusted Dirk, but Dirk didn't trust me, so that made for a bad pairing on the raft. And it would involve leaving the girls on the island alone with Karl, which I still wasn't quite comfortable with, despite some newfound respect for the man. As for sending Kryss and Anthea out on the raft, that was out of the question. One man and one woman on the rescue mission was possible, but not especially smart. What mattered was the best decision for the greater good. So that meant either Karl and myself on the raft or Karl and Dirk on the raft.

Dirk lifted my thoughts. "I don't mind going with him." He jerked his thumb at Carl. A bolder, brassier Dirk had emerged after Eloise's death. "But no way am I leaving *you* with them."

The girls, who had been kept in safe quarantine from the secrets of that conversation, picked up their ears and darted suspicious looks between the two of us, trying to fill in the gaps they'd been denied.

But for my part, I simply nodded weary acquiescence. I wasn't in a fit frame of mind to argue the point. El's passing, just the inexplicably exhausting oddness of it, had already worn me down, without paranoid accusations tacked on the back. And I didn't trust sharing a raft with Carl, in case he beat me senseless while I slept, though common sense dictated it would more likely be Dirk, if anyone, who would do that. Unless all three of us guys tried to make it to the land. But that involved leaving the two girls alone on the island, and that was insanity. Although I doubted the evidence of my senses by daylight, the thing I had seen, I couldn't do it in good conscience.



“Look, I’ll go” Dirk said suddenly, sensing the dilemma. “Just me. And if I make it to the mainland, I raise the alarm. But I don’t want anyone with me.”

“That’s not a good choice,” I said quickly. “If you get into trouble, you’ve got no one to back you up.”

He snorted. “You don’t understand. I don’t care if anyone backs me up or not. If I make it I make it, if I don’t I don’t.”

“Hey Dirk,” Kryz began, in that tone. “There’s more people here to consider than just you, y’know. I’m sorry about Eloise, truly I am. But we’re stranded here and we can’t afford to blow what could be our one chance at a rescue.”

“And that’s exactly why I think you should let me do it alone. The raft will take less strain with just one person. I don’t have a death wish, I promise you. It’s only twenty miles to the mainland, Ren, not two hundred.”

I didn’t like it. If the sea got up, twenty miles might as well be two hundred, but off the top of my head I didn’t have a better suggestion. And to be selfishly honest, I was more than a little relieved not to have Dirk to worry about for a while.

“I think I should just head out now. It’s the right time of day and the water’s calm. We might not have a better opportunity if we delay.”

That was true. “Wait. I’ll get you some distress flares from the shed.” I’d been keeping those in reserve, to fire off if the island was overflowed, but no planes ever seemed to go over. I already fired a couple on a clear day with a big boat in the shipping lane, but it was hit or miss and I don’t think they saw us.

So I gave Dirk the last of the flares. Well, I told him they were the last. Actually, I saved two. Then all of us lifted the raft and inched it towards the edge of the platform. Without the

crane, there was no choice but to drop it. If it was going to come apart, that was the moment, when it had to bear its own weight before being dropped to the water. And then the drop itself, eight feet from the platform. It resembled a raft less than it resembled some kind of disease that had broken out by the random accumulation of materials that had somehow sought each other out at sea and clung to each other for support. It wasn't elegant and it wasn't comfortable, but it survived the drop, groaning only once where the ropes pulled taut, so hopefully it would be robust enough for the journey.

Dirk stripped down and threw his clothing onto the raft then dived to the side, climbing on awkwardly from the deeper end. For a moment it threatened to tip over with his added weight. Then we threw down some food and a towel and a good supply of fresh water, which he caught deftly. It was more than he should need. A primitive sail cannibalized from two old bedsheets in stores would serve to steer him towards the shore. He nodded curtly, acknowledging us just that once, and then pushed away from the rocks with his foot.

We watched him until he dwindled out of sight, round the horns of the little harbor. Then there was a blind spot for an hour or two before we were able to catch sight of him again from the top of the island. Just a dot now, a mote on the waves, heading for a distant shore. It was a clear day and the mainland seemed deceptively near, almost like a photographic illusion. As I watched, praying that favorable winds would blow him swiftly to his destination, it almost seemed that the tiny speck of the raft hovered timelessly, like an image falling eternally on the horizon of a black hole.

The grim business of dealing with Eloise's corpse left me depressed and the undertow of my imagination haunted by faceless shadows. I sought the solace of the lantern room in the afternoon light, and the distraction of the journal. It didn't disappoint.

*February 4<sup>th</sup>, Seventeen Hundred and Fifty One*

*How privileged we are, we keepers of the lights. When I read my scripture, which any faithful soul must do on a rock like this to preserve his sanity, I half believe I am appointed by the Lord himself to keep the saviour's mercy shining out upon the world. We are like God's light ranging over the sea and where the great beam sweeps by, the world's shapes are called from the darkness of chaos. You have called, my lord, and I have heard you.*

Those words, *you have called...and I have heard you* startled me out of the passage. They were not addressed to me, of course. Still, it seemed just a little too much of a coincidence. I thumbed the pages looking for my scribble, but I could not now locate it. Or maybe it wasn't too much, and my mind just fancied a romance of rapport with this one-time keeper of the light. I felt in him a companion I could not hope to find among the others, though I must also confess that I had formed a certain affection for my companions. An affection I had not shared with them, however. In secret I envied Fowle his simpler world, his life of moral black and white, even his quaint turn of phrase.

I kissed my pencil. Again, not really sure what I was doing or why I was doing it, I wrote in the margins of his journal,

*Mortimer Fowle,*

*Did I kill those people?*

I closed the book gingerly, as if my marks were mere powder that might be disturbed by the breeze of its closing. The sea was calm today, reassuring. A twinkling light spangled off the waves in the middle distance, like a low gathering of brightly winged fish. And I thought I saw in that light a gap through the world, as Fowle saw a gap through his in the sweep of his lantern beam. Almost as if I could see the light stitching the world into place, sewing us up in its narrative, its memory. I can't say it was a bad feeling. It calmed my spirit as I watched it, and stilled my thoughts, then the sun lost its angle on the water and the phantom shoal of leaping fish, their sides sparking in heavenly light, vanished for the illusion that they were.

With the afternoon leaning heavily on the shoulders of evening, I made my way slowly back towards the hostel. On the high point of the path I passed once more the vantage where I had last seen the raft as a bobbing speck in the remote distance. And as I chanced to glance out that way, I stopped in my tracks and stared. It was *still* a bobbing speck in the remote distance...at the exact same place and at the exact same size I had seen it several hours before. With a sudden wave of dismay, I realized that what I'd been looking at was the distant platform of a static buoy, set in the channel between the rock and the mainland.

Dirk had never made it out of the influence of *Carraig Sithe*.

I grabbed the others and we all rushed down to the platform. There it was, the bobbing remains of the raft clattering together in the small currents, as if it had been ripped to pieces by a storm. In reality it had simply fallen apart, slipping its own lashings and hanging together, barely, by the knots that still survived. Clinging to one float tank, cold and drenched and exhausted, Dirk held out a trembling arm to be pulled up onto the rock. But that wasn't easy. We no longer had the crane. So we had to lower a makeshift harness and wait while he climbed into

it, slowly, awkwardly, like a wearied old man. Then we hauled him up the eight feet of rock, drawing cuts from his arms and legs. It couldn't be helped.

When he slipped the harness at last, he simply flopped on his back, wetly, like a landed fish, the last of the water pulsing away from him.

"It's not going to let us leave," he muttered darkly, when at last he could catch his breath. "It'll never let us leave. The waters around the island are the boundary of our world."

"Take it easy, Dirk," I soothed. "You've been facing up into the sun all afternoon."

He shook his head, not opening his eyes, screwing them tighter as if he sought to wring out the sea even there. "You don't understand."

"Lift him to his feet" I said, anxiously. "We have to get him up the stair."

But he batted my fussing aside. "Leave me be. I can walk. I'm just a shipwreck, not a cripple."

### Book Three: The Gods of Camouflage

As sunset kindled its wick in the west, I could have sworn the world's light blazed out from the great lens before us. It seemed to catch fire in the heart of the lamp and then spread its wings over the sea. We abandoned the claustrophobia of the hostel and sat in a ring, all of us, around the lantern room of the north tower, facing each other. It was the only place with enough light to dispel all shadows, and if darkness fell, I had fetched some oil up the stairs. We would kindle the lantern if we must.

"This is madness" Krys began, affronted at being coerced to ascend the tower and participate in what she evidently felt was an absurd ritual.

We could all see each other, either directly, or reflected in the concentric rings of the lens. It made for an odd gathering.

But Dirk was adamant. "We have to bring this to a head. I'm telling you. I know what happened to me. It's not going to let us leave."

I leaned my head back against the rail. This was going to be hard. "I think you're making too much of this. You're imagining things."

He stung me in the eyes. "And you aren't, Ren? Perhaps it's time for some truth, eh?"

What did you see? That night?"

I took a deep breath. Why not, after all? Perhaps he was right. "I don't know what I saw"

I said at

last. "Some kind of thing out of a nightmare maybe...a creature. Or a ghoul. Its head looked like a fog horn." I winced. It sounded ludicrous by daylight, and indeed it was.

"Exactly," Dirk pounced, wagging his finger at me.

I gestured my confusion. “Exactly what, Dirk?”

“It thought you were trying to leave the island, so it stopped you.”

“I was looking for Eloise.”

“But it didn’t know that. Or if it did, it didn’t care. You were alone on the path and you were headed for the south end of the island. It thought you were trying to escape.”

I wasn’t so sure. I knew I wasn’t trying to escape, and I had the suspicion at the time, though I didn’t mention it to anyone, that my mind was transparent to it. A cold place opened somewhere down at the bottom of my spine, at the place the yogis say your life force is stored. I remember I felt it that night too, and I remembered the dread in my soul. But I also remembered the precise color of that dread, and this I had not shared with anyone. It was not the terror of a creature trying to steal my soul or hold me prisoner upon the island. It was a terror of recognition.

“And we know that I was trying to leave” Dirk continued. “So that’s not even a debate.”

Anthea kicked out at the base of the lamp. “You’re making something out of nothing. The raft fell apart. It was always going to fall apart. Do you realize how paranoid you sound?”

This astonished me, coming from Anth. It was like something Karl might say.

Dirk regarded her coldly. “You weren’t there.”

I spread my hands. “Dirk, how can you be sure? Anth’s right. I mean, the raft was always a long shot. That it came to pieces is no big mystery, you know? We’re hardly ship builders here, any of us. You’re lucky to have got back here alive.”

“Lucky?” He watched me with the intensity of a fuse, burning. “It’s not the raft, Ren. I *felt* it. When I reached the edge of the world, I knew it wasn’t going to let me leave. The wind turned. And suddenly I was fighting a current. I paddled with all my strength, but still it seized

me, turned me, and pushed me back in towards the rock. It wasn't strong. It wasn't violent. There was no reason for the raft to come apart, but I saw it happen. I saw the lashings spring loose myself, as if someone lifted them. I hit nothing. All the time I spent floundering in the water was right down there beside the platform. I couldn't make it onto the rocks."

He turned to Karl. "What about you, what did you see?"

Karl glowered at him. He didn't appreciate the proceedings, and tensions with Dirk were rising. "Ask him." He jerked his head at me. "He saw it too."

"I'm asking you."

Karl shifted uncomfortably, but chose to yield on this occasion. The pressure of eyes in the circle, strangely magnified by a consciousness of all the glass and lens in the lantern room, was too much for him. He lowered his gaze. "Just a damn light, in the south tower." He mumbled at me again. "Ask him."

Dirk raised his eyebrows towards me.

I had a curious reaction towards the gathering. Aside from our cramped meals at the hostel table, this was the only time we'd all sat together...those of us remaining. I felt a sudden, lacerating compassion for these people that startled me close to the edge of tears. I actually had to swallow it back as I spoke, so as not to appear like an imbecile.

"Sure," I said, still a bit thickly. If anyone noticed, they didn't let on. "But we were both of us in strung out shape."

"The south tower!" Dirk flashed back quickly, angrily. "Don't you get it?" It marks the easiest way off the island. That's why it doesn't want you to go down that way. It's trying to scare you away. We all know you can't escape at the north end, unless you jump to your death on the rocks below, right?"



“Strung out shape,” Anthea echoed, “that’s your explanation right there. We’re on a wild, remote, foggy, stormy island. We’re stranded here when we should have been off it weeks ago, and you’re wondering why people are seeing things? I can see you never studied psych.”

Dirk ignored her, as if anything that didn’t fit in with his new world view, his brain disregarded. “We have to take action, Ren. Or this thing is going to kill us, each one of us, in turn. It will systematically hunt us down on the island, when we’re alone, until none of us are left.”

I nodded absently, but far back in my mind, a small voice whispered *no...no, it won't do that*. It was poised right on the pivot of my own internal dialog and the edge of hypnagogia. As if I’d both said it and hear it said, by another. And again, that recognition. I shuffled my feet.

Krys shivered suddenly at Dirk’s thought. “So we just never stay alone.”

“It will separate us, Krys. It will find a way.”

“Dirk, this is paranoid shit...”

His eyes stormed with daggers. “It isn’t. And I want to *live*, I don’t know about you.” His eyes flicked among us with new suspicion. “I don’t know about any of you.”

Karl lifted his gaze, eased his head back against the outer glass of the lantern room.

“What exactly did you have in mind?”

Dirk looked at each one of us in turn, a little calmer now that he’d been offered the baton. “Think about it folks. There’s no guarantee that the creature isn’t among us, even now.”

I stared at him. “Are you out of your mind?”

But he met my challenge with vigor. “Did you see how Eloise was killed, did you?”

“No... but I saw how Juan was killed.” The memory of that dreadful image jumped back into my mind’s eye and I flinched. “And so did you.”

Dirk scoffed with his lungs. “And what did we see? We saw nothing. We saw a freak accident. A thing that could never have happened in a million years. And yet it did. And whaddy know, we were standing right there to see it.”

This was starting to piss me off now. “What’s your point?”

“We don’t know how this thing is altering our perceptions, Ren. You think that creature you saw on the path was real? Its true form? A ghoul with long, gangly arms and a fog horn for a head?”

I set my teeth. The conversation, and his tone, began to erode my fragile sense of compassion and for reasons I couldn’t identify, I wanted to hold onto that, like a stranded climber holding onto the roots at a cliff edge. “I know what I saw. You claim to know what happened to you, right. I’d thank you to grant me the same respect. I know what happened to me.”

“Right, right.” He dismissed my thought as if I were an idiot. “But it’s just a shape it took to frighten you. We already know that this thing inhabits our memories. It can reach right in there and change them. If it can do that...”

Suddenly, I could see where he was coming from. A thought cascade rattled quickly through my brain. And against my own judgment, it made sense. Part of me knew he was right. It *was* a shape taken to frighten me. Which meant that it could make our minds discern any shape it wanted. Which meant...

“But if that’s true,” Anthea began slowly, staring into the low hearth of the sun’s fire reflected in the Fresnel in front of her. “...if that’s true, it could have killed any one of us at any point, and the person that’s sitting here...”

“Right,” I echoed, emptily. The truth was, this had never even occurred to me. But now I saw it...and I saw it clearly...my palms were on fire for a gun.

“I think I’ve seen that movie already” Karl said, drily. “Can you guys not hear yourselves?”

Dirk turned towards him slowly and narrowed his eyes like an accusation. “So then, you really saw nothing, Karl? You were just bluffing us?”

He lowered his eyes and they rolled from side to side under his lids in the uncomfortable company of his own thoughts.

“So shut the fuck up then!”

I shifted awkwardly. “You’re talking about killing this thing?”

Dirk spread his hands, like an apology. “What is this, amnesty day for monsters? Is that a problem for anyone?”

Karl hardened back into the conversation. “Well, actually, yeah.... First, let’s say it is a ghoul. A demon. This island’s genius loci. An evil force that won’t let us leave. Call it what you will? What makes you think you can kill something like that? I’m not sure there’s a frikkin’ manual, y’know?”

“I don’t know either” Dirk continued slowly. “But I do know this. It hasn’t killed us all already. So its power is limited. Limited, or it’s afraid. And something with limited power or something that’s afraid is at risk of some kind. If we can find its peril, perhaps we can destroy it.”

Anthea buried her face in her hands. “This is the maddest talk ever. We’ve gone batshit crazy. Crap, don’t you guys see? This must be how it happens. Next thing we know, we all cut

each other's throats in the night and the rescue boat comes and they ask...what the fuck happened here?"

To my surprise, Dirk nodded his consent enthusiastically. "That's right. And that's what's *going* to happen, unless we do something."

For the second time, I asked. "So what do you have in mind?"

"We try to escape. The thing won't let us leave the island, one at a time. So we go in pairs. If I'm right, its power is limited to dealing with us one at a time. You on the fog path. Juan in the tower."

"But it was you AND me that saw the light, Karl."

He wagged his finger. "Yes, but that was ONLY a light, Ren, and way off in the distance."

"This is crazy" Anthea sighed.

But I was still trying to understand his logic. "So why pairs? Why not all at once?"

"That still cuts it slack, Ren. It can corral us all in one place. If we force it to split its attention..."

"I see" I said slowly. Actually, I did see. "But how do you know? I mean, if I'm the ghoul, I'm just going to bluff that I can't leave, right?"

Anthea raised her hand, like a sarcastic schoolgirl. "Um, we're fresh out of boats, in case anyone hasn't noticed."

"We use the emergency buoys in the main platform store," Dirk answered quickly.

I laughed at the image the idea conjured. I couldn't help myself. "You won't get very far on those!"

But Dirk wasn't laughing. "We won't need to get far, Ren. I didn't get any further than round the horn of the rock. I'm telling you, all we need is the buoys and something that can serve as makeshift paddles."

I pondered the scenario. Despite my best efforts, all mental images that could be conjured still ended in absurdity. "It won't work. The buoy will drift around the end of the island on the current. There's no way to see what happens."

"I've thought of that. Someone watches from the highest point on the island." He kicked his foot against the iron grill under his feet. "That's right here. You can see all four sides of the rock."

"There are still blind spots," I protested.

"But not out on the water. If I'm right, the buoys will make it out far enough that we can see them. Then they'll be stopped. They'll turn around. Nothing their pilots can do will prevent it. And that can be seen from here."

"So what's the point?"

"We probe its weakness, Ren. We can't risk all going at once until we see how it handles two...or three."

Karl deepened his frown into the lens, as if he hoped to focus it there. "If there's really something, I mean if there's really..." He didn't complete the thought, instead switching to another track. "You're going to piss it off."

That hadn't escaped me either. But I didn't have a better idea. It was a madcap plan, and it might just work. "So what if it really is one of us already, and the person who stays up here is the demon?"

“Everyone does the boat test. Anyway, there are only three buoys, which means that two people are in the lantern room at all times. They verify what they see, and they each carry a gun.”

Anthea jumped to her feet. “I’m not carrying a fucking gun. I don’t care what you say. And I’m not going paddling in a damn life buoy either. Not in the waters round this island. It’s stupid and it’s dangerous.” She made for the ladder that led down into the watch room.

Quietly, but determinedly, Karl reached out to stop her, seized her arm. “We can’t let you do that, girl.”

I despised the spectacle, but I must admit, I saw the grim logic of it.

“I’m afraid on this thing, we can’t tolerate any dissenters, Anth.” Dirk said, with a ruthless style of compassion. “I’m sorry. You’ll do it. We all will.”

I glanced out skeptically across the water. Even at this time, the glare off the sea was prodigious. “We’ll never spot them. It’s further than you think.”

“We do it at night,” Dirk answered calmly.

That doubled the hazard of the venture in one moment, and I felt my threshold approaching. “Now, look, that’s just getting...”

“It’s the only way,” he insisted. “Because you’re right. The sun on the water during daylight is going to baffle the view. And we need to be certain. So we hang a lantern on each buoy and we do it after dark. That way we’ll easily see each lamp from up here and each pilot has a light on their vessel. If there’s a moon, we can do it tonight. So each pilot can see the island too. We know where all the dangerous rocks are, and we avoid them. So it’s not really more hazardous. You just think it is. And that’s not an excuse.”

“Sounds like you’ve got this all figured out,” Kryz said icily.

But she met her match. “I had a lot of time to figure things out, miss, while you guys left me wallowing in freezing water down by the platform.”

“What does it achieve?” I wondered, shaking my head. If the test is inconclusive, we’ll just be at each other’s throats.”

“We’re at each others throats anyway. What does it achieve? The chance to escape, Ren?” Suspicion deepened into the lines on his face. “Don’t you care about that?”

I stood up, tired of the mental jousting and poison glances. “Of course I care. Alright. Alright damn you, let’s do it if we’re going to. I’m sick of talking. Let’s get to work.” I pointed out the windows where a big moon rose red and full. “It’ll take us a while to get the buoys out and floating. I don’t want to be doing that after dark.”

It took longer than I hoped and it was already pushing midnight by the time we had all the buoys on the water, tethered to the platform.

“I still think this is stupid and dangerous,” Anthea complained.

“The water’s placid as a kitten” Dirk said, his reply ready. “So long as you keep your head, you shouldn’t be at any risk from the sea.”

I shivered. There was no wind, but the shoulder of winter was beginning to push over the sea and the air sparked its chill. “Let’s go over the protocol. I sure as hell don’t want to do this more than once!”

Dirk nodded grimly. “Yeah, good idea. Anthea and I will take first watch in the north light. Ren and Kryss and Carl take to the boats.”

“These are no boats” Carl observed caustically.

“...and then when you’re done, it’s three of you in the tower, and Anthea and myself will take our turn...assuming the matter isn’t already decided.”

“Get to the important part” I grumbled.

Dirk heaved his chest, and for a moment seemed frailer than ever on his cane. “Okay. If we’re right, the thing’s influence extends beyond the horns but not out as far as the Three Sisters.

“Come on” I scoffed. “How can you know that?”

“I don’t. But the horns are still part of the island, the sisters aren’t. It’s as good a call as any. And if I’m wrong, I’m wrong, right?” Dirk pulled in a long breath and kept talking. “All buoys proceed to the limit and then wait for each other. Stay at least twenty yards apart. Then keep going. If it can be done, we know it can’t handle three easily.”

Krys frowned. “So we just make a break for it?”

Dirk wagged his head like a big dog. “NO. You come back. When we really go for this, we have to do it all together.”

“And what if two of them can break free, and one can’t go on?” It was a question I already knew the answer to, a question I didn’t want to voice.

“The pilot that can’t continue is the demon of *Carraig Sithe*.”

“Madness,” Anthea muttered under her breath.

“I still don’t understand” Krys interrupted. “If the thing’s been stopping us from leaving...”

“It has,” Dirk returned flatly.

“...well then, isn’t it just going to stop us again? So none of us will make it to the Three Sisters and the test won’t show anything even if one of us is this...this thing.”



Dirk nodded, understanding slowly. “That’s my gamble. I believe the thing can’t leave the island. When we force it to try, it’ll be out of its safety zone. It will have its hands full. It won’t be able to control us as it does from the safety of the island.”

“That’s a big gamble,” I breathed.

“Why?” The worst that can happen is that it’ll fail. “If it succeeds we have a tag on the creature.”

“Maybe,” I corrected. “It still assumes that any one of us is the ghoul.”

“It still assumes there *is* a ghoul,” Karl added drily, and then continued to watch us in silence, me in particular, as if I was part of a psychological experiment he was running all on his own. Part of me wondered what he was biding his time for.

Dirk spread his hands. “What better way to observe us?”

“Well, let’s get out there,” I pressed. “Like I said, I’m done arguing about it.”

Steering the buoys was not easy, even with a paddle. They were directionless as vessels and never meant for this purpose. But after a little practice I got the hang of it and shouted instructions to the others, especially Krys, who was floundering.

By the time we sailed past the horns of the island we were veterans, piloting our various ships like seasoned skippers. I glanced sideways at Krys, her newfound confidence in piloting this unwieldy vessel, but also her nervous disdain for the whole enterprise. I tried to imagine her as some kind of nebulous wraith of evil intent possessing her body, or merely taking on the semblance of her shape...a malign force of some kind that affected these human behaviors with great cunning just to dupe us...but I couldn’t pull it off. It was an absurd notion to begin with, and I was doubly sure of it now. Karl was easier to imagine as a ghoul. But I was smart enough

to realize this was just my prejudice against the guy rising up on its heels. In the clear air out there on the water, the whole previous conversation now seemed like a kind of infection, a paranoia spread on a vector of words in the closed space of the lens room.

And if I was the ghoul, well then I didn't know I was the ghoul, which seemed to make it pointless in being a ghoul...to my mind anyway. Like a banshee that's forgotten it's supposed to wail. I'd already come to a point of some comfort about this in my mind, insane though it felt even to have the thoughts. I didn't really believe it, but if I killed Juan and Eloise, well then I was insane anyway. I had no memory of doing those things so I didn't do them on purpose. In my own mind that made me not a murderer. It was precarious ethics, but I was sticking to it. And I had no consciousness of preventing anyone from leaving the island. So again, if I was doing that I didn't know about it.

But this whole inner dialogue seemed stupid beyond belief. The moon-etched silhouette of the Three Sisters loomed before us. And for that first time, from that angle of approach, I actually saw why they had been named. By stark and uncertain shadows of moonlight, those rocks did indeed seem like three treacherous maidens of the deep, stretching to eldritch shapes, beckoning eerily, rising improbably out of the ocean to lure sailors to their deaths. What trouble then, would they have with us?

According to Dirk's instructions, and knowing he'd be watching from the tower, we brought ourselves round at approximately twenty yards from each other, and just within the invisible boundary Dirk reckoned as the limit of the island's mysterious influence. Beyond it, and just a minute or so of further rowing away, were the Sisters themselves. We each struck a lantern hung atop our buoys, so that we could be seen much clearer from the North Tower. Then there was nothing left to do except push into the edge of the membrane.

We each began to paddle. It was easy. Nothing obstructed our progress. I watched Carl and Krys surreptitiously out of the corner of my eyes. I knew how it could go. One would accidentally drop their paddle into the deep and feign profuse apology, being unable to continue till a later time, or else their lantern would flicker out so that we couldn't see clearly what they were about or whether their buoy was still manned. But none of this happened. Again, I bit down on these thoughts, but they seemed like dogs I couldn't quite control. Reason would keep them quiet for a short while, but eventually the dogs would begin to shuffle again, would begin to whine. Left to themselves, they would begin to snap and growl. I wondered, absently, if any dog owner had ever become so fearful of his own dogs that they sensed the measure of his fear and thus devoured him.

I could clearly see both Carl and Krys. All our lanterns were steady. And we progressed unimpeded towards the Three Sisters. None of us actually had a plan of action for what to do when we reached them, as we hadn't talked about that part.

"I guess we just go round them," I called out to the others. I meant the Sisters. The truth was, I had spent myself some hauling out the buoys from the store, and probably exerted myself more than the others. My arms were tired with the rowing and were close to the edge of cramping. But I dared not let it show to the others, and especially to Dirk, as I knew he would deem me the creature.

My rowing arm ached as we circled round the back of the rocks. From that vantage their aspect as evil temptresses of the deep lost its power, and they were just random structures of stone, projecting uselessly but hazardously from a remote outback of water. We could see each other at all times, even round the back of the rocks. We made sure to stay far enough away from the Sisters that Dirk and Anthea, up at the top of the light tower, would never see us disappear

into a blind spot. They had the altitude for that, and of course, all we had to do was position ourselves so that the lantern room was clearly in view to us at all times.

We passed the test, and if truth be told, I was more than a little relieved to have the ordeal over and done with. But on another level, we were worse off than when we began. Nothing attempted to stop us. But was that because it couldn't? Or because it simply chose not to? Dirk didn't seem to have factored that into his plan.

We swapped roles. The three of us in the lantern room, with Dirk and Anthea out on the boats. We watched as they struck their lanterns, then signalled up to us by swinging their lamps that they were about to head off towards the Sisters. I watched them go, but then suddenly, and all the more sudden because our attention was distracted from the fact, the weather changed on the rock. I saw a shadow fall as a finger of fog drifted across the moon. And then, as my attention focused across the top of the island outside the lantern room, I saw fog rolling over it like the fumes from dry ice rolling over the edge of a theatrical stage. Within seconds it flowed around and past the tower, and then down onto the west side of the island, obscuring our view of the boats. For a few moments the fog reached up even beyond the height of the lens and I drifted again in a vague sea of nothing.

“This makes the whole thing useless!” Carl protested.

“It'll probably pass in a minute or two,” I said. Actually, I wasn't sure. But I'd seen the effect of this mircoweather often enough when up there alone with the lamp, especially at night, that I knew the situation could change dramatically in a matter of minutes, even seconds. There was no way of knowing whether the fog would simply roll over and open again to clear night, or whether it would settle in and be with us for a night and a day. I certainly wasn't about to believe it was a genius loci controlling the weather.

And more or less as I had that thought, the fog rolled away from the top of the lighthouse, literally rolled like the passing crest of a wave that broke a few moments later into a scatter of fragments down by the shores of the island. And like curtains parting, once more the night focused clear, and we had crystal vision to the Sisters and beyond. I could see that one of the buoys had already passed round the rear of the rock formation and was heading back towards the island. The other buoy hadn't passed out from the shadow of the Sisters yet. That had to be Anthea. There was no way that Dirk would let himself get into the shadow of the island. Not only that but she let herself get too far behind.

There she came now!

With relief that truly lifted a stone weight from my heart, we were all able to extend beyond the reach of the island. So if Dirk's logic was true, and it was a big if, none of us could be the creature!

I waited eagerly on the platform with the others. In my mind, I was already plotting. If the intelligence of the island could be distracted, then we might be able to leave. That seemed to me the real message of the night. As I pondered, though, I grew distracted by what I perceived to be odd behavior on the part of the approaching buoys. It looked like they were drifting, and might even miss their approach to the platform.

"Yo!" I called, and struck a lantern of our own, just to be sure, though now the fog was clear there was more than enough moonlight to steer by. I peered out onto the water, confused, because I couldn't seem to make out any human shapes on the approaching buoys.

I called out again. "Ahoy there! Anthea! Dirk! You're almost home. Swing your lanterns so we can see you!"

No response. And suddenly, an eerie still descended. The buoys lapped slowly to the shore, arriving to bump against the platform, at last, with uncanny accuracy. But there was no sign anywhere of their human pilots.

Carl jumped right down onto one of the buoys. “We need to get back out there!” The buoy swung wildly as it sought to accommodate its new balance to the sudden weight. “They might have ditched in that fog, or hit the rock.”

That didn’t make much sense. The last thing they would do was abandon the buoys, but it was conceivable they may have crashed into the Sisters, leaving the buoys to return as derelicts.

I threw a rope over to Carl. “We’ll go out,” I shouted. “But not in these things. Talk sense. We’ll use the launch for this!”

He hesitated a moment, then nodded, embarrassed this hadn’t occurred to him.

But the launch wasn’t at the platform, it was at the south end, and there was no direct route to the south end of the island by path, no direct route at all—that’s what the launch was for—so we would have to climb the cliff stair back to the hostel, and the small rise of rock above the hostel, which was the one place on the island where all the paths came together.

Runing up the cliff stair shed valuable minutes, but it was still worth it in my mind compared to trying to mount a rescue in emergency buoys never meant for the task. We staggered, winded at the top of the stair, hands on our knees in the moonlight, before we could even hope to continue.

Carl straightened up first. “There’s something!”

A lantern, on the rope bridge path. It was just approaching the far point of the bridge, where the bowing dip of the bridge itself fell into deeper shadow among the rocks across the saddle.

A moment later another lantern appeared, down the path leading to the west side of the island.

“They made it!” Kryz yelled joyfully. She fetched her own lantern off the ground, where she’d planted it to get her breath back and lifted it over her head with both hands, so that they could see us clearly. The lantern on the bridge path swung from side to side in reply. A moment later, the lantern on the west path hoisted in the air. They were still too far away to recognize who swung each lamp.

The fog must have descended at the worst moment, disorienting them completely on the water. After that, and if they lost sight of the Three Sisters, it would be an easy matter to completely lose one’s bearings in the sea until visibility and the landmark of the island returned to them. If they made it to the island, they would have ditched the buoys as soon as they could step to land. The tow of current around the island would then capture the buoys and pull them slowly, but inevitably, back to the platform. I almost had myself convinced it made sense. Still, I wondered how anyone could have made it round to the base of the west path quite as quickly. And that was a taxing ascent, in its own way worse than the cliff stair. None of us ever went that way unless we had to.

And as I was pondering, Kryz made a small, emotionally indecipherable sound in the back of her throat and pointed. A *third* lantern had appeared, on the rock stair descending from the north light. My fingertips hummed with fright as if a charge was being pushed down my arms from my heart. It wasn’t possible for anyone to have gained that position, and there was no path beyond the light, only a treacherous drop onto the rocks below, and then the restless churn of the sea.

We all fixed to stillness, understanding at once the import of what we were seeing. Two pilots went out with lanterns. Three came back. One of those lanterns was carried by something else.

But which one?

When the lantern bearers caught sight of each other, they stopped momentarily. But as they were not visible to us, so we were not to them, and Dirk and Anthea doubtless supposed that we had split our group for some reason, sending one person with a lantern to search the north path...though that made no sense.

The amber glow of the lanterns lit flickering disks of light across the rock as they slowly approached. But what was approaching? I rolled my tongue in my mouth, thinking quickly.

“Krys, raise that lamp again and signal.”

She looked at me, seeking the string that would lead to an argument.

“Please, just do what I ask.”

She raised the lantern and swung it.

“Harder,” I said.

She swung the lamp vigorously until it was at risk of guttering on its wick.

“Ahoy!” I called into the dark, at the top of my lungs. “Hold your ground!”

The lanterns held, but—I sensed—reluctantly. They didn’t understand. Trying to explain a bizarre and delicate situation on a shout into the night wasn’t going to work either. I grabbed the lantern and held it at chest height among the three of us...so that those who bore the distant lantern could see that we were gathered there, a group of three. The lantern on the bridge path slowly lowered. Whoever bore that lamp understood. The lantern from the north swung from side to side, slowly, as if its owner didn’t comprehend. The lantern from the west held steady in



position, varying only by the natural flicker of its wick. Of course, I was guessing. These behaviors could mean anything. The fact is, one of them was the spirit of *Carraig Sithe*, and somehow I had the feeling that if we allowed it to approach by open invitation, it would consume us all.

Again, I yelled at the top of my lungs, but my voice grew hoarse. “If you are Anthea, raise your lamp!”

None of the lanterns hoisted. The croak in my thought or the scattered accoustics among the rocks, must have made my shout unintelligible. I tried another tack. I hoisted our own lantern and somewhat clumsily wrote DIRK into the wild air with a trail of fire, moving as quickly as I could. Then I began over, and wrote the word into the air a second time.

After a brief hesitation, the lantern on the bridge path raised and nodded quickly, three times.

I was as sure as I could be that the bearer on the rope bridge really was Dirk. Again, I signaled with the lantern, this time swinging it towards me, bidding him approach. The figure began moving on the bridge. I prayed for us all, that I was right.

Then I turned back to face the West and the North Paths. This time I raised the lamp and inscribed the letter A followed by a ? into the air. I could only hope that I made myself understood.

Neither lantern twitched.

I repeated the signal: “A?”

This time both lanterns raised, though the one on the north path just a fraction later than the west, as if it were watching closely, to imitate. The west lantern bobbed in the air, seeming to say, yes, that’s me, I’m Anthea. The north lantern also bobbed...I am Anthea.

And without being asked, both lanterns suddenly began to approach on their respective paths. I swung our own lamp harshly, trying to signal *no, stay where you are, we need to resolve this!* but of course no such communication was possible with the feeble tool of a lantern, nor any more with the flayed pipes of my voice. The lanterns did not arrest their approach.

The figure bearing the south lamp became visible first. It was Dirk, holding it up close to his face now so that we could see him, and then lowering it a little, so that he could the better see us. In the last stretch of his approach he began trotting, heavy with his limp. “You have to stop them!” he yelled.

But it was too late. Both lanterns now approached the group, like the reflections in the eyes of big cats circling a campfire by night. One of these was Anthea, surely, but what was the other? Dirk hobbled right past me and into the hostel, emerging just a few moments later with the rifle, which, somewhat foolishly I admit, I now recalled leaving out of the case. He looked at me once...then tossed it across to me. I was grateful for this small vote of confidence.

When the lanterns came within shouting distance, I fired a warning shot in the air.

“Identify yourselves!” I yelled.

But we seemed to hear Anthea’s voice, again scattered by the puzzle of rocks, coming from both directions. The lanterns began, once more, to inch closer towards our group, either not understanding the warning, perhaps mistaking it for an invitation marking our spot the clearer to approach, or else not caring for the warning at all.

There was nothing to be done now except shoot, and on this, I held my hand, recognizing the precarious proximity of a madness that could take from us yet another of our number. I let the rifle fall mute at my side, though I still held it close, till I could see with what we had to deal.

Both lanterns approached, perversely matched in speed and distance from the group. It was impossible to tell them apart, though shadowy figures could now be glimpsed behind each of them. At last, there was no longer even a need to shout. They were all but upon us.

“Raise your lamps and identify yourselves!” I commanded.

The west lantern raised up first to the face of the bearer.

Even in the distorted ghost light cocktailed by the moon and the lantern itself, it was clear enough. Anthea...her eyes wide. Frightened and confused.

I snatched the rifle up from my side and leveled it at the keeper of the north lantern. I was more than ready to fire. But already, its bearer lifted the lamp towards its face and I saw behind the glow another pair of eyes, wide, bewildered and frightened.

Yet I didn't shoot. I didn't shoot because I recognized those eyes. We all did.

It was Eloise. She stopped at a distance of about twenty yards.

“For God's sake open fire,” Kryss hissed, like water gassing on flames. “It's the creature!”

Dirk rolled his tongue over the outside of his lips. “No wait...wait a second here.” I could feel the conflict that was on him, because it also weighed on me, crushing me down.

“You can't be!” I barked, full of accusation. I aimed the barrel of the rifle straight at her heart. “I saw your body myself. We bagged your corpse and stored it in the boat house, god damn it.”

Eloise shook her head. “I couldn't hear the horn anymore, so I just came back. What's all this about?”

I swayed on the spot, suddenly convinced, though why I cannot account, that in her own mind, it was still the night of the foghorn and only minutes had passed. I could see it in her eyes, in her fright. I swallowed against my own dry throat.

“It’s a trick,” Carl warned. “For Christ’s sake use the gun!” The ice cold Norwegian, suddenly aflame with his own fears.

My fingers trembled, twitching on the trigger. The animal in me wanted to fire. But I couldn’t.

“I don’t think it’s a trick,” I said. “Look at her eyes, she’s terrified.”

“I’m scared because you’re pointing a rifle at me and I don’t understand why?”

Dirk took hold of the barrel, eased it away from its target towards a harmless place on the rocks beyond. “Easy, Ren. Don’t do this. If you’re wrong, you’ll regret. We’ll all regret it, forever.”

He turned his attention back towards Eloise. When he spoke it was strong and calm, but an undertone in his words disclosed that he was not entirely free of his own suspicions. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Eloise, if it really was Eloise, shook her head. “I was on the path heading for the south end and I started to get scared. I couldn’t see where you guys were in the fog and the path was treacherous, stones and stuff. Then that God awful horn sounded. It was close! I had to bury my hands in my ears and I almost lost my footing. I turned round on the path and came back to see where you guys were. Why did you come back up here?”

“She’s telling the truth.” I said.

“Why?” Carl countered quickly. “We buried her. How is this the truth?”

“I don’t know.” My own voice sounded remote and empty to me, like the far-off echo of a fog horn.

“It’s making us see what it wants us to see.”

I bit my lip. “But maybe that bagging, burying, maybe *that’s* what it wanted us to see.”

Carl pressed on. “It could be simulated. You’re letting your feelings get the better. Your feelings for Eloise.”

My throat tightened. “I don’t have feelings for Eloise.”

But he was relentless. “You know you do.”

I refused to have this out now. I understood what he was saying, and he was right. It could be a simulation. But if the power on the island could simulate that, then it could also simulate my memory of finding her tucked in a fetal position inside the fog horn. It could simulate the grim business of carting her down to the boathouse and tying her corpse in a bag. In fact, all of that could have been a vision from beginning to end.

We have to get to the truth of it. But I had no idea how we were going to do that. I already knew that Eloise’s tale would hold. In her world, in her experience of the island, only minutes had passed since she fled the horn on that path, though for the rest of us that was many days ago. The logic of her story would hold. But the two stories together...in that, there would be no logic at all. I didn’t doubt that if we went to the boathouse now, her body would not be there. And not just that, no bag, no sign of a bag, no ropes missing from their places that were used to tether the bag. The island would smooth over the wrinkles in memory, because that was what this thing was, that was what it did. Its nature consisted of it. Really, these rocks were memories, as much as they were ever stone.

That night, Karl came to see me in my room. Didn’t knock. Didn’t announce himself. Krys was elsewhere. He locked the door from the inside.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“We need to talk about this Eloise thing, Ren.”

I threw keys down on the desk. “Not now, Carl.”

“Yes, now. If not, I’m going to persuade the others to have you restrained.”

I stared at him, a rage rising in me. “What?”

He sat on the edge of the bed, softened his tone just a little. “You were the only one who said he saw Eloise’s corpse. The only one who saw her tucked into the fog horn. Your story is the only evidence any of that ever happened.”

“Carl, have you lost your wits? You helped me store the body yourself.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about that. You wrapped the body, Ren. It was already bagged and loaded on the cart. All we did was help you winch it down to the store. It might not have been her.”

“Right” I said sarcastically. “Right, because we just have this whole glut of spare bodies lying around.”

“Spare, no. Juan, yes.”

“For Christ’s sake Carl. We buried him at sea.”

“You buried at him sea, Ren.” He wagged his finger at me. “I’ve been thinking about that too. If you stashed the body, if you bagged it, it could be made to look like Eloise.”

“Oh come on, you can’t be serious. He was a foot taller than her.”

He shrugged easily. “Maybe you sawed the feet off?”

“...I sawed the feet off?”

Shrugged again. “Or you just pad the bag wider, which is probably what you did. In the confusion, in the struggle for some semblance of decorum, no one wanted to say anything, or suppressed their doubts. Even me.”

“Come on. You can’t seriously believe what you are saying? I killed Eloise? Why?”

“Well no, Eloise is here, so that must have gone wrong. I’m guessing you tried to drug her because you didn’t want signs of a struggle. But you were interrupted...”

“That’s insane.”

“Is it? No one saw you on the path. We have chloroform in the medical cupboard for emergencies. You confront her on the path. Or better still, you seize her from behind, so that she can’t see her assailant. But voices, lights...you’re interrupted. Your careful plan comes unstuck. The stones and junk you scattered on the path didn’t delay the rest of us for long enough, as you thought it would, and now you only have time to drag her away, to bind and gag her.”

I laughed openly. “On that path? Dragging a body?”

“An unconscious person,” he corrected. “Yes, I admit that’s a puzzle. But I think you hid her behind the tanks in the compressor shed. In the chaos that night no one thought to look there, including me. There would be room to wedge a person behind that stuff. Not much room, but room.”

I threw my glass onto the bed, not caring that it soaked into the sheets. But glancing casually in the mirror on the opposite wall I saw the bulge where Carl stowed the pistol in the back of his pants. I cursed myself for not securing it earlier. “Well, doesn’t match with Eloise’s story, does it?”

“No, but El doesn’t really have a story. And she might be confused, not remembering anything clearly, because you gagged her with chloroform. I could still smell traces of it on your clothing when we were talking in the lighthouse, because you didn’t have the chance to wash that stuff yet.”

“That’s bullshit. Prove it!”

“I can’t. And you’ve almost certainly washed it by now.”

I sat on the bed slowly. “Chloroform evaporates. It can’t be smelled on clothing days afterwards.”

“You sound like an expert.”

“More of a fucking expert than you, it would seem!”

“Then you spilled too much and your shirt was saturated with it.”

I cackled like a gypsy. “Bullshit again. I’d pass out. You know I would.”

Carl’s eyes narrowed to the same aperture as his voice.

“I aint bullshitting, Ren. And I advise you not to test the idea that I am.”

I smoothed the bedsheet beside me, a growing sense of the predicament I was in. “Soo...I take it you’ve talked to Dirk?”

“Of course.”

“And he believes you?”

Carl looked away.

“Aha! Well, that must be a problem!”

His gaze wandered back towards me, more threatening. “You’ve infected Dirk with your madness. He thinks that the person who ‘came back’ isn’t Eloise, that it’s some kind of creature spawned by the island.”

“It is,” I said reflexively. But I felt a twinge in my gut. It sounded full on mad.

Carl nodded, as if to my thought, and not to my words. “But I don’t blame Dirk, I blame you. I’m offering the chance to put yourself under restraint, Render. You aren’t sane. You haven’t been for some time. My suspicion now is that the damage was done before we even arrived on the island, when you were here on your own, alone with those...” he waved his hand dismissively... “diaries, or whatever it is you read.”



I narrowed my eyes, angered more than I thought I would be by this intrusion into my privacy. “How do you know about that?”

He snorted. “It hardly needs Sherlock Holmes. I just followed you one time, watched what you were doing.” His tone sank heavier, darker. “I know you killed Juan, Ren. You tried to kill Eloise. But believe it or not, I’m trying to help you. Because I don’t think you did it on purpose. I don’t think you *murdered* anyone, or even tried to. But that sure isn’t the way that the cops, and Maritime Heritage, and the coastguard, and every goddamn other person and his dog for that matter...are going to see it as soon as we get off this island. I’m pretty much your only chance, Bro.”

“I won’t let you do it. Kryss will never agree to have me restrained. Dirk neither.”

He rolled his eyes, acknowledging to his own frustration that this was probably true.

“And you can’t just declare yourself the police force on this rock. *I* won’t let you do that. I have a responsibility and a job here. You guys are just guests.”

“Those considerations don’t matter anymore. So far as I’m concerned, you’re under suspicion, Ren. But try to listen to this. I *want* to help you. I don’t believe you’re a murderer. You’ve done things your mind doesn’t want you to remember. And to cover up for it, you’ve invented this thing, the creature of the island that stalks around in the fog. And you *believe* it, I know you do. That’s why I think you’re not guilty. But it’s a ghost story your mind has made up to screen itself from what really happened.

The first bitter chill of this possibility needled into me. *Could it possibly be?* But I shivered it off. It was too far from everything I held dear of myself. And if it was true, then there could be no doubt...I really had gone insane. But I railed against it.

“That’s crap. YOU were afraid yourself, in the lens room. I saw you.”

Carl sniffed. “Nah, I bluffed that. An act for your benefit. So that I could stall and watch you carefully. I’ve been watching for some time, Ren.”

“Dirk is deluded about Eloise. But he’s not dangerous. I don’t fear for the others because of Dirk, I fear for them because of you. And so should you, Ren. That’s what I’m trying to get you to see. You can’t trust yourself. You *must not* trust yourself.”

“You have no idea!” I shook my head, but a hot film of moisture, salty and stinging like the sea itself, smarted in my eyes.

“Oh I do. I know that Dirk secretly hates me, and thinks I’m going to cut everyone’s throats during the night, especially his.” He smiled ironically, a somewhat eldritch smile I thought. “I’ve had it all my life, believe me. It no longer even surprises me. You most of all. But that’s okay. I don’t hold it against you. No, I’m not kidding. Really I don’t. I’m asking you to volunteer yourself for restraint, Ren.”

“I won’t do it! It’s madness. This place needs my attention and my skill.”

“You can do all of that from here.” He swept his arm round my bedroom. “And Krysl doesn’t sleep with you until this is over.”

I stood up. “Okay, I’ve just heard enough.”

But Carl was on his feet now too, blocking my exit to the door. “I urge you to reconsider, Ren! I can post myself here with you, to keep an eye on you. You won’t be bound or strapped to a chair, I promise. You’ll be free to move around in here. I’ll make sure your needs are taken care of until we get off the island.”

“We can’t get off the island. We lost our comms link.”

“Oh you *sabotaged* the comms link, Render. I figured that one out early on. You just used the crane crash as a cover, and that was staged too. But actually, the cable can be repaired.

And if I can somehow persuade Dirk to guard over you, I could even do it myself on a shallow dive. Truth is, it could have been done on the first day. We could have been out of here weeks ago.”

“This is such bullshit.”

A sliver of doubt crossed his features for the first time. “I...I can’t take the risk that it isn’t, Ren.”

“And what about Dirk’s test, with the buoys. I suppose you think I control the weather too.”

He smiled gently, almost affably. “No. No, I don’t think you do that. In fact, I think you just had some luck there, with the fog. I suspect you had some other plan. The buoys were tampered with perhaps, so that they wouldn’t float properly, or...” He paused, shrugged. “Well, I don’t know what it was and it doesn’t matter. And I know that you won’t remember, because your mind has screened that too. It’s living this story.”

“The only story is that some damn thing’s stopping us from getting off this island. I’ve been trying to get us off from day one, can’t you even see that?”

“It’s true Ren, there *is* a force stopping people from leaving the island. It’s you. It’s been you since the first day. Yes, I grant you, you went through the motions, but you’ve been cutting cables, sinking cranes, blacking the light on certain key nights so that ships don’t see us.”

“What about the thing you saw on the south light. Damn it, I was there right beside you. YOU were the one who showed me!”

“You rigged that. I must admit, you got me with that one, at least for a while. But the south island winch had a radio control. I noticed that control was missing last time I tried to use that winch. I think you took the receiver and rigged the chariot in the lantern room so that it

could be keyed from here at the hostel. It's not exactly space age technology, Ren. This isn't 1750, or whatever."

He fetched the pistol from his back pocket and motioned me to sit back down on the bed. A cool survival instinct forced my muscles to comply.

"All I'm asking is that we quarantine you until we get out of this place. I think you're innocent, Ren. I mean truthfully innocent, behind it all. I give you my word that if we can fix up a rescue, I'll cover over any tracks. You already did half a good job on that. It'll really be our word against theirs. There'll be an inquiry of course. Questions. But without a body, they'll never prove Juan wasn't an accident. Drowned while fishing in the shallows. There's still blood on that counterweight cable. That's the only weak link. It'll have to be cleaned out. Every inch, every molecule of it.

"It WAS an accident."

Carl wagged his head slowly. "You killed him, Ren."

"Do you have any proof?"

The door kicked open, sending the lock flying across the room, just missing my left ear, and the door slamming a knob-shaped dent in the wall.

"Yes, that's the question, isn't it Carl. *Do* you have any proof?" Dirk stood in the open doorway, the rifle leveled carefully at Carl. "Gun please. Move real slow, I advise you. Just let it slip off your lap and then push it away with your finger. That's it. Good boy." He reached forward and fetched the pistol safely.

"Because everything you've just said about Ren could apply to you, couldn't it? It's an interesting tale, Carl. When did you have the imagination to dream it all up?" Dirk batted away his own question. "Well, no matter, ain't anyone on this island is going to be kidnapped and

bound up while I'm on it. All this paranoia shit. It's got to all of us. Christ, you should have heard yourselves. So anyway, the first thing we do is we take THIS and THIS..."he hefted the rifle and the pistol in turn "...and we sink them in salt town."

"No, don't do that!" It was both of us, Carl and me, simultaneously, but for different reasons.

"Sorry, but they've just become too dangerous. There are no pirates on the high seas of Scotland last time I checked. Which means the only danger to ourselves here is the person wielding these...and his belief that he is fit to wield them. So the guns go...and you can sue me later, Ren."

An hour later my nerves were still singing. Although I didn't lose it when Carl was waving the gun in my face, my hands began to shake about ten minutes later, after it was over, after I was outside in the fresh air. Dirk fulfilled his promise and threw the firearms into the sea. I still thought this was a dumb idea. Now if insanity broke out, we would just have to beat each other stupid with our fists. Carl slunk around the rock after Dirk deprived him of the pistol. I met gaze with him just once, and his eyelights jerked away, like a cat, when they catch you staring at them. I didn't hate him. I felt for him. I understood the fierce engine of logic that had driven him to his crazy theory...that I had cut the comms link, trashed the crane, etc. I could easily imagine milling through such a theory and perhaps believing it, in the end. But it was still nuts. And it disturbed me how I seemed to see inside his mind, second guess his motives. I'd noticed that with the others too, like Anthea, who I seemed to have the least in common with. I found that I could almost guess her actions, her next words. I know we've been cramped together on the island, but it rattled me. It almost seemed like ESP...or something. I could almost sense, too, that

the others were relieved at the demise of the guns, even if they said nothing. Strangely enough, it wasn't Carl they feared now, it was Dirk. Or so it seemed to me anyway. I felt somehow responsible for these people, as if I had sucked them into this predicament by my determination to call up my friends and have company on the island. It was my fault. I should have braced it out on my own. Better still, I should never have taken the job.

Alone at the light. I had taken once more to striking it, even though the very act seemed absurd. But I needed that stable point. I needed the sense that I was doing something useful here, that was real. I needed assurance that the North Lamp actually shone out into the world and aided ships in the stormy night.

Because a storm was coming for sure. Already, the rain lashed against the west-facing windows of the lantern room and the waves boomed on the rocks below. But I could tell from the skies. They growled angrily along the western horizon like pacing wolves. This was a tempest and no mistake. If the wind got high enough, waves might even smash over the saddle and the hostel wouldn't be safe. It might be necessary for us all to ride out the storm in the lighthouse or, if necessary, even in the north storage shed, which was, strictly speaking, the highest placed building on the island save for the tower, though certainly not the most secure.

While the storm still gathered its lungs, I donned an oilskin and braved the rains down over the rope bridge to the South Light. It would take the worst brunt of the storm, so I locked all doors and secured essential materials in a bag to take back up the island. Items too heavy to lug around the rock or to otherwise handle by winch or by launch, I raised to the highest elevation practical within the south tower complex. The onset of the storm had taken us all by surprise. Without any link to the net, we had to rely simply on the old meteorological instruments on the

roof of the hostel...they reported only crude details, and in their great senility, even those with reluctance.

When I had done my best to secure the south station—its light would be dark, the southern end could not take this kind of beating and remain functional—I made my way back up towards the North Lamp. Already the storm gained in force. On the previous trip, downward over the rope bridge, the structure merely swayed a little and complained where the wind gnawed at its moorings in the rock. Now, on the way back, those moorings groaned, and the wires sang the doleful song that was the agony of all metal. A freakish glimpse of what had happened to Juan sprang into my mind and I hurried over the bridge as best as my footing with a backpack full of supplies could carry me. I half imagined one of the hawsers would tear loose from its mooring and decapitate me right there on the bridge. Fortunately, I made it across unscathed.

A few hours remained before the peak of the storm hit. I took the moment, in the lantern room, literally the calm before. It was astonishing how secure it felt in that place, even though it was entirely an illusion. With the wind getting this high, stresses across unguessable places in the stone and iron structure of the lighthouse made for peculiar noises, like the cries of odd creatures in the wind-whistling dusk. Still, they were cries from the wild outside. Within the room there was a sense of sanctuary, as if the lamp itself were a kind of God that could banish the world's most feral darkness, should it seek to encroach upon the tower.

I noticed a small chip in one of the bullseyes. It irked me. I was pretty sure I hadn't seen it there the last time I polished the lens, and I even began to form a suspicion that it was one of the others up to mischief or mayhem when I wasn't around. One time I had caught Karl chasing Anthea up and down the stairs, like children. It doesn't take much to chip a lens, and this was the big Fresnel. We couldn't replace it without supplies.

Fortunately, the defect was small, no larger than half the size of my thumb's nail. But it was in an odd position, just off center from the bullseye. I couldn't figure how it could have got there, unless someone bumped into it or struck it with something by accident, messing around where they shouldn't have been. But, I certainly didn't have any proof. It might have been some random defect in the glass, just waiting its moment. And the carriage, of course, was a human contraption prone to the failings of all human machines. It may have jolted or jammed a moment in its circuit, causing sudden and unexpected force on the glass. The lens was a heavy device to keep in motion.

So I knelt and polished it again as the wind got up around the tower. I even polished the chip, though this was probably obsessive of me, and I was fascinated to see inside its damaged glass, a tiny if distorted reflection of myself belling back at me.

The wind gusted hard past the tower and for just a moment it seemed to me as if the rising voice of the storm became, literally, a voice, and in a long, ribboned sigh, it lamented a single word:

*“N-i-i-m.”*

I jerked to my feet with such force that I actually staggered on the inner rail. Had it been the outer rail, I might have plunged to my death were I not attached by a strap. Many a keeper died this way.

Listening acutely, I strained my ears to their red limit. My heart thumped like a basketball in an empty sports hall. The wind rose again past the tower, now like the whine of a kettle rising towards steam. I settled back down and relaxed a little. You're a fool, Render Stone. It's just the goddamn wind.



But no sooner did I start polishing when the stretched whisper came again. This time there was no wind past the tower.

“*N-y-y-y-y-y-y-m.*”

Like a name, called.

I fell back at an awkward angle, one arm crashing against the first step down on the ladder to the service room. My eyes darted one way and then the other around the lens. This time I *knew* I had heard something. It was right there with me, in the lantern room. Except no one was there. It would have been impossible for two people to hide from each other, because they’d be reflected everywhere by the lens.

“Who’s there?” I hissed, remembering that day on the rope bridge.

No answer. My hand hurt. I’d sprained it where it thumped against the ladder.

But I knew this wasn’t the wind. My heartbeat throbbed in the back of my neck. Pulsed in webs of veins there. This was a new level of terror, and I didn’t understand why. Even the creature I had seen on the coastal path, terrifying though it was, shrank as if to nothing before this pitch of fear. Yet all I had heard was a whispered name, as if on the wind. The wind, but not the wind. It was its own malevolent breeze. But it almost seemed as if the word that I heard was a name, and worst of all, the dreadful impression that whatever it was that spoke called to *me* by that name.

I rose slowly to my feet, feeling shaky. I knew I had to get down, but my right arm was injured. It wouldn’t be easy descending the ladder. Instead, I just stood, breathing hard in the closed space, my ears pricked like a deer that had heard its marksman nearby in the forest.

I didn’t have to wait long.

“*Nym!*”

The whisper sounded close to my head. It swept through me like a wave and as it did, something terrible...the metal grid that circled the lamp beneath my feet ghosted to transparency a moment, then faded slowly back, as if the very utterance unmade the substance of the world.

“Get away from me!” I yelled in a smashed-in voice. But the storm took my fright and laughed with it all the way out to sea. I put my hand on the ladder rail but grimaced with pain right away. It wasn’t going to take any weight. Frantic to escape the lantern room, I decided to bump down the ladder on my butt if I had to. I was two steps down...

“*Don’t you remember, Nym?*” There was a teasing, menacing implication in the words. “*How sweet is memory, is it not?*”

“Leave me alone. I don’t believe in you!” I bumped down another step. Without the aid of my arm, it was painful and hard.

“*You don’t believe ? Yes, poor unbelieving Render Stone.*” And now a travelling laughter, a mocking laughter, toured the lantern room just above me, circled round and round the lens before shredding to wind.

I bumped down another step, groaning with the agonies it thumped into the base of my spine.

“*N-y-y-y-m.*”

And now the metal step below me wavered like a heat mirage just as I was about to plant my foot on it. I plunged forward, expecting solidity where there was only empty air, or less. I clattered down the ladder in a thrashing, grasping chaos and landed hard on the floor below.

But I wasn’t injured. Just dazed. I propped up on my one good arm.

“*Look...*”

And I looked. I couldn't help myself. Several stones in the wall of the lighthouse nearest my position faded transparent as I watched, and through them I could plainly make out the rocky terrain around the tower. Or...and this thought hit me hard...as if the wall had never really been there at all.

"That isn't true!" I yelled. It was the only answer I could think to give, a dumb holler from the pit of myself, and when I gained my feet, which I did at last, I bounded down the much wider stairs of the tower as fast as my feet would take me, even though my arm blazed like a tree on fire.

*You can't run forever, Render Stone.* It chased me, and yet it was inside me. I couldn't distinguish now between the wind and the soughing mockery of my own thoughts, but it let up at last, dissipating into the sky or the storm as I cleared the base of the tower.

I didn't even bother closing the door. I just kept running.

I sprinted straight to the hostel past Anthea, wide eyes, and into our room. Krys, sitting reading at our desk, gawked at me as I stormed past her, eyes as big as marbles in a kids' game.

"What the hell...?"

"Can you touch me?" I said, half sobbing. "I'm not kidding. If you love me at all, put your hands on me." I had no idea why these words in particular came to me. It was as if I sensed on some deeper level that physical contact was the only thing that could save me. My breath was coming in ripped tatters and I was giving it all I had just to keep things together. I feared any moment that the floor would fall away, or maybe even the rocks beneath it, and I would plummet to the cavern under the island.

I launched onto the bed and backed up against the wall, huffing like prey in a shadowy corner.

“Alright, alright.” Real fright jumped into her voice. She climbed onto the bed, put her arms around me. I buried my face in her breasts.

“It’s just a panic attack” she soothed, not soothed herself, not understanding. “It’ll pass in a few moments.”

“Yes. Yes it will,” I said, hoping that my words were law, that the mere saying of them would make it so. My breath coursed in and out like a flame. And though I understood Krys, her words sounded like a warble, like some nonsense glossolalia I’d long ago invented, and only pretended was a language.

“You never told me you suffered from panic attacks.”

“I don’t,” I answered drily, the terror only now beginning to loosen its grip. I took the deepest breath, but it was like pulling smoke far into my lungs.

“Well...” A hook of sarcasm moved to gain purchase in her tone, then she seemed to think better of it.

But at the edge of my consciousness I could still hear that infernal voice whispering *Nym, Nym*, and I could still sense a kind of malevolent sneer from the wooden panels of the station, as if, deep within, they knew their unsolidity. “Oh Christ.”

“Breathe, Ren. I’m here.” But when she said it, it sounded like the voice of the thing, and I jerked away from her, drawing back my lips.

“Now what?” She stared at me with wary, scrutinizing eyes as if I was an unpredictable, dangerous animal. And I felt like one.

“Don’t touch me!”

Krys avoided me for the rest of the morning. The rain now flailed itself horizontal against the small windows of the keeper station. And when the wind swerved, I saw it shooting by the glass, a wild silver shoal, as if the whole island were submerged in primal waters. In the skies over the rock, when I dared brave the wind to look, clouds rode like black stallions stampeding from a gunshot. Down at the foot of the north cliff, the voice of the waves against the rock was ogreish and sore. Great plumes of water shot up from the bottom of the cliff to the height of the lens room and sprayed the tower windows. I knew this was just a harbinger of what was to come.

And yet I remained calm. I insisted on my moment, and my fingers did not tremble as I opened the pages of the old keeper's journal. I acted as if I had all the time in the world, and perhaps I did. I knew what I was looking for. But again, I could not find it. Not at first. I had written in bold ink, so there would be no chance of mistaking my note:

Mortimer Fowle,

Did I kill those people?

But to my chagrin, I could not now locate the note, even though I was sure I had made a mental record of the page I scribbled on, and the journal entry it was set beside. I flicked through the pages in frustration, looking for evidence I had ever been there. My eyes passed over what my mind, at first, took for the mere remnants of a stain on the paper, but something made me pause, turn back.

And there it was. So faint as to be barely discernible, as if the ink had labored to sustain itself under centuries of chemical wear. I blinked. It was my handwriting to be sure, but the words...

*Did I kill those people?*

- *Mortimer Fowle*

I ran my fingers over the slightest disturbance the ink marks made on the page. They were physical, but at the very threshold of leaving the world. Had I written these words? When? Was my memory then not to be trusted? I swallowed against the sudden dryness in my throat. I *remembered* my boat trip to the island. I know I did, no matter what Carl and the others said.

And now that I looked, as it were, with eyes refreshed, I saw an uncanny resemblance between my own handwriting and *all* the handwritten entries in the old keeper's journal. But Fowle's presence was the stronger. It held its ink well on the page, where my note was the apparition, a ghost only, in a fabric of centuries.

Rain scratched at the windows like an animal and the storm shrieked with barbarian fervor in the small spaces around the doorway. Visibility on the westward side cut back to zero. I came back to the moment and jumped onto the radio, not even bothering to holler in the corridor. "You guys...we need to quit the shelter and get ourselves to the lantern room. Bring the keys to the store too, just in case. This could get rough."

I really didn't want to go back up to the north lamp, especially after what happened in the morning, but there was nothing for it. And after all, I wouldn't be alone this time. Some deep

center of responsibility still nourished a flame in me, and even the keeper station could not be guaranteed safe in the heights of such a storm.

Carl jumped on the mike a few moments later. “You’ve got to be joking. I’m not going anywhere with you. I don’t care what the reason is!”

But I held my ground. This was about looking after everyone on the island. I felt that burning core in myself, and to my utter relief it really was there. It was a low flame, but it was a steady one. I wouldn’t let anyone throw cold water on it. “Don’t be an idiot, Carl. The station won’t be safe in a storm like this. The whole thing could be torn apart.”

A few moments of silence then Dirk came on the mike. “Ren, how do you...oh, the hell with this.” He dumped the mike then appeared at my doorway a few moments later. “I’m on it. We were just fastening the boards on the back windows. We should go to the shed.”

I sat back in my chair. A blow that required shelter in the north storage shed would be a fifty-year storm, and a gut sense told me we were already past that point. But the back-from-the-dead wail of the wind seeking the island’s hollows both chilled my marrow and made a better argument than I could.

“We’ll see,” I said. “Just get yourselves up to the door. Bring only what you absolutely need. Leave the rest.”

He stalled in the doorway. “Don’t worry about Carl. It’s bluster.”

“He wasn’t blustering earlier.”

“Ha! Yes he was. He’s not as brave as he makes out.”

“Brave or not, I hope you’re right, Dirk.”

I was reluctant to risk riding out the storm in the shed. If it really was that bad, it was a precarious shack in which to face the weather. Altitude on the rock was its only advantage. Set

a little way above the base of the light tower it would be the last place the doomful force of an epic wave could find, other than the tower itself. And if the sea in its wrath crashed over the base of the light tower, and not just the furious blast of its spray, then the tower itself would not be safe. The lantern room would not be safe regardless, in case the windows shattered in the storm. But these were the options and no more time to ponder them. The choice was upon us.

A small extension of the guard rail passes through a hatch just to the side of the main door. A safety measure for just this kind of situation involving high winds around the station. I attached one ring of my cable to its loop in the belt of my oilskins, and the other to the end of the guard rail, locking it in. When I stepped out into the storm's demonic blast, I barely managed to slam the door behind me before I was swept off my feet, a horizontal rag flailing in the Biblical dark, like the torn-off pennant of some fallen king, and even with the lifeline of the cable, I only just managed to haul myself back to the path. When at last I gained the base of the tower, I collapsed on the floor there in a puddle, exhausted.

Dirk and the girls burst in a short way behind, wearing their oilskins. Dirk had shackled the girls to himself as well as both of them to the rail. Good thinking. But it irked me I hadn't thought of it. I should be the one to look after Krys, not Dirk, but again the shriek of the wind ravaged those thoughts to oblivion. In just the short distance from the hostel to the tower, the others looked like they'd been drenched by a monsoon, and left dripping pools of water beneath them where they stood. In the mouth of the door, the storm clawed rampant. I kicked the door shut just so I could hear myself think, and before the winds had a chance to spin up in the tower.

Dirk watched me gravely. "We have to go to that shed, Ren. It's too strong. This thing could take out the lighthouse."



Blinking against a half-blindness of salt water, I shook my head. I didn't answer what I thought, *I'm the damn keeper here*. But he knew what was on my mind anyway.

"You weren't there in the back room," he said defensively, to an attack I hadn't made. "We barely managed to get the windows secure before they blew out. This is a storm that can kill us, Ren. We need to go to the shed."

"Where's Carl," Anthea said, dumping the weight of her skins. Ill advised, since we'd be needing them again shortly.

Dirk frowned. "Wasn't he behind you?"

Krys blinked to a sudden revelation. "No. He wasn't with us when we left the hostel. I just assumed..."

My brain flecked red. "Goddamnit, two of us will have to go back for him..."

Dirk grabbed my arm. "No, he knew full well we were coming to the light. It's already too dangerous out there."

"Talk sense," I shouted, just another yell in a gyre of shrieks. "If he's lost his footing on the stair, we have to find him."

The argument blew away to silence at the sound of the tower door flailing open against its hinge and Carl standing in its raging gap. He fixed me immediately with his eyes, frightened and suspicious, and in his right hand he brandished a knife. Krys and Anthea staggered a slippery step backwards from this inexplicable apparition. Carl allowed the storm to gnash at the room a moment longer, then he reached across to the flapping door end and slammed it back secure against the wall. The storm cut back to a distant din.

Without taking his eyes off me, without the tip of his knife wandering from its intended target deep in my chest, he threw his oilskin hat on the floor before him.

“I’m real,” he said slowly, dangerously. “I don’t care what you say...or what you *are*.” He spat this last word with a visceral contempt and to my great surprise I heard true fear in his voice. His lower lip trembled with a fright all the more unnerving to witness in such a powerful man. But the tip of that blade he held steady, and its small movements mirrored only the chance movements of my own vital organ in space. It knew its target, alright.

I fought to remain calm. “Carl, brother, put the knife down will you?” He did not put it down. Instead, he jabbed it closer towards me. “I Am Karl Ingulfson” he moaned, plaintively, as if it were a plea bargain, a call for leniency in a crime I didn’t grasp. “I have a life and a girl back home.” The tip of the blade began to quiver now. “You aren’t going to take that away from me! None of you are.” The tip wandered a moment, swept round the gathered company briefly, then snapped back to me, it’s principal target.

I ran my tongue against the inside of my front teeth. The first priority was defusing the physical crisis here, whatever was behind it.

“I know you are, Carl. We all know that.” In fact, I had no idea what he was talking about, and my mind raced quickly over any fragments of knowledge I may ever have heard on how to handle an encounter with a psychotic. I didn’t come up with much. “And we’ll talk about it. I promise you we will. We’ll get to the bottom of whatever it is, I promise you. But, just put the knife down. You’re making me nervous. I can’t talk to you with a weapon pointing at me.” This was the second time he’d pointed a weapon at me in so many hours.

Like a judo throw, Carl rolled his backpack over his shoulder and onto the ground in front of us. “Explain that, genius. I’m all ears. You’d better make it good.”

I glanced at the backpack.

“I’m Karl Ingulfsen. Karl, with a K, you know?” The knife tip threatened again. “And spelled like that. Look. Look at it!”

His blade menaced closer and I backed off, glancing down at the pack only when I was sure I was safe from its reach. There for the first time I saw what I hadn’t noticed before. His name sewn into the top pocket of the backpack. Carl Ingulfsson.”

“I don’t know what shit you’re trying to pull on me, Ren. But you won’t succeed.” Again, the tip wandered. Menaced others in turn. “None of you will.”

I stared at the backpack. So many thoughts, crowding me. The label was old and worn. Why would he put an altered spelling of his name on his own equipment?

“Carl...” I pleaded, but suddenly my mind was hit by an odd wave of dizziness. And right in front of me I saw the name stitched into the fabric of the backpack begin to change or phase between its two possibilities...Carl...Karl...Ingulfsson....Ingulfsen....Carl...Karl.

I blinked and fended off the apparition with the back of my hands. To myself, I said *I’m just not seeing that. I know I’m not. I’m not going to see that. I will not.*

But I did see it, and for a long moment my fingers were no shield. Until at last the apparition passed and the name seemed to settle: Karl Ingulfsen. I tried to remember what I had seen it as just a few moments before, and now somehow could not call it back.

Karl never looked down at the rucksack again. The tip of his knife trembled in sync with my smallest movements.

“I have a girl...” A tear sparked its threat at the corner of his eye. “Back home. I have a girl, god damn you.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but was startled to see the brickwork on the inner surface of the tower becoming visible through his body.

“I’m real,” he moaned, as he faded gradually from view right in front of us. “I have a girl.” Last time he said it, just before he disappeared, it was a lament, like the grief a dream character might know as its waker rose implacably to a dawn somewhere in a world it would never know. He dropped the knife and joined his hands as if in an attitude of prayer.

“Render...please.”

I stared at the empty space where he had been, where the backpack had been, where even the knife had been, appalled to some existential core of my self.

“Karl...” I pleaded, in my own turn, but no one was there.

The others stood, terribly quiet and still. They looked at me, all of them. The question on their lips unspoken. I couldn’t bear it.

Then, I saw Dirk’s face relax slowly. His lips broadened to a smile...innocent, childlike, even a little idiotic. It spread like infection to the others. They were already beginning to forget that Karl had ever existed. Like old relatives easing into the saggy sweaters of their dementia, it blissfully smeared away for them. But not me.

“God. Oh God” I gasped to myself, collapsing onto one knee. I felt like all the oxygen in the tower was suddenly sucked away from me, as if the light were a huge candle, burning away the essence of all life.

A lightning bolt lashed the island somewhere and its stark brilliance strobed in the window, backlighting the others like ninepins. They just stood looking at me, as if to say *what do we do now Ren? What would you have us do now?*

It was too much. I staggered to the outer door and threw it back against the wall, not bothering to pull it shut behind me. Rain mauled me with teeth sharpened on ice, a physical force trying to push me back. It was the creature. It wouldn’t let me leave. No it wasn’t. I was the

creature. I'd always been the creature. In the labyrinth of arguments, of hiding from myself, I'd even managed not to believe it. As I glanced back and up the height of the tower, rain rivered down its curved surface and the light at the pinnacle blazed with implausible brilliance, as if it were the focus of all that ever was or could be.

"That's not true." I snarled. "I won't believe it!" I gritted my teeth and pushed forward into the driving wind and rain. It threatened to catch in my open oilskin like a kite, and hoist me into the air. I struggled to pull the fastenings closed, but pressed on. I had no idea where I was going. Just as far from the North Lamp as possible.

I passed the hostel. Lightning strobed again, and I was sure I saw Juan's face at one of the windows. Pale and staring. Mutely, like the others, he seemed to plead with me what to do. I tumbled sideways and vomited against the rocks. The storm snatched away my effort to flying ribbons in a moment, but the purge for a second steadied me. I understood that the hostel was no refuge. Could never be a refuge again. Blown from side to side, like a madman, I lurched down the axis path towards the south lamp. Suddenly, I heard shouting behind me. I turned and saw, in the middle distance, Dirk standing at the entry door to the north tower, gesticulating wildly. He was urging me to come back in from the storm. In his right arm he held aloft not a walking cane, but a Shepherd's Crook. I took fright and quickened my pace. Water from the strongest waves surged over the saddle and threatened to wash anyone away who might be foolish enough to cross the rope bridge, as I was about to do. The hawsers sang like Sirens and the planks vibrated underfoot as I set my boot on them. One of them broke loose and flailed dangerously in the wind. But it was this or the north tower. I took a step.

Part way across the bridge I saw a piece of paper raging against the rope. Sodden and near to tearing. Then the wind caught it and it whipped high into the air. But some vortex of

currents there, over the saddle, conspired to whirl it round and carry it back towards me. It slapped hard against my chest and lower jaw. I tore it away and was about to fling it from the rock when I glimpsed writing on the paper. The words smeared into rain-blurred pennants and printer's ink pooled in eccentric trails to the bottom of the sheet, but I could still make it out. More or less.

Mr. Render Stone  
Pumpleston Cottage  
Gullane  
East Lothian  
Scotland

Dear Mr Stone,

Thank you for your application for (...illegible...) of seasonal keeper on *Carraig Sithe*. As I am sure you understand, we had many well qualified applicants for this position, and unfortunately on this occasion you have not been successful. I understand that (...illegible...) a disappointment, but I must tell you that you were one of a very short list of final candidates. All the best with your future aspirations.

Sincerely

A. Knightley

Heritage Maritime Holdings.

Rain stunned my vision near blind. I could barely keep the paper in focus and I could no longer sense the join between the waters of my own grief and those of the storm, as if my tears just wandered into the general rain and smeared the words further. The sky, pressing at my eyes like thumbs, squeezed from me the essence of a storm.

I continued to stare at the words, breathing heavy. Then a gust snatched the paper from my hand and scooped it high into the air. I made a quick grab for it, but it was gone. The storm had it, turned it once in the air over the saddle, then whipped it away into the dark and out somewhere over the edgeless wastes of the sea.

“That’s not true either, you bastard!” I howled after it, shaking my fist. But thunder merely rumbled in mock reproach and a fresh blast of wind swung the bridge like a hammock. I slammed against the rope, almost tipping over the side to the serrate rocks below.

And then a small miracle. A bubble seemed to bow over the storm, as if a dome descended around me. The rain bent away from my face until it was just a drizzle and the wind hurled its violence elsewhere. In front of me, the bridge stopped swinging, and I was able to cross. I didn’t question the source of the change, though I took it for no natural development of the storm.

I gained the other side with no greater hazard to my life than my feet slipping once or twice on the sodden wood. But I had a good grip on the ropes. As soon as my feet left the bridge, the weather began to change. The wind fell away, as if it simply burrowed away into hollows and caves around the island. The rain eased back to spitting, then to nothing. I began the descent of the long stair towards the south lamp. There, at the foot of the tower, I was sure I glanced a figure shifting crates from one pile to another.

Jesus, Roehampton! Talk about timing. How did he manage to get here in a storm like this? But with each step down that stair there was less of a storm to speak of. Half way down I could no longer feel the chill of the wind through my clothes at all. A few steps further and sun opened on my right side. I felt its warmth on my cheek and looked up. White clouds bobbed sedately at altitude, like yachts lapping gently in a harbor. The sun peeked through frequent gaps in the cloud. It was the weather I had seen when I first came to the island.

I bounded down the last few steps. “Christ man, where have you been? We’ve been looking out for you for weeks. I can’t tell you how much we need those supplies.”

The man straightened up slowly from his task, without turning. And then all at once I could see that it wasn’t Roehampton. The build wasn’t right. A sudden memory of the east path, and the thing I had seen that night, flashed into my mind like the blossom of a flare, before falling into darkness.

“Who are you?” I groaned, weary, at last, of all except the truth. The sound of my own voice startled me. It was the low growl of a cornered animal.

He turned slowly. A man out of time. His deep beard squared off at his chest like the blade of a shovel...a style I could recall seeing only in the maritime pictures hanging on the wall at Heritage Holdings. And no oilskins for the wild weather. Just a heavy long shirt, like a deer



skin, tied at his waist, with woven underlayers, his feet clad in simple moccasins. In my imagination he looked more like a frontiersman than a lighthouse keeper...but I knew that I too was a man out of time.

He smiled at me with his eyes, as if from a place deep inside his wild hair.

“Mortimer Fowle,” I breathed, and the words sucked back into my throat even as I spoke them, as if they didn’t belong in the world.

“At your service” he said, and did a little mock bow.

I shook my head. “They’ll never believe this.”

Fowle cocked an eyebrow. “Are you still determined so, to persist then?”

I stopped my train of thought, a runaway caboose. “What? What do you mean?”

“What you just said. They’ll never believe this. Who is *they*?”

“My friends. They’re up at the north lamp. They’ll think I’m...”

But a dreadful sadness in his gaze halted me. “You are alone on this island, Render Stone. You’ve always been alone. Your friends don’t exist. They never existed.”

I felt my hands clenching, a panic rising in my chest. “That’s not true! I’ve been trying to save their asses, get them off this damned rock ever since...”

Mortimer Fowle shook his head slowly. “You have to understand something here, boy. I am your last chance. If you turn away from this chance, you cannot go back. There is no going back.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And if you take my advice, you won’t. But this is your choice.”

A whirlwind of disconnected thoughts swirled in around me, struggling to make shapes of themselves, to connect up in ways that made a shred of sense. A clue, a lifeline, seemed to rush out at me from this inner storm.

“The journal. This is about the journal, isn’t it? Finding it wasn’t an accident?”

He shook his head.

“Then...” all the moisture fled from my mouth. Implications backed up against me, threatened to pull the fragile stitch of my mind. My finger trembled to pull on that stitch.

“Then it’s always been you? I’ve always been you, all along? Mortimer Fowle? I never left the island?”

“You died here on a wild night, over two hundred and fifty years ago, and your spirit walks the island still.”

“I don’t believe you!” I scoffed, though with inwoven dread. “That’s a plot from a bad movie. I have friends. I have a girl.” This sudden echo of Karl’s words startled me, as if, just for a moment, I had become him.

“You’ll never see them again.” And suddenly, with earnest passion, he reached out and clamped his big paw of a hand on my shoulder. “I urge you to accept what I’m telling you, Render. Truly, it is your last chance.”

“Last chance? I don’t understand. Last chance for what?”

He pulled back slowly. “To avoid remembering, Nym. To avoid the truth. You created me for that purpose, and to that purpose I hold.”

I wagged my head, fierce with confusion. The speaking of the word Nym seemed to hit me with colossal force, like the onset of a stroke. “But you just said...I’m not you, I’m not Fowle?”

“Do you want to be?”

“I held my head in my hands and sobbed openly. “I just want the normal world back. I just want a world.” I sounded like a grieving child.

He patted his hand on my shoulder again. “I know, I know. And that’s what I am to you. That opportunity. If you turn your back on me now, you won’t have any memory of this conversation. You’ll become what you believe yourself to be...an 18<sup>th</sup> century lighthouse keeper called Mortimer Fowle, and you’ll live that life here, on this island, until, at the very very end, the truth will steal upon you at last. But that might be a very long time, Render. And it wouldn’t be such a bad life. You need have no memory of these “friends” you’ve conjured. We can rekindle it here, right now. You will be settled and glad. There will be dark moments of course, but these will be few and you will push through them. I urge you to accept my proposal.”

I took a step back. None of this made sense. “And if I don’t?”

“Then you must confront the truth.”

“...which is?”

His eyes creased with pain. “*You must not ask me that.*”

I backed away a step further. Though to where I thought I might escape I couldn’t say. Where was there any escape on this demon’s island?

“But you are that demon, Stone,” he said, even though I had not spoken. “Run now...and forget. It is my heartfelt plea to you.”

I felt the pull on my feet, and yet, for some reason, some reason that rose up from an ancient determination deep down in the inscrutable heart of myself, I held my ground.

“It’s all a dream then,” I demanded. “Is that what this is? My companions, the island, everything?”

He didn't answer. I felt my grief swelling close to violence. But then what would I kill?

"So why even give me the choice?" I moaned, with inconsolable loss swirling like a foam in my voice. "If this truth is so terrible, why not leave me in peace with the dream, damn you...and not tell me that it is one?"

"Because the request was made that if the structures of memory should falter, as they have, and if ever the threshold of waking should draw near, which it does, that the choice be presented to you."

I bit down on the bitterness. "*Who* made this request?"

A long pause and the shine in his eye was the glitter of a hard enigma. "You did, Nym."

"That's *impossible!*"

"I don't doubt that you believe that. Yet I tell you it is so."

But anger, a rare anger was rising. I didn't care now what this truth was. I would have it, or be damned. I would have it even if it was damnation itself.

Fowle shook his head, still trying to desuade me. "You have no idea what you seek."

"I am done with deception," I said, and I meant it.

It was tempting, it really was tempting, to just turn and run, back into the sunlight, back into a dream gossamer of peaceful solace, the quiet life of a lighthouse keeper on a placid Scottish island. What weather such as this, such storms, could ever come to Scotland? Why didn't I *notice* that before? What wool had been drawn over my mind? Who would send a man with a cane out in a life bouy? I rubbed my eyes heavily with my hands, trying to make it all go away, make Fowle go away.

He was still there, watching me sadly, though not without compassion, when I took my hands away.

“If you are determined,” he said at last, “there is a way. If you want the truth, it can be done. But you must tread the path. You must make that choice.”

“How?”

“You must kill me, as you killed the others.”

I thought you said...”

“Not just that, you must butcher me right here on this rock, limb by limb, until the blood and sinew fly, until the muscles of your arm and your jaw lock with the effort.”

I pulled back my lips in revulsion. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh I assure you, you are capable,” he sighed. “But it doesn’t matter. There never was a Mortimer Fowle. There never was a *Carraig Sith*e. You never had an interview on the mainland. There is no mainland. There is no world.” He smiled.

“I’m sick of your riddles.”

Fowle, or whatever it was, bobbed up its chin. “So act. I’m sick of your weakness. I’ve told you what you must do.”

“Yeah, chop you to pieces.”

“No, simply dismember a dream. But you must have the courage to do it. It’s the final curtain you have to push through. If you can’t do it, you won’t get there. The dream will close back over.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“You invented me, Render Stone. You may think of me as the virus set to disrupt your dream. I began in your attention a long distance from you, hundreds of years ago, speaking by obsolete dialect in a dog-eared journal. At first, it was easy enough to ignore me. Then I moved closer, speaking to you directly from that journal, across the years. And now, at last, we meet

face to face, but only because you have requested it. I am the failsafe you built in, but I am not really here. If you really want the truth, then you must have the courage to destroy me.”

And then suddenly, with a violence to my strength I scarce knew I was capable of, I lurched forward and seized Fowle around the midriff, yelling to the bellow of my lungs. We staggered together a moment like one organism joined at the middle, but with the ogre of my sudden strength, I forced him back upon the rocks until we stood at the drop into the water.

And there, in just that last moment, his expression changed. A little fear perhaps. He opened his mouth to speak. Like Karl, perhaps to plead for his existence. I pushed him gently, just gently, over into the sea. And the sea drank him till his beard became its foam, slowly spreading wider.

But in my head I heard his voice one more time, trailing off with distance. “Then you have made your choice, Render Stone. Go to the place of memory, the place you once prepared, and you will know what you are.”

The place of memory? What –

But even before I could complete the thought an image appeared in my head. It was a picture of a little known path on the Rock that ended in a blind alley of weathered stone. And in my mind’s eye, inexplicably, I saw myself carving something into that stone. It seemed impossibly long ago.

A lifetime ago.

No.

Lifetimes ago.

No.

Before human beings ever walked the earth.

I swallowed or tried to, but my mouth was so dry my throat wouldn't close. I *remember* that! But the memory was impossible. How could it exist? And with it another memory. A knowing that all along, all the time I had dwelled here on this Isle, I had avoided that small segment of path. Not by conscious design, not with deliberate intent, but even during my explorations when I first arrived on the island...or thought I did...I didn't explore that path.

This way lay right nearby. I did not, then, need to make one dramatic final crossing of the Rock. I could see its entrance now from where I stood. And that same infallible memory told me that the path was not long. It turned one corner, pressed forward perhaps a dozen steps, and there I would find the closed-off face in the rock where once I had carved...what?

I began the walk. My feet were heavy. I did and did not want to do this. And I remembered the words of Mortimer Fowle. This is your last chance to turn back. But now there was no turning back. With each step further down that narrow way, with its odd, little echoes scurrying like small rodents in the stone, and its high walls leaning over, I remembered more of the image now in my mind. I remembered those echoes. I remembered the sound that the tool made against the stone as I carved there. I remembered how foolish I felt in the carving, as if saying to myself, *this will never be necessary, I will never forget myself*.

And then all these images and thoughts disappeared at once as I rounded the fateful corner and stared full upon the blank face of rock I already knew from the action of my imagination. For a moment, a wave of relief washed over me. There was nothing there! Or if there had been anything there, it had long been eroded by the epoch-patient chisels of wind and rain.

But then it was as if I became capable of seeing with another sense of myself. A sense that knew I had created that wind and rain, along with the rock on which I carved. I could not

escape with that excuse. And as this knowing came, so upon the rock in front of me, I began to discern, faint and disjointed at first, fantastical figures or shapes, as if from an alphabet dimly remembered from the first sketch of time. There were only three figures, and they formed no word or name that humans could pronounce or understand, for it was not even a sound, but a signature in being, something that is beyond your comprehension. So here I must deviate a shade from truth so that you can understand. And I tell you that I saw and recognized my name, a name that existed like a star in eternity, and to the extent it can be uttered in human tongue and yet carry any of its flavor, that name was this:

*Nym.*

And you must understand that this is no mere utterance, for when a being such as I gives voice, it is not to words, but to *Being*. That which I declare becomes, and from this terror there is no retreat.

I cried with abject loathing and ran from that place. But as I rounded the corner, by some devilish device of the island, which, even as I encountered it I knew to be myself and nothing other, the path once more brought me before the rock wall and the inscription carved upon it. I ran again, this time with such determination that I caught the south light tower in my sight. But once again, at the last moment, the path veered left and for a third time I found myself before the weathered wall. I crashed to my knees in front of it and not for the first time, my tears became rain, gurgling in the thousand tiny fissures of the rock walls, like small laughter.

The force of this final realization, that I could not escape wherever I ran, undid me. All paths on the island led to *Nym*. Blood broke loose from my skin and pooled on the stone, but it didn't matter. I began to shed the human form as soon as memory washed into me. My real name was like a force that shredded the time-deep camouflage I had taken upon myself in order to



forget. Radiant fissures opened along my limbs, as if knives made of light were cutting me out of a man suit from the inside. The illusion of human-ness burned and smoked away from me and I stood up, then, as the being in truth I was. In your terms, taller than the world, of an aspect that would draw the fright of death from any mortal creature, though we are not evil in intent. And my substance more real, more solid than your world can contain. For an eon or longer, I wept my grief.

And then suddenly I wasn't on the island anymore. I understood that the island, too, was simply my creation. But the whole of memory did not come to me. Not yet. There was still a missing piece.

Other shapes, dimly glimpsed, pressed closer. I remembered them. And in front of me an image at once piercing and terrifying. A great spine suspended in a glass case, soaring to a vaulted roof beyond my estimation.

"No one blocks your memory now but you, Nym. In this final matter we cannot help you, for you are as powerful as we are. We have created this place, just as you created the world of Spirit Rock, to seek the answer to our problem." It was none other than this spine within the glass case that spoke to me, yet I heard it only in my mind. It possessed no apparatus of voice, and no movement stirred within the glass.

"I don't understand you. What problem?" But immediately I said this, a dire sense of urgency seemed to rise up from nowhere in my being. It caught in my chest and I choked for breath, leaning against a pillar in the uttermost void. An entrance beckoned like a siren. With every fiber of my self, I wanted to make a break for it.

“Don’t run, Nym. If you run now, you will always run from it. You created Spirit Rock to answer the question, to answer it for all of us. Don’t let us down now.”

And suddenly shadows. Shadows all around, a vapor of ghosts, half-substantial. Yet ghosts somehow more solid than the world I had come from.

I swallowed against the dread in my throat. “We are gods then?” The thought filled me with dismay.

“You use a word from the world you created, Nym? What purpose would that serve here? We are the most powerful creators in existence. Beyond us there is only mystery. The responsibility is ours.”

Again that sense of daring at the threshold of memory. I knew what he was talking about, and yet I dared not stare it in the face.

“I am your brother, Nym. But because you are afraid to remember me, so you create this place of arches and pillars, a safe haven for the last of your forgetfulness. And in your imaginal power you shape me as a spine in a specimen jar, because it is easier to deny a fearful form than your own kin. But I am your kind, and I am your brother.”

“We are impatient, Nym,” one of the shadows said. Its voice was like a river under the stars. “We would know the answer to our question.”

“Be patient with him. He does not yet fully remember.”

“But I did remember. My fright caught glimpses of it at the corner of my attention. So long ago, yet now, I began to remember. The dilemma. Yes. The dilemma. So old and yet so terribly familiar. I remembered my dread of the answer. Yet I remembered too, my courage in seeking it. The problem felt dreadfully familiar.

As that amount of recall washed into me, the glass case surrounding my brother dissolved away. The glass melted to water and flowed past me under my feet. He stepped out in front of me as the radiant being I knew, in heart, myself to be as well.

I didn't look at him at once, instead watching only his ethereal reflection...and my own...in the running water. My sigh was an eon of air settling in that place. "They are real then? These beings that we dream?"

"Only you can answer, Nym."

"Still, I hesitated. The responsibility was too much. Yet I remembered. I remembered volunteering for this. We do not experience time as you do, and yet for us, you could say that for eons this problem tormented us. As humans, when you dream, you think little of the creatures you create, as you suppose them fleeting apparitions without life. And in this you are right, or mostly. Because even in the feebleness of your own dreaming, you yet carry an echo, a trickle, of that same power which in our kind rages as a torrent. Thus the creatures and fleeting shapes you create in your own dreams really do have a life of their own, though their life force is transient and weak relative to yours.

A great trembling filled me. I knew I had to answer. I remembered the dilemma now. And there was a change in me. I remembered Karl: "*I have a girl, damn you.*" I carried that emotion inside me, for of course I had created the being who uttered it. I had dreamed him.

But there is our dilemma and I must ask you to understand. For us, as for you, it seemed that the creatures of our casual thoughts, and our dreams, were too vaporous and transient to have life of their own. We dismissed them as mere byproducts of our being.

"And the question?" my brother pressed.

“The answer must be no” said one of the shadows. We are the deepest power, save mystery, therefore whatever we decide is ethical, by definition.”

“Is it?” my brother said, staring only at me. He was my brother after all, and I remembered him and I loved him, and he knew me better than the others.

Yet I remembered Karl. The awkward, scared Norwegian who hid behind his granite edifice of carefully sculptured courage. I remembered Juan...twitchy, neurotic Juan...and Eloise. Dirk and Anthea and Krys. Oh, Krys! The thought pulled a tide in me and for a moment she hovered in front of me, conjured to the quivering threshold of incarnation by my mere desire for her again.

She hovered there in front of me, her feet a few inches above the stone, painted nails pointing downwards. But she was real. I saw her reflection in the water, where it merged with mine. She glared at me. She reproached me. “Why do you bring me back, Render Stone, just to tease me with life? Are even the dead not sacred to you?”

But my brother swept his arm and the form vanished, like smoke. “Stop! You’re beginning to dream again. If you choose to re-enter the dream, then you must answer us before you do. Otherwise all has been for nothing.”

With terrible certainty I knew it was Krys herself that I had seen, and not simply an image of her, that I had summoned before us. And with that came the answer. Yes, yes...our imagination, our very dreaming, gave birth to beings with their own life and feeling, their own longing and heartbreak. Our imaginal force was that powerful. But no god dwelled above us. No great power could solve our dilemma. It was ours.

“The answer is yes,” I said, in a voice far too small for the magnificent creature that I was.

My brother turned back to me, his expression grave. “Nym, are you sure about this, I mean...*really* sure?”

I stared at the water shouting its light on the cavern floor. I stared at the magnificence of us, a power that could conjure and dissolve worlds. And yet like humans, we did not ask to be created. We simply were.

“I am sure.”

A wiser voice sounded from the shadows. I recognized it as the one who had spawned the question among our kind. That elder among us who had entered the first deep dreaming. “Well then, the first question is answered. But this brings us to a new question. If then, the beings we dream are real, is it ethical for us to awaken from such dreams? Because in waking, assuredly, we destroy these creatures we have made.”

I felt the pang of his words tear right through me. “*Krys! I loved you!*” And for a moment my mighty form faltered, the cavern wavered in my vision, and my limbs felt heavy once more, like the swinging masses of a human creature.

“Stay with us Nym!” my brother urged. “At least a little longer.”

But the answer was clear. My body, my being had already given it. It mattered not that Krys was dissolved somewhere in me, like a crystal in water, or that her death was somehow a small part of the waking that was once more my godly self. That didn’t matter. That didn’t make it okay. I could see that now. Karl, Juan, they were all within me. *Karl*, no wonder I hated you. I could see it now. Like Fowle, I summoned him to goad me towards wakefulness. But none of that mattered now. As individual beings, they would never again exist unless I allowed it. And to allow it, I had to sleep, and in sleep I would dream, and perhaps...never more to awaken. Ahhh...I remembered the dilemma now, and how we feared it. I remembered too why I chose to

forget, so that the question would not torment me until the cusp of the choice was come at last.

We created Spirit Rock, *I* created it, as a trial run, to test whether the force of our dreaming could generate a cosmos. And it did. Oh dear god, if only there were a god. *It did.*

My brother sensed the drift of my feelings. “Think carefully, Nym. Here is a choice that cannot be reversed.”

I was slow to answer. But no matter where within myself I tried to hide from the problem, I could still see it there. I could still see Krys.

“We will not ignore your choice, Nym. Do you bid us dream, that these beings may live and know?”

Still I didn’t answer.

“You understand that we may never wake up?”

I lifted my head, and stared into the whole circle, eyes shining. “What would you do, my friends, if we ourselves were the dreamed?”