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A Fan Fiction Story from Matthew Corbett's World

Based on Robert McCammon's Matthew Corbett Series

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To Slay a Dragon

A Work of Fan Fiction Set in the World of Robert McCammon's Matthew Corbett Books

by Amanda Desiree

Layers of clouds spackled the sky like paint flecked on a canvas, shielding the two travelers from the sun's direct gaze. Nevertheless, despite the overcast firmament and fact that it was early November, the air was heavy with an unseasonable warmth that had infested the land from the coast to the valley for days. Matthew Corbett had hoped that the river along which they rode would deliver up a refreshing breeze, but so far it had only sent envoys of flies. His companion, Hudson Greathouse, slapped away another advance, then wiped the sweat raised by this exertion from his brow. Matthew's shirt, likewise, felt damp from the oppressive atmosphere. He doubted if ever a less likely pair of knights had sallied forth to confront a dragon.

The Great One glowered at the stretch of water that shared his name. "Remind me again how much Van Ryn is compensating us for our discomfort."

"Fifty guineas to visit the estate and another fifty for successful completion of the job."

"Ah, yes. A foolish indulgence for a fool's errand. How could one refuse?"

"At least the leaves are pretty," Matthew offered, admiring the flares of crimson and bronze among the forested hills.

"A pitcher of beer at the Trot Then Gallop would be easier on my eyes."

"It is an intriguing problem, though. What do you suppose the 'dragon' really is? An animal? A human mischief-maker?"

"The last 'monster' sighting I investigated turned out to have a perfectly...well, abnormal but human explanation," said Hudson.

Matthew thought of how the demons in his own past had been rooted in imagination and cultivated through suggestion. "Perhaps the solution is a

mixture of the two,” he mused, “a person who has disguised an animal as a fabled beastie as a diversion in order to accomplish his nefarious scheme.”

“Good luck trying to sell that ridiculous story for a ha’penny,” Hudson scoffed. “D’you really want to know what I think it is? A mad Dutchman’s fancies.”

“More than one person has seen the, ah, culprit,” Matthew reminded him.

“Van Ryn’s tenant farmers, all Dutchmen. And all Dutchmen are crazy. The whole country went mad years ago, about tulips, of all things. Men traded away vast sums of money and property for a few bulbs that were supposed to sprout pretty blossoms. A people who would think that was a good investment would be capable of believing anything, including that they had seen a dragon.”

“You have a remarkably low opinion of the Dutch,” Matthew noted.

“Indeed.” Hudson slapped at another bloodsucker and slipped back into taciturnity.

He had been against this endeavor from the moment Dirk Van Ryn’s letter arrived at the office on Stone Street. The substance of his missive resembled a fairy story for children more than a business proposition from a wealthy landowner, but Van Ryn’s reputation was impressive enough to overcome the far-fetched nature of his request. The Van Ryns were among the oldest families in the colony, having settled the Hudson River Valley decades before the English had entered the region. Dirk Van Ryn owned numerous acres, which he rented out to over a dozen farming families. His own family occupied a grand manor house called Dragonwyck. “That silly name might be the source of his fancies,” Hudson had observed.

The problem Mynheer Van Ryn fancied he had was that his household was being pillaged by an unusual thief: “*A covetous dragon is stealing my fortune piece by piece.*” At first, Matthew thought Van Ryn was employing a metaphor, but as he read on, he realized the gentleman truly believed he was the victim of something unearthly.

About eighteen months earlier, Van Ryn had presented his wife with a diamond brooch to commemorate her birthday. Natural caution prompted him to persuade her that the jewels should be kept in his wall safe, which proved to be not so secure. The next morning found the safe empty, marred by the marks of a great beast.

Over the ensuing year, more valuables vanished: silver plate, more jewelry, and even a bag of gold coins were all snatched away despite the patrols of hired men around the property. No sign of forced entry or exit was ever detected, but the crime scene always showed unusual signs of unnatural strength. Finally, the thief was sighted. Two guards separately claimed to have glimpsed an enormous *thing* that melted into the shadows before they could approach it; all they could do was babble about claws, teeth, and horns.

“Something uncanny is creating this nuisance, and I should express my gratitude liberally to anyone who would expose this cretin and recover what is mine.” The story intrigued Matthew but irritated Hudson, who only agreed to undertake the commission when he learned what the first installment of Van Ryn’s gratitude entailed.

Matthew suspected Hudson’s many belittling comments during this trip were deflections to cover his discomfort. This was the first assignment he’d accepted since recuperating from the injuries inflicted on him by a true monster, one Tyranthus Slaughter. Though Matthew was encouraged to see Greathouse walking with greater ease and sitting his horse on the long ride with minimal interruptions, he wondered if his friend wasn’t suffering more than he let on. So, for Hudson’s sake, as well as for his own comfort, Matthew eagerly anticipated the conclusion of their journey.

“Ah. That must be the place.” Their path began to rise and twist around a hill, and when the pair crested the top, they beheld a remarkable sight. It was a leviathan among houses, reminiscent of a medieval cathedral. The building was broad, spanning the hilltop from end to end and stretching three stories high. Crafted from stone blocks, it sported spires, turrets, and a singular, square tower. As the Herrald agents gazed upon Dragonwyck, a fugitive sunbeam tore a rift in the clouds and exploded against an array of windows in the house’s façade, further dazzling their eyes.

“Well, considering he’s already got a castle, I can understand why he’s obsessed with dragons,” Hudson said.

*

Within the hour, the travelers were resting their sore bottoms on soft settee cushions in one of the manor house parlors, where a liveried servant had

instructed them to await Mynheer Van Ryn. Matthew's eyes had bulged as they crossed the vast foyer, their footsteps ringing across polished stone tiles inlaid with mosaic patterns, and passed beneath the landing, which bridged a pair of staircases that swept up either end of the foyer, and down a paneled hallway, past various sitting rooms, toward the rear of the house. This parlor was made particularly cheery by the addition of a stained-glass window. Though the colored panes didn't shine as brilliantly at night as they would have if the sun smiled through them, the image they formed—of a red and yellow striped tulip blossom surrounded by a green background and a blue and gold border—was pleasing nevertheless.

At least, it was to Matthew. Hudson refused to be charmed.

"What did I tell you?" he griped, once the servant had departed. "These people are mad."

"It's only a decoration, and I wish you wouldn't mock our host," Matthew chided. "It behooves us to keep on good terms with him. The bounty he's offering is most generous, and, if he's pleased with our services, he might recommend the Herrald Agency to his fellow landowners, who may be just as free with their wealth. What are they called again? Patrons?"

"*Patroons*," Hudson corrected. "They're more princes than landowners. Each estate is like a little kingdom. The farmers work the land and pay tribute to the *patroon* while he keeps order. His word is what passes for law in the community."

"Really?" Matthew was surprised to hear such fiefdoms existed within the New York colony, but perhaps allowing the *patroons* to continue their way of life was part of the arrangement when the land had changed from Dutch to English hands.

"Why do you think he's making us wait on him instead of offering us supper and a bed after we've been on the road all day? He wants to remind us he's in charge. He'll be making a grand entrance, just watch."

Fortunately, they hadn't much longer to wait. The clack of bootheels in the corridor announced the arrival of the master of Dragonwyck. Matthew looked up to see the doorway fill with a tall, thin man cloaked in a long maroon velvet frock coat trimmed with silver braid and ermine. He paused at the threshold to evaluate them; his keen blue eyes scraped over Hudson, found him wanting, then pointed at Matthew. He stared back, taking the

patroon's measure in kind. Van Ryn was a man of middle age. Strands of gray crept across the sides of his dark hair, which fell loosely to his broad shoulders. He had a long, aquiline nose set in a long, angular face framed by arched eyebrows and the points of a neatly-trimmed mustache and goatee. His thin lips seemed to curl back in a sneer. Then, they pulled back into a smile.

"Welcome to my home, good sirs," he greeted in a resonant, surprisingly high voice, enunciating each syllable. Van Ryn stepped into the parlor, and Matthew realized their host was smaller than he'd first appeared. Hudson topped him by a couple of inches, and outweighed him by at least a stone. Yet, the aura of power Van Ryn projected lent him the illusion of greater might. He extended his hand for a businesslike shake. Matthew noted long, slender, uncalled fingers. "I had begun to despair of your arrival. My wife, Cornelia, has already retired for the night. The poor dear needs her rest. Please allow me to convey her regards."

"We made reasonable time. The road only turned rough once we reached the hills," Hudson said, defensive.

"You might have hired a boat to carry you from the city in less than half the time. There is a dock a few miles from the estate, a comparatively short ride. I've paid you well enough to cover the expense of the fare. I hope you're not the types to shave corners in an effort to preserve more payment for yourselves."

Now, Hudson glowered. "Horse travel seemed the most natural means, and not so time-consuming. It's only just past sunset."

"Ah, as city denizens, you are doubtless accustomed to livelier nights. Here in the country, we keep farmers' hours: up at sunrise, down at moonrise."

Matthew frowned. He recalled how the three-tiered chandelier in the great hall had been fully ablaze with candles, hardly a sign that the house was closing up for the night. Still, Van Ryn's attire, though sumptuous, looked more like what he might wear while lounging in the comfort of home than what he might put on to entertain guests. Perhaps Van Ryn acting as if their tardiness had kept him awake was a power ploy, like withholding victuals, Matthew reflected as his stomach made a sudden loud complaint.

Van Ryn looked amused. "I have asked Cook to prepare a small repast for you. I expect you would welcome refreshments after your journey."

Nevertheless, I am sure you can respect my eagerness to address business matters first. I have been in distress for months, and I am counting on you problem solvers to relieve me of it.”

“What exactly do you propose we should do?” Hudson asked. “From your letter, I understood these...incidents...happen irregularly. Do you mean for us to stay on here waiting for something to investigate?”

The corners of Van Ryn’s mouth tightened and his eyebrows drew down. “No, that would not be convenient for any of us. I have taken the liberty of baiting a trap in the hope that this duivel—this beastly thief—will attempt to steal the bait during the next few nights. The thefts always occur at night, mind you. If you good men would consent to remain at Dragonwyck for the week and watch over the prize, with luck, you may lay hands on the creature and end its mischief. In the meanwhile, of course, you shall interview witnesses, examine clues, and do whatever else you do.”

“What clues might those be?” Matthew asked.

“Allow me to show you.” Van Ryn led his guests back through the corridor, past the windows of what appeared to be a large conservatory.

Hudson peered into the mélange of shadows and greenery. “Do you grow tulips in there?” Matthew’s bootheel pressed down on his toes, but the Great One didn’t flinch.

Van Ryn glanced back in surprise. “Why, no, I don’t trifle with such foolish things. I’m actually developing a new variety of oleander. Oh, but you must be referring to the window in the parlor. I had that installed as a wedding gift to honor my dear bride. Her grandfather made his fortune through speculating, and her dowry derives from the bulb.” He sighed. “If only the money were all she inherited from those flowers... This way, please.” He turned a corner briskly before either man could follow up on his remark.

“Here is where I was accustomed to storing my valuables.” Van Ryn lit a standing candelabrum, casting illumination over what looked like a study. A large desk, the width of one wall, and a high-backed chair stood beside a window covered by dark green damask drapes. An object covered in a matching cloth rested in the center of the desk. The two walls on either side of the desk were paneled in wood; the third boasted a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. Van Ryn strode over to the bookcase and Matthew expected him

to swivel it aside to reveal a hidden chamber. Instead, he tapped a panel beside one of the shelves. "Bring one of the candles here."

"Why didn't he take a candle when he lit them?" Hudson grumbled under his breath. "That's not as satisfying as ordering us about, is it?" Privately, Matthew shared his sentiments, but he selected a candle without complaint and handed one to Hudson, too. They crowded around their host. Within the glow of the combined flames, five widespread gouges in the wood were clearly visible.

Hudson brushed one of the slashes. "This looks to be half an inch deep." He stretched his fingers to try to match them to the indentations, but the marks were slightly wider than his hand. "You think these were left by your 'dragon'?"

"Yes. This panel conceals a safe within the wall. The edges catch on hinges, just so." Van Ryn pressed the edges of the panel and pushed up slightly; the piece came off in his hands like the lid off a box to reveal a recessed space. "My servants know I have a safe, some even know which room it's in, but none would know the secret of how to open it. The door is well-hidden, and there is a certain trick to manipulate the panel. I came in on the morning after the first theft and found the cover looking just as you saw. It was still in place as if it were part of the wall, but the gouges showed that something very strong and very eager had forced that panel open."

"And then put it back?" Matthew frowned. "Restoring the panel didn't hide the theft. The marks prove the safe was accessed."

"I know. I believe it was taunting me, telling me it knew my secrets and cared not a whit for my ingenuity. That requires something more than animal cunning, my good men. That requires fiendish intelligence."

"And you think it was a dragon? Granted the thief made a show of strength, these claw marks could have come from a tool of some kind in the hands of a man," Hudson objected.

"What tool do you think did this damage?" Van Ryn walked to the desk and tugged aside the cloth with a flourish, revealing the twisted, shattered remains of a strongbox. The metal bands that would have wrapped around the chest stuck out at odd angles like the arms of a starfish. One side of the chest was missing. The top had a hole punched through it.

"After the first theft, I became more vigilant. I hid my valuables in random places throughout the house, knowing my safe no longer deserved

the name. I locked some bank notes in a desk drawer; the drawer was ripped out. That cost me a pretty sovereign to repair. I hid some of my wife's jewelry—a pearl necklace, several jeweled rings, and a cameo—in the toes of a pair of boots I then put under my bed. I thought a commonplace hiding place might go unnoticed. I was also curious to see if the thief would dare enter my room. I posted servants in the hall and lay awake until just before dawn when I foolishly imagined any danger had passed. When I awoke, the boots had been emptied and thrown across the room. A set of gouges carved the floor under my bed. My servants denied seeing anyone—that time. They swore they never even heard a sound. I didn't either." Van Ryn looked shaken.

"Next, I tried to set a trap. I made a great show of putting a bag of gold coins into this specially commissioned strongbox. I left it in this study, in plain sight, and stationed servants and some of the strongest men from my farms throughout the house. For three nights, nothing happened. On the fourth, the box was looted—and the thief was spotted.

"Jan Van de Kamp, a farmer strong enough to pull his own plow, was a quivering mess when he told me he saw a thing on the upstairs landing. He claimed it was nearly seven feet tall and half again as wide with black eyes, clawed hands, bared fangs...and horns. It hissed at him and he scurried away in retreat. He feared it would pursue him, but when he ventured to look back at the landing, it had gone. Gone where? Deeper into the house, where my wife and I sleep? You might think a brawny lad like that would give chase in defense of his patroon, but instead he cried and wailed until others came to his aid. They searched the house in pairs but never found the dragon, nor where it went, nor how it entered.

"All was quiet for some months after that. Some men whispered that Van de Kamp had imagined the affair. I had him and his home thoroughly searched to determine if he was the thief and trying to cast suspicion elsewhere, but turned up nothing.

"Last spring, I commissioned a portrait from one of the master artists of Amsterdam, a man with a long waiting list. I traveled abroad to sit for him and conduct other business. The finished painting finally arrived in July. I wanted to hang it in the grand parlor with the portraits of my father and grandfather. Then, I considered the value of this work of art and that the thief might strike again.

“Again, I summoned my tenants to the night watch, with the exception of Van de Kamp. I ordered them to guard the library, where I had just hung an inferior portrait that I’d had painted two years ago when I became patroon after the decease of my father. I had been unsatisfied with the outcome, which is why I sought to have a new painting made. None of these peasants would know the difference between good art and poor art. I told them to mind that portrait, and they did, while I hid the real prize inside a feather mattress in one of the guest rooms. Then, I waited to see if the dragon would be drawn to the real treasure or distracted by the decoy. I hid myself in the room across the hall so I could observe what transpired and make the way appear clear.

“In the middle of the night, Lars Bakker, who was patrolling the landing, heard noises coming from the hallway. He described them as ‘the rummagings of a giant rat.’ He investigated and found his so-called giant rat tearing apart the mattress with its claws. It looked up at him with black eyes and gnashing teeth. Fortunately, he had the presence of mind to pull off a shot at it. He missed, though; I could show you the bullet embedded above the bedstead. Then, he said, the thing escaped down the hall. The entire household converged at the sound of the gunshot, but all we found was a distressed Bakker and the absence of my cherished portrait.”

“This happened in the room opposite yours. What did you hear or see?” Matthew asked.

“Nothing, much to my consternation. The shot startled me, breaking the silence as it did, but by the time I reached the corridor, the fiend had absconded.”

“Had Bakker heard the earlier witness’s description of the thief?”

“Everyone heard it.”

“So, he might have been expecting to see something monstrous. With the memory of that description in his mind, in a dim room, suggestion might have shaped his perceptions. I’ve some prior experience with the effect of such influence on a witness’s testimony.”

Van Ryn’s eyes narrowed. “What is your point, young sir?”

“None of these anecdotes necessarily indicates that a creature is causing the mischief,” Matthew replied.

“Perhaps not, but how do you account for the eyewitness descriptions, the violence left at the sites, the thief’s ability to seemingly vanish on the

point of capture, let alone its ability to enter and exit a guarded, locked house?”

“I cannot, as yet. The matter requires further investigation.”

“Precisely why you are here. I have called the thief a dragon because dragons love wealth and beauty. They are avaricious, powerful, and fearsome, all traits that fit our culprit. Whether it be natural or supernatural is of less consequence to me than having it stopped and my stolen valuables recovered. Exactly how you accomplish those tasks is up to you. I have seeded the ground for you to sow.”

Van Ryn reached into a pocket of his robe and withdrew a small, wrapped object. He unfolded the corners of the handkerchief to reveal a large, square-cut emerald on a gold chain. “A fortnight ago, at our annual autumn frolic, I presented this pendant to my wife in front of our neighbors, friends, and tenants. This, good sirs, is the bait for your trap. Now that word of it has spread, the dragon is sure to emerge and try to take it. I’ve been keeping it on my person these last few nights, in anticipation of your coming, but as I’ve no wish to wake and find myself being rent to shreds, from this night forth, I will be keeping it in my wall safe, a place we already know the dragon can access. I’ll leave it to you to work out how to guard or defend it.”

“Just us two?” asked Hudson. “You won’t be calling in your local farmers to help?”

“Why should I rely on rabble, who failed me before, when I have two well-paid professional problem solvers to assist me now?” Van Ryn smiled in challenge.

“Is there anyone in the vicinity who might have motive to rob you?” Hudson asked. “A rival patroon who lost to you in a deal, or a former tenant who couldn’t pay his rent? Even if they aren’t carrying out the dirty work themselves, they could still be directing it.”

“No tenant would cross me. As for business, some may have been dissatisfied with how our dealings concluded, but none can accuse me of acting unjustly—and no one has threatened me, if that was to be your next question. Besides, I’d like to know how any malcontent could enter and exit a locked house without a trace. Truly, I want you to determine that. The house has no hidden passages. I’ve seen the blueprints for myself. The

closest thing to a secret room is this safe.” He crossed the room to set the pendant in place and position the panel door.

“How does your wife feel about you using more of her jewelry to lure out the ‘dragon’?” Matthew asked.

“The jewels were purchased with my money. While she may wear the baubles, they still belong to me.”

Matthew considered that Dame Van Ryn’s flowery dowry had likely paid for some of the purchases, but refrained from saying so. “Does she have an opinion about the thefts and whether a monster, like the tenants described, or a person is responsible?”

The corners of the patroon’s mouth curled down. “My wife has unusual ideas. I wouldn’t pay her any mind.”

“I was hoping to speak with her in the morning to obtain her version of events,” Matthew said. “She’s been in the house during each of the thefts, and even though kept at a remove, she might still have observed something useful and could have some suggestion—”

“My wife,” Van Ryn cut him off, “is not well enough to be interviewed.”

“Oh? Perhaps she will be feeling better in the morning, after her rest.”

“Unlikely. To be blunt, she is mad. Oh, not dangerous. You needn’t fear her. Rather, my Cornelia is to be pitied. She is still a capable hostess and can even be quite charming when she applies herself, but she has . . . such notions.” He drew a deep breath and rolled his eyes. “She believes she can speak with angels. These heavenly visitors show her visions of heaven and hell and even share knowledge of the future, she says. Hers are tiresome fantasies, but ultimately harmless. She was not so mystical when we began courting, but in recent years, she has become more absorbed. My wife spends much of her leisure time writing down the philosophy she claims her enlightened friends have taught her, though of course, I do not allow her to read it to our guests. It is bad enough that she should be known as silent and pensive; I will not have her become the laughingstock of the valley.”

“Has she had any visions about your dragon?” Hudson asked.

“Please don’t mock her,” Van Ryn said coldly.

“No one’s mocking, I’m just curious. I’d think an angel would have something to say about unnatural goings-on in the home, especially if we’re dealing with something unearthly like you seem to think.”

“I, too, would like to hear what she has to say,” said Matthew. “Her, ah, insights might give us a direction to pursue.”

Van Ryn’s lips pressed into a line. “She says I will never catch the thief. And now that I’ve retained your services, I won’t have to. Solve my problem, sirs, but do it without troubling Cornelia. I don’t want her riled up by talk of this business.” He clapped his hands. “And now, I expect you will be wanting to sup and rest before beginning your first watch. Just because the thief doesn’t usually strike immediately doesn’t mean that it won’t do so.”

He went to the desk and pulled a rope that dangled from the ceiling beside the chair. Matthew heard no sound, but imagined the rope triggered a bell somewhere within the vastness of the house. Sure enough, another servant in neat livery appeared at the door, bearing a candelabrum. “Sem will show you to your rooms and Annalies will bring you each a tray. I will expect you on duty by eight o’clock.” Van Ryn bestowed a stern look on each of his hired men before departing down the corridor.

“It looks like we won’t be keeping farmers’ hours,” Hudson commented. In a lower voice, he added, “So, Van Ryn believes in dragons and his wife believes in angels. What did I tell you?”

Matthew ignored the gibe. “Shall we each take up positions on the ground floor, or patrol the upstairs and downstairs?”

“I’ll stay below with the safe to start,” Hudson replied. “We can switch at midnight and get some shut-eye at dawn.”

“Agreed, but only a short sleep. I want to set out early and speak to the two men who saw the thief.” Matthew addressed the back of the servant.

“Er, Sem, were you in service during either of the recent thefts?”

The footman paused and half-turned to address him. “Yes, sir. I was guarding one of the servants’ entrances in the rear on the night Farmer Van de Kamp saw what he saw. I only heard his story later from another servant. When Farmer Bakker met the beast, I was stationed near the conservatory.

I heard a commotion from above and ran up the servants’ stairs to reach the landing faster. They open into the hallway just overhead, you see. I saw other servants and some of the tenants coming together from the different parts of the house where they were standing guard. Mynheer Van Ryn was there, too. Everyone gathered around Farmer Bakker, but it was some moments before he could speak clearly of what he had seen. He said the

creature ran off down the hall, toward the bedrooms, but I had just come through that way and I saw nothing unusual in the hall or on the stairs. We searched all the rooms upstairs to no avail.”

“Have you any idea where the thief went?”

“No.” Matthew hoped the servant would opine further, but Sem resumed his pace and soon delivered Hudson and Matthew to their quarters in the guest wing—separate rooms, one located at either end of the corridor. This way, Van Ryn would have a defender at the front and rear of the house.

The rooms were well-appointed. Matthew’s boasted a four-poster bed with a feather mattress and pillow, a washstand, a small desk, and a wardrobe where his travel satchel had already been unpacked and stored. He stretched out across the bed and shut his eyes. It was a pity he wouldn’t be able to properly enjoy its comfort during his stay. His duties would permit only brief naps, so it was best he take advantage of the accommodations whenever opportunity presented itself. Matthew allowed the plush texture of the coverlet and gentle resistance of the mattress to absorb the ache of the long ride from his weary bones while he waited for the ache in his stomach to be filled.

He opened his eyes at the swish of the door, expecting to see a maidservant with a tray, but the woman approaching him was far too elegant. She wore a pale blue silk gown that seemed to float around her, so baggy was the material on her slender frame. She was surprisingly tall, though perhaps a head shorter than Van Ryn, with sharp, wide cheekbones and a face that narrowed to a point at her dimpled chin, giving her a catlike appearance. Dark blonde curls escaped from the tie intended to hold them back and spilled over her shoulders. Her eyes were gray, like the skies that had smothered him during his ride into the valley, and clouded with distress. When she saw him, her eyes flickered with hope, and she rapidly crossed the room to join him. Matthew sat up. This must be the lady of the house. But what had brought her to him? On past occasions, Matthew had been overpowered by amorous women. Had the tulip heiress come for such a tryst?

“You are the man my husband summoned from the city?” Her voice was low, unaccented, and urgent.

“I am one of them. My name is Matthew Corbett.”

“Master Corbett, you look to be an intelligent man. You would recognize a friend who wished to offer advice. Please believe me when I say you must leave this house.”

“Why?”

“Forces here would harm you if you stayed.”

“If I am in danger, then so must be my companion.”

She shook her head, frowning. “I know nothing of him. It’s you I must warn. Unless you leave Dragonwyck tonight, the only way you will return home is if you are carried from this house feet foremost!”

Her declaration sounded more dramatic than threatening. Still, there might be some basis to it. “How do you know this?”

“How is unimportant. I know many things, chiefly that you are in danger.”

“From whom? Or what? Have your sources said?”

The brightness in her eyes dimmed. “What has my husband told you about me?”

“He said that you were ill.”

“Nothing is wrong with me,” Cornelia insisted.

“Too ill to receive visitors,” Matthew continued. “I would have spoken with you otherwise. I want to know more about what you know. Have you any idea who the thief of Dragonwyck is?”

“It is a beast.” Her eyes slid to the side, as if she could see it in the distance. “It can overwhelm a man. You cannot reason with it, and you will never bring it before a constable or magistrate. Its lust for treasure will turn to a lust for blood if you remain here.”

“Where can I find it?” Matthew asked.

“It will find you.”

“What about the treasures it’s stolen? Where can they be found?”

Cornelia’s brow wrinkled. “In its lair...under the earth.”

Her evasions and riddles, so typical of sybils in stories, irritated him. “Do you know any of this first-hand? Did you witness any of the thefts or see the dragon with your own eyes?”

Cornelia met his gaze again. “No. My husband wanted to spare me from excitement, so he confined me to my room on the nights the house was guarded.”

“You mean he—locked you in?” Matthew squirmed.

“Not with a key, but with disapproving looks and words. I spend most of my time confined to my room, lest I become overexcited.” Her mouth twisted into a crooked smile. “Save for those occasions when the patroon is entertaining at Dragonwyck and must trot me out for entertainment or face awkward questions about my absence, I see no one but him and our servants, though they are discouraged from interacting with me beyond leaving my tray or my clothes. Sometimes, whole days pass without my hearing another human voice. And then, one day, I heard other voices. They told me not to despair, to be strong, and that someday I would be mistress of myself again. But for now, I must abide by my husband’s instructions and rest as much as possible so I do not become agitated and say or do anything to embarrass him. Dirk values his reputation as much as his wealth and his legacy.”

In light of this depiction of the Van Ryns’ marriage, Matthew reflected on the stained-glass tribute downstairs and how Van Ryn had spoken of his ‘dear wife.’ Yet, those endearments had seemed more formal than affectionate.

“It sounds trying for you,” Matthew remarked.

Cornelia shrugged. “I have my books and my writing to fill my time. Dirk has his plants and his business deals to keep him occupied while he waits for his coffers and the cradle to fill. There was a time Dirk courted me as ardently as any girl could have hoped for her suitor to act, but I’ve come to believe it was my fortune he admired most. Even after my dowry was at his disposal, he wasn’t satisfied. He wanted a title. His father, Willem, was still alive when we wed, though nearing his ninetieth year. Dirk couldn’t wait for him to pass away so he could finally be master of Dragonwyck. Two years ago, Willem’s heart failed. Instead of grieving his father, Dirk threw a great banquet to celebrate becoming patroon. Willem was the last of his family. All his older siblings had died in childhood from accident or illness. Yet, I’ve never seen him shed a tear from that day to this. Dirk knew he would be patroon someday as the last heir, and that was what mattered most to him.

“And yet, now that he has finally come into his inheritance, this shadow has fallen across his life, this monster that steals from him and humiliates him under his own roof. It cannot be borne.”

She seized a handful of the curtain surrounding Matthew's bed. "Do not be fooled by the beauty of your accommodations into thinking you are a valued guest. To my husband, you are a tool, much as his tenants are tools, for promoting his fortune. When a tool breaks, he is prepared to replace it. I do not want to see such misfortune befall you. I entreat you again to leave. If you will not believe that I know of what I speak, then at least humor a poor, sick woman."

Matthew thought of the second payment due after he and Hudson finished standing their week's watch. If he left, would Van Ryn still pay Hudson in full? But this was an academic question. Matthew had no intention of leaving Hudson to face a dragon alone in his still-weakened condition, nor of abandoning this puzzle. "It's too late to set out now," he began.

Cornelia's shoulders slumped. Weariness ate through her features—the effects of the illness she had denied, or the result of living with her neglectful spouse? "Very well, Master Corbett." She lifted her chin and spread her hands, now looking aristocratic and proud, like her husband. "I have done my best," she addressed the heavens. "He is in your hands now." She turned and glided from the room, letting the door slip shut behind her soundlessly. A moment later, the long-awaited servant arrived with squash soup and a plate of venison. As Matthew tucked into his food, he pondered his hostess's warning. Had it been inspired by a delusion, or by a desire to keep him from discovering the secrets of Dragonwyck?

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"There are no dragons and no angels." Hudson's opinion was firm. "On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence for lunacy. Still, Dame Van Ryn may have given us a useful clue. The dragon's first theft occurred about two years ago, didn't it? Right around the time the old Van Ryn died and this one took over?"

"Yes," Matthew agreed.

"That can't be a coincidence. Someone's got a grudge against the new patroon or wants him to look weak. Let's see what gossip we can squeeze out of the tenants."

After an uneventful night's watch, a short sleep in soft beds, and a hearty breakfast, the problem solvers were on their way to interview the two people who claimed to have set eyes on the dragon. Red and brown leaves twitched on the branches of the trees as Matthew and Hudson rode by, then twisted away and skittered across their path. The smell of moisture and earth hung about them. Though the skies were still layered in charcoal and iron, a strong breeze gusted from the river at intervals, brushing them with a much welcome coolness after the previous day's heavy heat. Matthew felt more alert, eager to tear into the mystery at hand.

Their first visit was to the home of Lars Bakker. They found him mucking out his barn. At first, he was irritated by the interruption, but when he realized his visitors came from the patroon, the farmer quickly turned deferential, inviting them into his cottage and offering them tea. "Please," Matthew urged, "tell us exactly what you saw and experienced."

"I heard the thing before I saw it," Bakker explained. "I was asked to patrol the stairways and was walking back and forth on the landing, ready to stop anybody who might try to come up or down. From behind me, down the hall, I started to hear a funny noise. Sounded like rats in the walls at first, but then it got louder, like a dog scratching. Then, I heard a sound like tearing. At first, I thought it might be the patroon. His manservant told us Mynheer Van Ryn often stays up late to work at his books or his little indoor garden. He warned us to look lively in case the patroon came 'round to see how we were watching over his home."

Hudson leaned forward, frowning. "You mean Van Ryn doesn't keep farmers' hours?"

Bakker laughed. "What for? He doesn't farm, does he? Anyway, I knew he had a room on that floor so I called out, thinking he might be up and about, but I got no answer. So, I went to the room where the sound seemed to be coming from. I opened the door and saw...It."

The old farmer hesitated and clenched his cup, as if to draw warmth and strength from the beverage. "The candles were still burning in the hall sconces for the night watch and I had a small lantern with me that I shined around the room, but it was still gloomy. At first, all I saw were shadows, then I saw a huge hulk atop the bed, just a big mass of darkness. Then, I saw a face peeking out of the shadows with even darker eyes and bared

teeth. I saw claws, and I knew I was looking at the dragon. That's what Van de Kamp called it.”

“Could you see it clearly?” Matthew asked.

He shook his head. “No, I didn't want to. I was afraid to look at it too close. I thought if I saw the whole shape, I'd take fright and run or swoon away like a woman, and I couldn't afford that. I couldn't risk the patroon throwing me off my land like he did Van de Kamp.”

“How's that?” Hudson asked.

“The patroon got angry that Van de Kamp let the thing he saw escape. He said he needed loyal tenants who would serve when asked and told Van de Kamp to leave his farm. He let his neighbor, Erik Van Allen, take over the fields. Van de Kamp didn't go far, though. His brother rents a farm nearby, and he, his wife, and children went and stayed with him.”

“That seems harsh. How did Van de Kamp react?” Matthew asked.

“He wasn't pleased of course, but there was nothing he could do.”

“How did the other farmers take it? Was there bad feeling against Van Ryn?” Hudson asked.

Bakker pressed his lips into a thin line, seemingly loathe to answer.

“The patroon makes the rules. I can't say he's right or wrong. I think if old Mynheer Willem had been in his place, he would have found some other way to punish Van de Kamp. Raised his rent or made him pay back the value of the stolen item, but he wouldn't have made him homeless.”

“Did Van de Kamp threaten revenge?”

“Oh, no. He kept his head down and kept on trying to earn his living. He was afraid the patroon might expel his brother's family too, if he did anything else to displease him. Van de Kamp wouldn't have done anything to make trouble for them. None of us would. Anyhow, after I saw what I saw, the patroon forgave him and let him have the farm back, but I didn't know that would happen. In the moment, I just knew I better act before I lost my place. Well, that thing saw me and it started growling. I fired my pistol at it. Big as it was, I hoped I could hit it by aiming in its general direction—I didn't want to look too closely at it, as I said—but I missed it completely. I found my bullet in the wall but no blood around it. That thing didn't like being shot at and it rushed at me, slapped me out of the way and up against the wall. My jaw was bruised afterward.” He rubbed his face at the memory.

“It didn't walk through walls then,” Hudson remarked.

“It wasn't human, but it had solid form and strength behind it.” Bakker smiled ruefully. “If I had known it would run at me, I'd have waited until it was closer to fire. But maybe if I hadn't defended myself in the first place, I might not be here to tell the tale now.”

“Where did it go after it went by you?”

“I couldn't see, being as my face was mashed to the wall. I turned 'round and ran into the hallway, but I couldn't see anything but my fellow men rushing to my aid. Then, the patroon came and demanded to know what happened. He made me tell over and over what I saw, which wasn't much, but he must have been satisfied. After all, I'm still here.”

“Strange how the old farmer could hear noises from a room down the hall behind him when Van Ryn, in a room just across the hall, said he heard nothing but the gunshot,” Matthew commented as they departed. “He didn't seem hard of hearing to me.”

“You think Bakker was lying?”

“No, I just think it's peculiar. I also think it's telling that he admitted he didn't see the big monster that Van Ryn described in so much detail. He saw enough to suggest a monster, but those fragments don't necessarily imply a whole.”

“He could be involved. All the farmers could, and the servants, too. You can see how they all fear and hate Van Ryn. They could be acting in cahoots to get the better of the patroon. Think on it. How could a stranger move about a packed house without anyone spotting him? Van de Kamp could have concocted this dragon tale as a cover, and after it backfired on him, Bakker had to take it up and keep the fiction going. For all Van Ryn pooh-poohs the idea, I think deep down, he believes it.”

Matthew chuckled. “Everyone is guilty. They're all conspiring to take revenge on Van Ryn. Now, that's an imaginative story. I know you're mad that Van Ryn treated us as he did last night, but not everyone wants to strike back at him as you do.”

Hudson scowled. “Somebody inside the house has got to be part of this business, to help the thief in and out at the least. If not the servants, then what of the wife?”

“She seemed to me more sinned against than sinning,” Matthew said. He had no idea of his own yet what the dragon might actually be, but he

hoped Jan Van de Kamp would illuminate the situation.

They found him in the fields, working to bring in the last of his wheat. Van de Kamp would not stop to talk with them but allowed them to walk with him and ask questions as he reaped. “Thank God the weather's held! I had a late start with my planting, and now I'm behind with the harvest. I've tried to leave the crop in as long as I could but the rain's coming, I can smell it, and I must get this last batch in.”

“We heard you had to leave your farm for a time,” Matthew acknowledged.

Van de Kamp's face flamed, but he looked ashamed, not angry. “It's true. I let my patroon down. I'm fortunate he's graced me with another chance.”

“What happened?”

“I was monitoring the ground floor for intruders. I walked from the big glass room with all the plants down the hall, past all the parlors, then past the twin staircase and the front door, to the dining room, and then back through it all again. Sometimes I crossed paths with one of the other men, but none of us ever had anything of note to report. Then, round about two in the morning, I was passing through the foyer and happened to glance up. I can't rightly say why or whether I heard something or just felt like I was being watched, but I saw a creature up on the landing. It must have been seven or eight feet tall. Black eyes, sharp teeth, claws, horns and... I think...even wings.”

Matthew swallowed. “You saw all of that?”

The young farmer's face creased in frustration. “No, not clearly. The thing was standing in a patch of darkness. I thought I saw wings, maybe a tail, but that might have been just shadows moving. I knew they were there though. I could see them in my mind, the same way I could see the layout of the ground floor, the way I knew where the dining hall was and what it looked like without having to set my eyes on it. I'd never expected anything like that. I was amazed. I know I acted a fool. I've felt that shame every minute since it happened. I should have raised an alarm, tried to fight it, done something, but in the moment, I couldn't think at all. I couldn't move to save myself, not even to run. Anybody else would have felt the same way. Lars Bakker told me the only reason he didn't freeze or faint

when he met the dragon was because I'd told him what I'd seen and he knew to expect something frightening. Nobody warned me."

"What did the creature do when it noticed you? Did it menace you?"

"No, it ran away down the hall. I didn't see whether it went into a room or down the back stairs. We searched all over and never found it."

"And you never heard it break into the study or tear apart the money chest?"

"No, sir, nor did anyone else on the floor. It must have slipped in when we had our backs turned. It must have been watching us from the shadows and plotting. God, I hope I never meet that thing again!"

The problem-solvers left the farmer to his harvest. "Did you believe him?" Hudson asked.

"I believe he saw something frightening that he believed was a monster, but I'm still in the dark as to what it really was. The men's stories share enough details that I'm sure they saw the same thing, though it's curious they can only give a composite instead of a full description. I was struck by what Van de Kamp said about having an image in his mind instead of actually seeing the creature, almost like the vision had been suggested to him."

"Do you think it's like your Carolina business?"

"No, the testimonies in that matter matched exactly, as if the witnesses were reciting from the same hornbook. I believe each of these men is telling his own version of what he experienced, even though that's only an impression constructed from a few glimpses, an idea of the whole. I'm sure something is influencing their perspectives, but I need to think on it more to determine what that might be."

"While you think, I propose we take the lie of the land so we can plan our defense for the next few nights. See if we can spot a likely lair for the dragon."

"Dame Van Ryn seems to think the dragon is staying underground."

"All right, then look for a tunnel or an underground cave. Check the approaches to the estate, see which farms are closest to the house and which are closest to the river. We can cover more ground if we split up. We'll meet back at the house by midday."

Matthew concurred, and they separated to make their surveys. In addition to the farms and the grand house, Dragonwyck comprised wooded

land around the river. Matthew rode past fields and fenced animals and turned his horse in the direction of the water, wanting to enjoy the bucolic view while keeping his eye out for hidden coves. The river popped and rippled in the rising breeze, a much different sight than the sluggish gray ribbon that had stretched flat beneath yesterday's swelter. On the opposite bank in the distance, hills rolled, dappled by a darkening sky. The shores, however, were disappointingly flat. He saw no sign of anything covert in the landscape, nor even a deserted cabin or shed. While he regretted the lack of progress in his search, Matthew had no complaints about being surrounded by such beauty.

Then, he spotted a wagon, tilting sharply to the right, stopped beside the river. A pair of horses grazed beside it. Could these belong to a malefactor also scoping out the area? Matthew approached the wagon but pulled back on the reins, startled, when a vibrant figure emerged from behind it, clutching a red-covered book with one hand and clapping a straw hat to her head with the other.

"Matthew?" Berry Grigsby blinked up at him in astonishment. She was garbed in a striking gown with a russet-colored bodice, long yellow sleeves tied with red ribbons, and a yellow skirt striped with scarlet. The combination set off her fiery hair, which billowed beneath her brim in the breeze. She reminded him both of the blazing leaves adorning the surrounding trees and the tulip in Van Ryn's parlor window. "Wherever did you come from? What are you doing here?"

"I'm here on a matter of business for the Herrald Agency. How did you come to be at Dragonwyck?" Matthew had last seen Berry setting out on a walk from her grandfather's house in New York as he was saddling up to leave on the previous morning.

"Dragonwyck?" She wrinkled her nose, clearly puzzled.

"Is that Matthew Corbett?" Matthew looked down toward the wagon's bottom where the voice emitted and spotted a pair of long legs cloaked in brown breeches. The legs emerged from beneath the wagon, drawing with them the mussed form of Ashton McCaggers. "Oh, what luck! I don't suppose you know how to fix a busted wagon wheel? I thought I could rig up something that would at least hold us until we'd crossed over the bridge, but I haven't the right tools, nor the talent."

Matthew looked from the lanky man to the listing wagon. "I'm afraid that's a problem I'm not able to solve."

"Ashton invited me to picnic on the river," Berry explained. "He thought I would enjoy sketching the scenery. We left early this morning by boat. The view from the river was delightful in itself, but after we docked, we were able to hire this wagon from a farmer who lived nearby and travel further inland to see more of the trees and the hillscape."

"I thought getting the wagon was a stroke of luck, but our luck turned just like our wagon turned on a sharp stone," McCaggers added. "It cracked the spokes. I've been tinkering with the wheel while Berry sketched, but I was just about to suggest we start walking to the nearest farm to ask for help when you came along. Perhaps you could send help for us. Whereabouts are you staying?"

"Hudson and I are guests of a local landowner. He owns an estate called Dragonwyck a couple miles from here."

Berry hugged her sketchbook. "That must be the great manor house we saw from the boat. I made a drawing of it as we traveled upriver. I didn't realize it was so close."

"This land along the river belongs to Mynheer Van Ryn. It's probably best that I found you before he did." Matthew doubted his host would take kindly to uninvited guests, but perhaps he could warm their welcome by claiming them as his friends. "Still, I'm sure he has someone on the property who could get you back on the road before dark." Matthew offered his saddled horse to Berry while he and McCaggers rode the remaining horses bareback to the house.

Inspiration flashed across Matthew's mind. "McCaggers, it might interest you to hear that I've come to this region to hunt for a dragon." The young coroner's eyes gleamed behind his spectacles as Matthew shared Van Ryn's story. "Would you care to see the evidence left behind? Perhaps you could give an opinion of what caused the damage."

"I certainly should like that," McCaggers agreed.

Obtaining Van Ryn's agreement was a bigger challenge. His surprise at seeing Matthew return with Berry and McCaggers was almost as great as Hudson's, though the latter was pleased to greet his friends. While he chatted with the new arrivals, Van Ryn took Matthew aside. "While I do have a man who can make the repairs they need, I don't fancy strangers

trespassing on my hospitality any more than I like them trespassing on my lands. Naturally, the cost of labor and supplies will be deducted from your fee.”

“Naturally,” Matthew said evenly. “I think you may come to appreciate your new guests before their visit is over. Ashton McCaggers is a natural philosopher, familiar with a variety of beasts of the natural world,” Matthew pictured the skeletons that decorated his friend’s garret lodgings. “He may be able to help identify the beast that has ravaged your property.”

“That beast has no place in the natural world,” Van Ryn averred.

“It might interest you to know,” Matthew went on, “that he possesses among his specimens the tooth of a dragon.” Not long ago, McCaggers had shared with Matthew, Hudson, and Berry a very old and very large fang—the sort that might once have adorned the mouth of a mythical beast.

Van Ryn’s eyes flared with interest. “And what about the girl? What expertise does she have?”

Matthew thought a moment. “She is a gifted artist who could create a representation of the beast from the witnesses’ descriptions.”

Van Ryn burst into a rippling laugh. “We don’t need a picture to help us identify the beast. If you ever saw it, you wouldn’t mistake it for anything else.”

“Even so,” Matthew persisted, “her sketches might give us a better sense of what characteristics are most salient and what measures are needed to protect against the beast.”

“We shall see.” Van Ryn must have been sufficiently intrigued by Matthew touting his friends’ accomplishments because when he reentered the parlor, he was much more hospitable. “I’m told that you, Mr. McCaggers, are a student of nature. Perhaps you would care to see the plants I have specially bred in my conservatory after dinner. I can also show you some other materials I understand Master Corbett has told you about.”

He turned to Berry. “And you, my dear, I’m given to understand, are a fine artist. Might I see some of the drawings you have made during your visit to my valley?” Van Ryn seemed pleasantly surprised by the quality of her charcoal and pastel sketches and the array of colors springing from the pages of her book. He admired one drawing in particular. “Ah! You have captured the view of Dragonwyck from the Tappan Zee. That’s the widest part of the Hudson River,” he explained in response to her wondering

expression. “It looks almost like a lake. You’ve represented the scene quite well for such a hasty sketch. I recognized it at once from my many trips up and down the river. I shall keep this to commemorate your visit.” Berry, to her credit, offered a tight smile and a curtsy rather than any protest. She understood implicitly that her reluctant host was appropriating her art as compensation for entertaining them.

“You, I’m sure, will appreciate the mastery represented by my collection.” Van Ryn turned attention back to himself with a sweep of his arm to include several framed works adorning the back wall. “Consider this etching of an angel appearing to shepherds. My dear wife is particularly fond of it. It was created by a man who I’m sure will one day be recognized as the greatest artist who ever lived: Rembrandt van Rijn. Perhaps he hadn’t as inquisitive a mind as Leonardo, but his concentration on the soul of his sitters makes him understandably more human...” Matthew listened to his host trill the merits of each piece, rolling each R. In Van Ryn’s smiles and the rich flow of his conversation, Matthew caught hints of the charmer who had wooed the young Cornelia.

As Van Ryn pointed out aspects of the various artists’ techniques to Berry, while Hudson and McCaggers looked on from a distance with glazed eyes, Matthew examined the painted faces that peered back at him from within the frames. All sported distinctive high cheekbones, strong noses, and thin, curling lips, from Great-Grandfather with his profusion of white hair, stark against a red background, to bearded Willem Van Ryn in his ruff collar, clutching his staff before a pastoral scene. It was almost as if Dirk Van Ryn had posed in fancy dress for each iteration.

The scion noticed his scrutiny and approached with Berry in tow. “Here we have my own ancestral gallery. My great-grandfather, the first of my family to come to this new world, my grandfather, who built Dragonwyck, and my late father, who increased its prosperity. As you can see, the Van Ryn blood has a certain persistent strength across the generations. I hope to be able to add my own likeness to this gallery—soon.” He looked pointedly from Matthew to Hudson.

Next, Van Ryn summoned Annalies to bring refreshments for the newest arrivals. He maintained his cheerful air throughout the meal and even allowed that Berry might sit with Cornelia in her private parlor until the wagon had been repaired, though he remained firm that Hudson and

Matthew must not speak to her. Matthew smiled to realize the patrol remained ignorant that he had already met the lady the previous night. Once the repast was concluded, Van Ryn insisted that Annalies show Berry upstairs. When she had departed, he stood. "And now, Master McCaggers, I should like to hear your thoughts about my dragon."

McCaggers evinced alarm at the sight of the smashed chest but had no opinion about what might have caused the damage. He was fascinated by the scratched wall panel, however. "I doubt this was done by a wildcat or a bear. The marks are too widespread. See." McCaggers stretched his fingers to match the alignment. "Those animals' claws are close together and the marks they leave are more uniform. These are almost radial. At the same time, I shouldn't attribute them to a reptile either." He pressed his nose against the wood to get a clearer view. "This partial mark off to the side looks like it could have been made by a vestigial toe. Or...a thumb. There are powerful creatures in the Far East called orang-outangs that have five digits on their hands—and feet—like a human, but I don't know that they have claws. I suppose it's possible such an animal brought to this land might have escaped and broken in to the house..." He broke off when he saw Matthew and Hudson's expressions. "You're right. It's too sensational."

"It's not too sensational to think they were made by a human playing a hoax," Hudson muttered.

"I wouldn't like to meet whatever did this in the flesh. I'd say your men were lucky to escape without being attacked," Ashton added.

"Is that typical," Matthew asked. "for a large, powerful animal capable of fighting to run away instead of aggressing?" Such behavior certainly did make it unlikely that a bear was responsible. The scar across his face prickled as grisly memories rose in his mind.

McCaggers pushed his glasses higher up the bridge of his nose. "Perhaps, if the animal were startled. You did say one of the men shot at it. If it had encountered humans before and knew they could injure it, it might have preferred to flee instead of facing danger. It's also possible the creature that did this may not be a predator. Very large deer look fearsome but will still run from confrontation."

"You're not suggesting these gashes were made by antlers," Hudson said in disgust.

"No, they don't look like the work of antlers to me."

“You mean any antlers you've seen before,” Van Ryan corrected. “Why should this creature behave like other animals in nature? It is clearly preternatural. Such strength, such intelligence!” His voice was inflected with awe.

“It would need to eat,” McCaggers said. “Have you seen an increase in kills about the property since this business began? Rabbits or deer torn to shreds? Sheep attacked? Or, supposing it’s really herbivorous, have your farmers’ crops been invaded?”

“No, there have been no such reports. I would know if any crops had been stolen, and I have not heard of increased predation on my lands.”

“The thing could be taking fish from the river,” Matthew proposed. Or consuming its kills altogether, swallowing the bones and fur with the flesh. He shuddered.

“If it's nocturnal, it must go to ground somewhere during the day,” McCaggers mused.

“We searched the grounds today and didn't spot anything like a den or hiding place. I suppose one of the tenants might be keeping it in a cellar or an attic, though they'd be risking their lives to do so,” Matthew said.

“Or perhaps it vanishes into thin air,” Hudson said sarcastically, “and only materializes in this world again when it wants to steal something.” Van Ryn cast a malicious eye at Hudson, but he didn't quake.

The patrol changed the subject. “Now that we've discussed the animal world, would you care to tour of the botanical world? Master Corbett and Master Greathouse have yet to see my indoor garden.”

“That sounds invigorating,” McCaggers said. Hudson looked far less enthusiastic. Matthew didn't give a toss about plants personally but he knew it was best to stay in his host’s good graces. If Van Ryn wanted to boast about his prized petunias—or oleander—then let him.

They followed him into the conservatory, where fading daylight glowed through the surrounding windows. “Stuffy in here,” Hudson remarked as a blast of humid air engulfed them in a soggy embrace upon entering.

“The warm temperature aids the growth of the plants,” Van Ryn said. “Many of them have been imported from gentler climes, which is why I grow them indoors. I’m proud to say I’ve managed to strengthen most of these plants over successive generations. It’s been the work of several years, but it’s enormously satisfying to cultivate new and better strains, to see the

improvement in appearance and increased longevity. I intend to cultivate my family and grow our fortunes in the same manner...”

Matthew’s attention wandered from Van Ryn’s pontificating and McCaggers’s occasional comments as he studied the contents of the conservatory. Small plants and herbs sprouted from planters bordering the walls. A slender tree speckled with yellow flowers stood in the center, a layer of pods and dried blossoms blanketing its roots. Throughout, flowering plants emerged from large pots. Matthew was no horticulture expert and didn’t recognize them all, though he caught occasional names from Van Ryn: laburnum, foxglove, larkspur...

“Here is my latest oleander, a more potent example than any you’re likely to find beyond these walls. Note the unique, deep purple of its flowers.” Van Ryn fondled the petals, a dreamy smile softening his features. “Come closer, McCaggers, so you can catch a whiff of its sweet fragrance.”

“Oh, I had best not. I’m afraid flowers make me sneeze.” McCaggers offered a regretful smile. Van Ryn looked annoyed, but did not press. Matthew didn’t think the potted stalk, with its spindly leaves and star-shaped blossoms, merited so much fuss, though apparently its bold coloring was distinct. He suppressed a yawn and shifted from foot to foot.

“Mynheer,” Sem called softly from the entrance. “The wheelwright’s assistant has delivered the wagon, intact.”

“Excellent!” Van Ryn turned to McCaggers. “I am sorry to cut our tour short, but I know you will want be on your way before nightfall.”

“Yes, we must hurry if we’re to catch the last boat back to the city. Thank you for your hospitality, Mynheer. Your flora is most enviable.” They followed their host down the hall and back to the foyer.

“I didn’t know you were so sweet on flowers, McCaggers,” Hudson said. “The two of you went on and on about them. And here I thought you only knew about dead bodies.”

“I am interested in everything in the natural world,” the coroner said defensively. “And, as it happens, sometimes bodies become dead because of plants. It’s part of my job to be aware of that.”

“It’s a pity your illness keeps you from enjoying the flowers more closely.”

McCaggers grimaced. “I, ah, fibbed about that. I didn’t want to offend our host but I didn’t want to get too close to his plants. Oleander is

poisonous, poisonous to the touch. Van Ryn didn't seem concerned, though perhaps he's built up a tolerance to the toxins from spending so much time with his plants. Everything in that garden is poisonous. What a strange hobby. What kind of person would want to surround himself with such macabre things?"

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Berry was brought downstairs quickly and paid her respects to Van Ryn while the hired horses were hitched back up to the wagon, then she and McCaggers set off to return the repaired rig. Matthew offered to ride with them as far as the river crossing. He wanted to be sure they passed through the estate safely with night coming on, though he presented his accompanying them as a chance to check the grounds one last time.

McCaggers pushed the horses at a fast clip to ensure they would reach their destination in a timely manner. Matthew rode behind, scanning the road from side to side, peering into the shadows beneath the trees and bushes that lined the path. A profusion of heavy clouds dyed the skies a darker shade than they usually were at this time, and the air had grown downright chilly. At least, Matthew told himself the chill creeping up his neck was caused by the turning weather and not by cold eyes studying him from afar.

At last, the trees thinned, revealing the bridge that would lead his friends back to the docks and eventually back to New York. Berry turned in her seat and waved good-bye. Matthew was just raising his own hand to return the farewell when he saw Berry lurch forward and grasp at the bench seat to steady herself. A sonorous cracking, like a giant branch snapping, reverberated through the dusk, and the wagon pitched sharply to the left—and stopped.

"No, not again!" McCaggers jumped down and squatted beside the wheel, but Matthew knew even before he pulled up beside the wagon that a wheel had broken on its opposite side. His friend looked up, stricken, worried eyes magnified behind his lenses. "What should we do? If we run, we just might cover the remaining distance to the dock, but I'd hate to abandon the wagon here."

Before Matthew could offer a suggestion, the night blazed white and the bridge exploded into the same oranges and yellows as the surrounding leaves. The horses reared back and Berry cried out. McCaggers seized the reins and managed to calm the animals, but the three humans watched with sinking stomachs as the bridge over which the wagon had been about to cross crackled and burned. A deep, dull roar, like wheels grinding over a metal bridge in the sky, surrounded them, and fat drops pelted Matthew's face, increasing in rapidity by the second.

"Well, that does it," McCaggers said bleakly, raising his voice over the next peal of thunder. "Now we're stuck here for the night."

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Van Ryn's eyes glittered like broken glass as they took in the three drenched arrivals dripping all over the colored tiles of the foyer. "Master Corbett, I am not running an inn. I realize your friends' misfortune cannot be helped, but you must understand that it cannot become my misfortune, too.

Certainly, Dragonwyck has rooms enough, and I'm sure, between your spare linens and my servants', fresh clothing could be mustered for them for the night, but this will not be offered as a matter of charity."

"The cost of any food they eat and the new repairs to the wagon may all be deducted from my fee," Matthew said through gritted teeth.

Van Ryn smiled. "I am glad we agree on that. I trust this turn of events will not affect your ability to stand watch tonight." Matthew, sopping and shivering, assured him it would not.

After serving a light supper to his houseguests, albeit reluctantly this time, Van Ryan had McCaggers and Berry shown to their separate quarters. McCaggers would be lodged in the same guest wing as Hudson and Matthew, but Berry would sleep at the opposite end of the house in the family wing where the Van Ryns had their rooms. Matthew felt uneasy about this arrangement. Even though he recognized the propriety of keeping Berry near to Cornelia, he would have preferred to be in a position to reach her more quickly if an emergency arose. Then again, he wouldn't be in his room for very long. He and Hudson had agreed it was best to concentrate their efforts on blocking from intrusion the study where the "bait" was kept. The Great One would guard the foyer and stairwells while Matthew

monitored the ground floor corridor near the study. They both confirmed that all the doors of the house were locked and advised the servants to stay in their rooms as a precaution.

Matthew really didn't expect the dragon to make an appearance, though the night certainly lent itself to monsters walking abroad. The storm had grown even more intense after his return to Dragonwyck. Thunder still rumbled across the night, ricocheting through the Catskills. "The little men in the mountains are playing ninepins," Sem had told Matthew when he collected his wet clothes. "That's what people in the village say on nights like this." While he might have found the superstition quaint under other circumstances, it didn't make him smile now. Little men or large monsters, the less of folklore and myths Matthew had rattling around in his head the better.

Speaking of rattling, the windows of the house quivered constantly beneath the strong gusts that swept around the house. The stone walls were sturdy enough, but Matthew wondered how the glass sides of the conservatory would endure through the night. When the windows weren't quaking as if in response to the footsteps of a giant beast creeping about outside, the raindrops slammed against the façade like volleys of buckshot. At a time when he was supposed to be alert for the slightest noise, Mother Nature's increased racket of made this duty more challenging.

The storm also made his watch unpleasantly cold. Matthew had brought only a light cloak to wear on account of the unpleasant heat that prevailed when he had departed for the valley. Now, he shivered beneath its folds as he stepped softly down the passages of the manor house. He was sure he could feel the chill of the flagstones radiating up through his boots and into his calves, though he told himself that was his imagination at work. Cautiously, systematically, he rotated his lantern from side to side, peering into every corner, testing the doorknobs of the various sitting rooms. All had been shut and locked to keep intruders from taking refuge there. So far, nearly two hours into his shift, nothing seemed abroad except the storm.

Another torrent vibrated through the house. Matthew hesitated outside the conservatory and peered through the glass as if he could see through the room to the outer windows and observe the progress of the tempest. Alas, he could see nothing but the silhouettes of the foxglove flowers that grew along the entrance. He thought the branches of the laburnum tree

shuddered. Perhaps there was a draft in the room, or perhaps he merely fancied he saw shadows swirling because he had stared at them for so long. He turned away, rubbing the tip of his nose where it had touched the icy glass. Matthew wondered how Van Ryan's macabre specimens would fare in such weather. The temperature inside the conservatory couldn't be much warmer than outside.

Just ahead, a shadow seemed to detach itself from the corner of the conservatory abutting the hallway. Matthew froze and watched it glide across the floor toward the study. He could have pointed his lantern beam at it and shouted, 'Halt, who goes there?' And he might have let himself feel foolish if the shadow had proven to be an effect of the gale-tossed trees. Instead, he sprinted across the hall, keeping to the balls of his feet so his boots wouldn't squeak. He wanted to get closer, close enough to see what the shape actually was. Matthew needed to look at it, all of it, and answer once and for all what devil was plaguing this house.

He saw the shape pause outside the study door and coalesce, seeming to grow taller. Then, it slipped into the room as if melting through the door. Matthew struggled to swallow, his tongue suddenly dry. Should he call for Hudson? And listen to his scorn if it turned out he was overreacting? Or, should he confront the intruder and do his best to stall it? Tentatively, he took one step forward, then another, pressing his hand over the open lantern shutter, waiting until it was time to spring and illuminate, in full, the face of the Dragon, for that was how he now thought of his opponent.

Now he heard scratching as his quarry clawed at the panel blocking the safe, proving it was more substance than shadow. But the room was too dark for him to make out details of the presence. He could only see an undifferentiated mass rising along the wall. Matthew braced himself in the open doorway. It was time to confront the fiend. He fumbled at his belt for a weapon. What should one use to fight a dragon? He had no magic sword, and a pistol had failed before. He did have a dagger, though he didn't wish to have to be close enough to be able to use it. *I fought once before against a devil using only a knife and survived; I can do it again.*

"Stop right there," Matthew yelled. He released the shutter, and the lantern's beam shot forth like the lightning that had ignited the bridge. The sudden contrast after straining to see through the darkness forced Matthew to squint, but he could still make out the fury of the thing that turned to face

him. It was tall, easily topping seven feet, with dark wings flaring behind it. He glimpsed a flash of claws, five distinct fingers curled and ready to slash. The teeth were there, oh yes, snarling white chompers set in a pale, almost white, flat face. A pair of eyes filled with ink and loathing fixed on him.

The thing hissed, and something heavy flew across the room and smacked the lantern out of Matthew's hand. It cluttered to the ground, its flame dying. Matthew's forefinger, thumb, and wrist smarted as if they had been slammed against a door. It had thrown the panel at him—a prelude to its next attack. “Hudson,” Matthew shouted, squeezing the handle of his knife and drawing back his uninjured hand. Something huge and sturdy like a horse plowed into him, knocking him backward against the doorframe. A great howl filled his ears. The Dragon was on him, tackling him, forcing him to the ground. It would rend him to pieces if he didn't fight back. Matthew grappled with the beast. The thumb and forefinger of his aching hand refused to close in a grip. Matthew gasped as his fingertips brushed soft fur, not scales. Could this be a bear after all? Hot breath steamed down his neck. The thing would tear into his throat in another second!

Matthew thrust up with his blade at the beast's bulk, but felt no connection. The knife didn't sink into his attacker's flesh. It seemed to pass clean through, but then caught on something. He heard a ripping and felt the blade tear loose. *The pelt!* He heard Hudson calling and the sound of heavy boots pounding down the hallway. Matthew wriggled, ducked, tried to wrap his arms around the creature as if to hold it in place, but it scooped him up and thrust him aside. Then, the door was empty, but for Matthew slumped against the jamb. He staggered into the hall, still brandishing his knife, for whatever good it might do him. He spotted Hudson halfway up the corridor. He must have run down the servants' stairs when he heard the cry for help. Hudson aimed his lantern's beam in Matthew's direction and gaped at whatever the light revealed. Matthew could only glimpse the backside of the towering creature lumbering about ten feet ahead of him, its dark wings rippling behind it. Before Hudson could close off its escape, it darted to the left, up the corridor that led to the foyer. Hudson lunged for it, but the creature was already passed.

“Are you hurt?” he asked Matthew.

“No, but I think I may have hurt it.” He rubbed at the side of his blade, searching for blood, and his fingers closed against something soft, the same

consistency of the fur that had covered the creature, caught on the knife point.

They heard a shrill scream and a thump. "Who the devil—" Hudson dashed away in the direction of the cry. Matthew plucked the scrap and stuffed it in his pocket, then followed. They came upon a huddled form sprawled on the floor. When Hudson shone his light on it, he revealed Ashton McCaggers's ashen face. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"I couldn't sleep--the storm. I-I thought I would look for a book," he stammered.

Matthew helped him up. "Which way did it go?"

McCaggers shook his head and gestured toward the dining room. "There, I think."

Hudson brushed past him. "Sit at the foot of the stairs and don't budge." McCaggers, still shocked, nodded and sank down.

Before joining his friend, Matthew paused to pick a candelabrum from an end table and light it from a book of matches lying beside it. Holding it at the level of his eyes so he could have better clarity and something with which to strike back at the creature, if necessary, he strode into the dining room to find Hudson pacing the length of the space, glancing under the table, pulling back the drapes.

"Nothing. It's gone. Blast McCaggers! Either he was wrong about where it went or it got out somehow."

"Are the windows fastened?"

"Yes. There's no water on the floor, so it didn't go out that way. Damn it, why didn't McCaggers stay put? He could have been killed—and he couldn't even slow the thing down long enough for us to catch up to it."

"Did you get a good look at it?" Matthew asked hesitantly.

Hudson looked back at him quizzically. "Did you?"

"I saw it briefly before my lantern went out."

"And?"

Matthew shrugged. "It was large. It snarled at me. And it had black eyes."

"Yes." Hudson winced.

"What other features did you notice?"

"I saw what you saw. It was only a brief glimpse."

"You didn't...notice any horns? Or wings?"

Hudson narrowed his eyes. "Did you?"

"I only had a brief glimpse. Let's hear what McCaggers noticed."

The young coroner startled at their approach, but he visibly relaxed when he recognized his friends. "Was that the thief? The Dragon?"

"Aye, but it's gone now," Hudson said. "It may still be in the house though. Let's go see if it managed to steal the jewel."

"It did get the panel off the wall," Matthew acknowledged, "but I don't know how much further it might have gone."

"If it succeeded in burgling the jewel, you can be the one to tell Van Ryn. I'm surprised he hasn't come down to see what we're on about."

"Perhaps he can't." Dread crawled across Matthew's skin and settled solidly in his belly. "You two check the safe. I'm going upstairs to check on the Van Ryns." *And on Berry.*

"Stay close, McCaggers," Hudson cautioned. He drew his pistol. "You hold the light steady until we can find you a weapon."

Matthew raced up to the landing and turned to the right, down an unfamiliar corridor. A line of doors stretched out to his right; to his left, a pair of low-burning candles in wall sconces and a mirror cast distortions that dazzled his eyes. He didn't know which room was Berry's, but if he had to open each door to find her, he would. The Dragon had no reason to come after her; she carried no valuables. Nevertheless, Matthew wouldn't feel easy until he had confirmed that she was safe. He caught a pale blur reflected in the mirror as of a figure approaching from the opposite end of the hall. He snapped his attention forward to see the image closing in on him in reality.

"Matthew, what brings you up here?" Berry was clad in a long, white, high-neck gown with billowing sleeves. Her hair was loose again and uncovered, forming a curling frame about her curious face.

"You shouldn't be out of your room. I came to warn you that some—" Matthew paused and breathed in to steady himself. "—one is abroad in the house. You should lock yourself in until he's caught." He took her arm and tried to steer her back in the direction whence she'd come, but Berry resisted.

"You're the one who ought to be locked in for safekeeping. You're in greater danger than me." She raised one eyebrow while glaring him down. "Dame Van Ryn told me you are likely to die if you remain in this house."

She said she warned you, but you ignored her. Matthew, why didn't you tell us you were in trouble? You know Ashton and I would gladly help you. Haven't you any care for your safety? Or for your friends' concern?"

He sighed. "Did she also tell you how she came by this premonition? Her 'angels'?"

"A warning is a warning. She may have been trying to tell you, in a roundabout way, of a real threat in this house."

"Or maybe she was trying to warn me away before I could expose the real threat to Dragonwyck. Where is she now?" Berry indicated a room opposite them. "All right. Do you really wish to help me? I'd like you to stay—"

"I won't be locked in my room," Berry protested.

"No, I'd like you to stay with Dame Van Ryn and keep an eye on her. Look after her, that is, and help her should any danger come your way. You're strong and tough-minded. She is sickly and not quite right in the head."

Berry's eyes widened. "Where did you get that idea? From talking to her husband? I spent several hours visiting with her today. Cornelia is a kind, thoughtful woman. She generously offered me one of her own nightgowns to wear. She's also highly intelligent and well-read, particularly about theology, though she only shared her views on the subject after I invited her to do so. She reciprocated by asking my opinion, too. I've learned more from talking with Cornelia Van Ryn than I have from reading most books. On the other hand, I spent an hour listening to Mynheer Van Ryn prattle on about himself, his illustrious antecedents, and his collection of priceless treasures. I wouldn't put it past him to try to make his wife seem small and negligible and to build himself up as a martyr by contrast."

"You and Hudson should talk," Matthew commented. "I admit Dame Van Ryn is very charming—"

"You spoke to her last night. Did she strike you as mad?"

"She was rather high-strung."

"As is natural for someone who might fear for your life. Matthew, you visited an asylum not long ago. Did she behave as those poor souls?"

"Berry, she thinks she can talk to angels."

"What of it? The vicar of my village claimed God spoke to him, usually while he was planning his sermon for the next Sabbath. I expect Rev.

Fenclaren also fancies he hears holy voices. Does that make either of them mad? Van Ryn is probably envious that the heavenly host passed over the great and glorious patroon for a mere woman.” She blew out a puff of hot air.

“Let’s defer the question of Dame Van Ryn’s sanity to another time. Will you keep her company? Two standing side by side is better in a crisis than one.”

“Very well,” Berry agreed.

“Then let’s get you both inside where it’s safe. Why were you wandering about at this hour anyway?” Matthew asked.

Berry’s face brightened. “I was headed to the conservatory. I was lying awake, listening to the wind and thinking—and I had an idea I wanted to verify. Ashton told me that Van Ryn grows a number of poisonous plants. I wanted to see if he keeps nightshade. Women sometimes use it as a beauty aid to make their pupils larger so their eyes look more comely.”

Matthew hoped Berry didn’t feel compelled to use the stuff. He thought her eyes looked quite nice just as they were. “But nightshade is a poison.”

“It is if ingested, but applying it to the eye creates a different effect. You said that everyone who has seen this dragon thief reported that it had large black eyes.”

“Indeed.” Matthew suppressed a shudder at the memory of his own sighting.

“That might have been caused by an animal—or even a person—coming in contact with nightshade.” Berry beamed. “A few drops from a broken stem at eye level, or a hand wiped across the face after touching the leaves and berries could be the makings of a monster.”

“Possibly.” The idea merited further investigation. An unsettling implication gnawed at the edges of Matthew’s thoughts, but he drove it back and rapped lightly at Dame Van Ryn’s door. She opened it immediately as though she had been expecting him, which she might well have been doing if she’d been forewarned of her visitors’ arrival by divine messengers—or if she had been eavesdropping on their conversation in the hall.

“It’s returned, and now you’ve seen it. I can see the traces in your eyes.” She pressed Matthew’s hand and patted it. “Come in and sit down. You look as if you could use a moment to catch your breath.”

“No, I can’t spare the time. I must find Hudson and McCaggers. And the intruder.”

Cornelia shook her head slowly. “It’s no intruder.”

“Do you mean that it comes from within Dragonwyck? Why didn’t you say so yesterday?”

“You weren’t ready to hear. You wouldn’t have believed me then.”

“I’m finding it hard to believe now. Where does the thing hide? This is a large house, but it doesn’t seem large enough to contain what I saw.”

“It comes and goes,” Cornelia said evasively.

Matthew tamped down on his irritation. “As to that, I need you to tell me truthfully whether you know of any passages or hidden rooms in this house that the thing could be using to evade us. Your husband denied anything like that existed. I swore we had the brute cornered in the dining room, only to find no trace of it.”

“Dirk was right. I know of no hidden exits. There’s only the kitchen passage.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a covered walkway leading from the dining room to the kitchen. The kitchen isn’t a part of the house, you know; that would pose a fire hazard. Instead, it’s a separate structure constructed at the rear. The servants carry our food to the house using a discreet passage. It opens into the corridor just outside the dining room. When meals aren’t being served, the entrance is covered by a curtain.”

Matthew’s frustration rose. “Why did no one tell me about this?” That was surely the explanation for how the Dragon had disappeared.

“Why, because kitchen passages are a common feature. Everyone knows about them.”

“Everyone who knows anything about cooking, that is,” Berry added, looking back at Matthew sympathetically. She knew that when he didn’t sup with her and her grandfather, he took his meals at the tavern.

Matthew squirmed beneath their matching, pitying gazes, feeling like an ignoramus. From the corridor, he heard Hudson calling. “Thank you for your help, madame. I must resume the search. Please, both of you, remain in this room for safety’s sake.”

“Be careful, Matthew,” Berry cautioned, shutting the door behind him. He waited just long enough to hear the lock click before turning to rejoin

Hudson and McCaggers. They were already hurrying to meet him from the other end of the passage.

“Van Ryn is gone,” Hudson announced. “His room has been ransacked.”

“Show me.”

A partially-open door revealed the shambles of a once-grand room. The fine velvet curtains that had hung around the bed had been shredded and pulled from their rings. The mattress had been hollowed out by vicious claws. Piles of feathers oozed out and onto the floor like the intestines from a trapped rat. A row of five deep, horizontal scratches lined one wall, illustrating how the Dragon had crossed from the door to the bed in a fury. But had it caught the man lying in the bed? Matthew saw no blood despite the other signs of struggle.

“We came up to report on the situation,” Hudson explained. “The necklace was still in the safe. You managed that much, Moonbeam. I thought Van Ryn would want to hold on to it himself for safekeeping, but it looks like our dragon went after the patrol when it failed to get his treasure.”

“It looks to me more like it found the room empty and destroyed it in a fit of frustration,” Matthew pondered. If the Dragon had fled by the kitchen passage as he now suspected, when would it have come back to tear apart the room? Matthew had been just a few doors away talking with Berry and Cornelia in the interim. At least one of them would have heard the commotion. “This is damage for the sake of damage, a beast lashing out in a desire to punish Van Ryn. I think it happened before the attempted theft.” He gestured to the floor, strewn with eviscerated bedding, but otherwise clean. “There’s no blood, and there should be because I wounded the Dragon in our struggle.” So saying, he withdrew the fragment of fur he had stowed in his pocket.

McCaggers took one look at the dark red hue and pressed a corner of his nightshirt to his mouth. “You wounded it something fierce, Matthew.”

“No, this isn’t blood.” Matthew rubbed the soft texture, feeling an answer to the mystery slide into place.

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Matthew patted the fabric-covered walls until he found where the curtain began. “Aha.” He pushed it aside to reveal a door.

“I already tried that,” Hudson objected. “It was locked.”

Matthew tested the knob and confirmed this was the case. “Still, though it may be locked now, I’m sure the Dragon used this passage to escape. If we can’t follow it, we’ll have to circle outside to corner it.” Hudson grimaced and McCaggers looked crestfallen.

“Do you think the Dragon carried off Van Ryn? Is that why it had his robe?”

“Not exactly.” Matthew set the candelabrum on an end table near the passage door and set off down the hall and out the front entrance into the storm.

He pulled his cloak up to the tips of his ears and pressed his tricorn low on his head, but the wind launched the rain at him in near-horizontal streams, dousing him as readily as if he had stood under a waterfall. His flimsy cloak was soon soaked through, his hair, neck, and shirt drenched in kind. Deep puddles surrounded the mansion. Matthew sloshed through them, feeling water spill over the tops of his boots, chilling his feet, before he finally spotted a small structure about a hundred yards behind the manor house. He tried the door but it was locked.

“Open up, please! Is anyone in there?” He rapped on the entrance, wondering if anyone stayed in this building and if they would be able to hear him over the pounding rain.

“Matthew, what is this about? Have you gone mad, too?” Hudson growled, approaching behind him.

The door popped open a crack and a bleary-eyed woman in a plain cotton cap peeked out at him. She quickly drew behind the door, only showing her eyes over the edge. “Oo are you?”

“We are guests of the patroon, guarding the house on his instruction. I don’t wish to alarm you, but I have reason to believe an intruder may have entered the kitchen. Please, may we come in and search?”

The kitchen maid, for surely that must be who she was, blocked the doorway. She still looked uneasy. Perhaps she thought they were robbers attempting a ruse.

“May we please come in from the storm? We mean you no harm, I promise. We surprised a thief in your master’s study and pursued him, but

we lost him near the dining room. I think he used the connecting passage to reach the kitchen. He may be in there with you now. Your mistress specifically recommended that I investigate this space.” That was nearly true enough.

The mention of Cornelia softened the maid’s resistance. Finally, she stepped back, allowing enough space for the three men to enter. “Look if you like, but it's just me here.”

“You're alone?” Hudson asked.

She sniffed. “No one else would choose to sleep here. I got to get the fires going in the morning so it's best if I stay near them at night. At least it's warm.”

“Have you seen or heard anyone in or around this building tonight?” asked Matthew.

“None but you three.”

“Have you seen your master tonight?”

“Here? No. I’d know who had been here, wouldn’t I? I sleep here, don't I? I woke up when you came around.”

Matthew inspected the structure. The kitchen was not as large as he might have supposed, considering the amount of food the servants might be called upon to prepare when the Van Ryns were entertaining. The large center section was about eight feet by twelve feet in size. A large brick hearth made up one corner. A cutting and preparation board took up one side and a pair of basins filled the other. A door was set in the fourth wall. “Does this lead back into the house?” Matthew asked.

“Yes.”

“So, there are two doors, one at either end of the passage? Are they both kept locked?”

“Not to my knowing.”

Matthew reached for the knob, then reconsidered. “You'd best stay back,” he warned the maid. He searched the room for likely weapons and finally selected a heavy pan hanging over the range. “Take this,” he told McCaggers, “in case you need to defend yourself.”

“Are you serious, Matthew?” He weighed the pan in his hands, looking nonplussed. “Can't I have a knife at least? I can acquit myself with a blade well enough, but this...”

“I'm sure you'll make good use of it.” Satisfied that his companions were sufficiently prepared, Matthew tugged open the door and revealed a covered passage with a dirt floor. Little could be seen beyond the first few feet. Hudson entered first, carrying the lantern and pistol. Matthew strained his ears for the sound of breathing or any footsteps besides their own, but heard nothing. It was, therefore, a shock when the Dragon loomed out of the darkness, hissing and snarling.

The maid screamed, and McCaggers pushed her against the wall, shielding her with his body. Hudson had time to fire off one shot before the Dragon sank its claws into the Great One's shoulders and hurled him across the remaining length of the passage. Hudson struck the second door leading into the great house and it gave way beneath his hefty bulk. He crumpled atop the breached barrier and the curtain floated down to cover him.

The Dragon now turned its distorted sneer and stygian gaze on Matthew. He gulped and tried to find his voice and his courage. “Mynheer! Dirk Van Ryn!”

The creature barreled toward him, heedless of his words. Matthew drew his knife again, ready to take another stab at the Dragon, but a single swipe of its clawed hand threw stars across his vision and slammed Matthew into the dirt wall. It departed down the tunnel and out the scullery door unobstructed. Matthew was torn between pursuing it and determining if Hudson needed help. He chose the latter.

“Are you all right?” He knelt beside the fallen man.

Hudson sat up slowly, kicking away the curtain. He cringed as he shifted his leg. “I'm in one piece. That thing caught me off guard. If it hadn't been for my injuries, I'd have stood against it easily. If I'd had both hands free, I could have taken him.”

“The important thing is that you're all right,” Matthew said, satisfied that his friend's only wounds were to his pride. “I expect we'll have another chance to apprehend the Dragon before the night is over.”

He reclaimed the candelabrum and turned to the kitchen maid, who was sobbing and shaking. “Come into the house, miss. You'll be more secure here.” McCaggers helped her step over the door, which was still intact despite being completely torn from its hinges.

“It-it picked you up—like a doll,” the woman stammered in disbelief, looking from Hudson to the open passageway. “That-that-that was the

Dragon?” Matthew nodded.

“Matthew,” McCaggers said slowly, “why was it wearing Van Ryn’s robe?”

“Because,” Matthew said, “it *is* Van Ryn.”

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After the maid had been secured in an upstairs bedroom, Matthew led the way to the conservatory, sharing Berry’s insight along the way. He threw open the doors to the glass-walled room and played the candlelight over the flowers and tree. “Look around, McCaggers. Do you see any nightshade?”

The coroner paused between the laburnum tree and a smaller plant. “Yes, it’s right here, with the dark berries. They’re often mistaken for edible fruit, to the detriment of whoever eats them. Our Berry is correct that the juices can dilate the pupils. They may also cause distorted thinking, even hallucinations. One might think others around him are monsters—or that he himself is a monster.”

“Would the plant cause violent behavior, or heightened strength, or cause a law-abiding man to steal?”

“If Van Ryn is taking his own things, he’s not stealing them,” Hudson pointed out. “Besides, in this land, the patroon is a law unto himself.”

“All of these plants affect the mind and senses in various ways. In combination, those effects could be enhanced.” McCaggers stepped back and swept his arm in a circle to encompass the entire conservatory. His hand struck a small pot on the edge of a low shelf behind him and knocked it to the floor. The pot exploded, scattering soil everywhere. “Oh! Oh, my...” He knelt beside the mess and stood up holding something that glittered.

Matthew came closer and watched McCaggers brush the soil away to reveal a diamond pendant on a gold chain. The problem solver plunged his hand into one of the remaining pots, probing and prodding the dirt until he felt something ridged and hard, like a pebble. He wriggled the object out. First, he saw a smooth black rim, but as he dusted away the dirt, Matthew revealed a sculpted white bust engraved against the dark backdrop: Cornelia’s missing cameo. Hudson followed his example, dumping out the

contents of a nearby planter. Mingled with the earth and roots were a series of coins.

“He buried his treasures here, in his lair,” Matthew marveled. A frisson raced up between his shoulders as he reflected on how accurate Dame Van Ryn’s words had proven to be.

“Why would Van Ryn hire you to catch the thief if he is the thief?” McCaggers asked. “He didn’t behave like someone who wanted to be caught when we discovered him in the scullery.”

“No, he didn’t, and he seemed genuinely distressed about the thefts. I think...I think he may not be aware of what he’s done,” Matthew said slowly. “Perhaps, he was acting as a sleepwalker. The thefts always occur late at night. Van Ryn frequently works in the conservatory late at night, so he might have been drawn here by habit. Nobody who saw him walking the halls at any hour would question the patroon’s presence. If he were also acting under the influence of these damnable plants ... McCaggers, just what would the poisons in the nightshade or the oleander do to a man in small, regular doses?”

“They would make him drowsy for one thing—and perhaps make a sleepwalker more likely to act.”

Hudson cast a suspicious eye around the conservatory. “Remind me how it was that old Van Ryn died.”

“His heart failed,” Matthew recalled. “He was very old.”

McCaggers bit his lower lip. “Some of these plants would cause heart failure. Take that nightshade, or even the oleander.”

Matthew sighed. “It would be impossible to prove at this point.”

McCaggers looked uneasy. “I don’t suppose he would have done that in his sleep?”

Matthew shook his head. “No. We must consider that we are not only facing a violent thief but a possible murderer.”

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“You said that your husband wasn’t grieved when his father died. When was that, again?”

“Two, three years ago. And Dirk was not exactly glad, though he seemed ...satisfied. He was impatient to become patroon and have full

control of Dragonwyck. Father Willem was very old, almost twice as old as his own father had been. Dirk used to tell me, 'He can't last forever.' On the day Willem died, when he was laid out for viewing, Dirk smiled at me and said, 'What did I tell you, my dear?' It-it was a tasteless remark."

"How impatient do you think he was to inherit his position?"

Shadows flooded her eyes and she locked her hands over her stomach in a protective gesture. "I don't care for where your questions are leading."

"Nevertheless," said Matthew, "we must follow that trail to its likeliest conclusion." Berry glanced between him and the distressed lady with furrowed brow. She seemed to sense the ultimate destination of this interrogation, for she stepped closer to Cornelia, offering wordless support.

"What was your father-in-law like toward the end?" asked Hudson.

"He was very weak. He had stopped eating. Willem claimed to have no appetite, but I think his stomach was too weak to hold food. Whenever I could persuade him to take a little gruel, he would spit it up soon after. He was tired all the time. He kept his eyes closed, even in daylight. He said that they hurt." Matthew glanced at McCaggers, who nodded. These were all symptoms consistent with poisoning.

"Madam, I'm sorry to say this, though I must do so for your own safety: we believe that your husband has been using his plants for malicious ends. Further, we believe he has himself fallen prey to their poisons. That is, we think that prolonged exposure to his plants has altered him. If absorbed through the skin, their toxins could cause characteristics that have been reported in the Dragon, such as the distorted facial appearance, the black eyes, and the enhanced strength." Matthew locked eyes with Berry and nodded, acknowledging the truth of her suspicions.

"These poisons have the capacity to affect the mind as well as the body," McCaggers elaborated, "to the point that your husband on occasion loses all sense of himself and robs himself unawares, striking out against others in the process." Cornelia bowed her head but said nothing in Dirk's defense.

"You don't look surprised," Hudson observed.

"I have been married to my husband for five years. I know him far more intimately than you. No, I think I knew his true nature all along, even if I didn't let myself know it. My angels tried to warn me. He was impatient to

create his legacy. He wanted to make his mark on the estate. He wanted to raise up a family of strapping sons to follow his path. But he couldn't become master of Dragonwyck soon enough, and when I didn't give him a son after the first year of our marriage, he grew angry with me. He suggested that I had too much excitement in my life and needed to withdraw from society to calm myself so I could be more receptive. That was when he began confining me to my room. He discouraged me from making or receiving calls. 'Who would you call on, my dear?' he'd say. 'The farmers' wives? You are superior to them. I'll not have my wife brought low by the company of peasants.'"

Berry bridled on the other woman's behalf. "What about the other gentry?"

"There are no families within miles of the estate whose status could compare with the Van Ryns', in Dirk's opinion. Making the effort to travel farther afield might exhaust me further, and so I learned to keep company with myself. I used to pray for a child, all those lonely days and nights. Dirk didn't mind that I spoke to the heavens then. But when they spoke back to me, he called me mad. That became the new reason why I should be isolated: I might speak too freely about my unwomanly ideas and offend others with my display of knowledge. So, no, I am not surprised that my husband is a monster. I have seen enough of holiness to recognize its opposite."

She turned on McCaggers. "You think my husband's plants have corrupted him, but you're mistaken. If anything, they have made him more himself than ever. Achieving his life's ambition to be patroon wasn't enough to satisfy Dirk; he covets more, and now he is pursuing that desire for riches as you have seen, while his inhibitions are stripped away. The vision of the gargantuan beast is his image of his true self. He sees himself as something beyond the common man, something fierce and powerful that no one would dare challenge. And his will is immense. It is so forceful that he can impose his personal image onto others and make them see him as he wants to be seen."

Hudson grunted and looked unconvinced. Matthew couldn't blame him. The prospect sounded mad. And yet ... it wasn't so very different from his own past encounter with another man who had the power to make others see what he wanted them to see and believe what he wanted them to

believe. Though in that case, the victims had been in the altered state, not the mischief-maker.

And yet...

What Dame Van Ryn was describing wasn't terribly different from what Matthew himself had admitted to Hudson. The sightings of the Dragon were similar enough to what he had previously experienced—similar, but not the same. Could one as assertive as Dirk Van Ryn somehow use his mind to overpower others? Farmer Van de Kamp had said his image of the Dragon came to him as if it had been put in his mind. Even Matthew, when he had first seen Van Ryn, had thought him to be a towering presence. Van Ryn had been fully alert and cognizant then. If his powerful mind and will were enhanced and distorted by poisons, what visions might he project?

“Monster or man, we must take him into custody now,” Matthew said. “Please, please promise me you and Berry will remain in here with the door locked until one of us comes back to tell you the danger has passed.”

Dame Van Ryn’s mouth twisted in a deprecating smile. “A locked door is small protection against one who holds the keys to the castle.”

“We’ll barricade the door with the furniture,” Berry vowed. “Please be careful, Matthew. Van Ryn is no common criminal. If he’s as affected as you say, you won’t be able to reason with him.”

“I wasn't planning on reasoning with him,” Hudson affirmed, cracking his knuckles and forming a fist.

Cornelia stepped forward and cupped Matthew's face in her hands. Her touch was soft and cool and as soothing as a cup of tea to his strained nerves. “Go with God, my child. May the angels guide your steps and catch you when you fall.” Matthew stepped back. His cheeks felt warm, not from embarrassment, but from a kind of focused charge, like the lightning that still crackled in the air outside.

“Let's go.” Hudson led Matthew and Ashton into the corridor while Berry locked up behind them. “McCaggers, you take the upper level. If any of the servants are awake, tell them to stay in their rooms. We don’t need anyone else wandering around putting themselves at risk.” He nodded and hoisted his frying pan in salute, then disappeared up the servants’ stairs. Matthew approved of the assignment. Van Ryn was unlikely to raid the servants’ quarters in search of riches, so upstairs was probably the safest place to be. McCaggers would be out of harm’s way but could still feel like

he was contributing to the effort. “Matthew, stay on this level and guard the stairs and the ladies. I'll take the downstairs and fight him off in case he tries to return through the kitchen.”

Alone, Matthew wandered onto the landing. He stood at the top of the left-hand staircase, waving his candelabrum into the shadows. Nothing stirred. The staircase to the right was also vacant. He turned and walked quickly down the hall to the door opening onto the servants' stairwell. Matthew threw it open and shone his light into the narrow, box-like space. No dragon here. He returned down the corridor, peering to the left and the right for any movement. He strained his senses for the sound of a creaking door or cautious footstep.

Back on the landing, he paced its short length. Matthew felt restless and tense. Even though he was patrolling the area assigned to him, he felt as if he weren't doing enough.

He turned down the guest corridor, seeing only one sealed door after another.

He returned to the landing. Nothing on the stairs to the left, nothing on the stairs to the right.

He leaned over the railing. The chandelier hung above him, a dull mass in the darkness. Below, in the flickers from the wall sconces, he could make out the outlines of tables and statuary in the foyer. It was too dark to see the pattern of the tiles. Matthew could tell that nothing was moving, however. Not even Hudson. Perhaps he was back by the conservatory. Matthew sighed, wondering where Van Ryn could be and when or if he would make his next appearance.

“You seem to be making yourself quite at home in my house.” The cold, piercing voice lanced through the darkness behind him, as if summoned. Matthew spun around, realizing too late the significance of Dame Van Ryn's warning. Locked doors, be they barriers between the house and the outdoors or the entrances to seemingly deserted rooms, posed no hindrance to a man who had the means to unlock them. Hadn't Matthew watched him pass effortlessly into the study earlier? The patrol must have been hiding in one of the bedrooms on this floor all this time.

Dirk Van Ryn emerged from the shadows, at first nothing more than a black silhouette darker than the darkness behind him. As he approached the candlelight, the pale streaks in his hair emerged first, standing out against

the gloom. With a little imagination and a lot of fear, they could be taken for curling horns. Van Ryn's eyes, usually a pale, piercing blue were dark now, the pupils enlarged—to see better in the darkened house, or because they were infused with nightshade? They seemed to grow larger and darker as Matthew looked on. The fabric of the patroon's maroon robe swirled behind him like folded wings fluttering impatiently. Wings! One wing was dragging, the other about to spread...

Matthew rubbed his eyes and looked again. This time, he spotted a rent along the side of the robe where his dagger had pierced the garment. He put his hand on the hilt of his knife, preparing to draw it in defense if the madman came closer.

"I heard you ordering my wife to stay in her room before you sent your man to order my servants to do the same. You were hired to assist me, and yet you seem to think you're in charge."

"Mynheer Van Ryn, I must ask you to remain where you are."

"Oh, you think to order me about now?" His lips peeled back into a snarl and his teeth gleamed in a mocking smile.

"I am asking you to stand back for the moment, sir. I believe you have been poisoned, unwittingly, by the plants you tend. For your own health and the well-being of the household, I think it best that you retire to your room until the dosage has worn off."

"Oh, do you now?" Van Ryan took a step forward. He looked larger now, and not just because of his proximity. "You think you know what's best? You Englishmen come here in the guise of my guests. You sneak reinforcements under my roof and turn my household against me. You mean to confine me to my room on the pretext that I am unwell. Soon, Corbett, you'll be telling everyone that I am mad. And then, you'll set yourself up in my place as the patroon of Dragonwyck and claim its riches for yourself." He lowered his head like a bull about to charge. "That candelabrum is a family heirloom, brought all the way from the Old Country. It is made of solid silver, far too precious for the likes of you..."

Van Ryn advanced, seeming to swell as he came nearer. His image blurred, and suddenly no man was standing before Matthew, but an eight-foot-tall creature of darkness, crowned by horns, with wings spreading, knife-sharp teeth bared, and black eyes blazing like coals in the center of a fire. Matthew blinked and rubbed at his eyes. It's a vision, not reality!

When he opened his eyes again, it was to see a deranged Dirk Van Ryn, his graying hair wild, pupils dilated to fill his eye-sockets, face snarling, and robe flapping lunging at him. In the instant of Matthew's distraction, the patroon had taken the opportunity to rush across the landing and was now right before him. And this time, the murderer was wide awake.

"Get back!" Matthew drew his dagger and simultaneously swung the heavy candelabrum in his other hand. It struck Van Ryn's shoulder, but the blow did nothing to slow him. One hand locked its long, thin, iron fingers around the wrist of Matthew's knife hand while the other seized the candelabrum and, instead of wrenching it from Matthew's grasp, forced it across his throat. Matthew felt his pulse pound against the chilly, precious silver. His vision blurred again, blackening. Matthew squirmed, kicked, tried to twist his blade toward Van Ryn. The patroon danced out of his reach, spinning Matthew around to keep him off-balance. His fingers grew numb and he heard the knife clatter on the floor. His attacker's beastly sneer and dead eyes loomed into his view, then faded, while around him, the ceiling and walls blended into a tunnel of shadows.

From those shadows, an angel emerged, clad in a white gown and wearing a corona of flame—and wielding a frying pan.

"Get away from him!" Berry swung her weapon in a vicious arc. Her aim was better than Matthew's. The sound of metal smacking the back of Van Ryn's head and shoulders was loud enough to rival the storm. The impact drove him forward, even as he continued to turn with Matthew, and they both hit the banister that bordered the landing.

Something cracked, and it wasn't thunder.

Van Ryn howled as the banister gave way, and released Matthew, but not the candelabrum. Still clutching his priceless family treasure with to his chest with both hands, the Dragon fell backwards from the second floor to the stone floor below. A deluge of raindrops drowned the noise of his impact.

Pulled by the patroon's momentum and still groggy from lack of air, Matthew also slipped forward. He heard Berry cry out for him and felt a gentle touch brush his back as if she had tried to catch and pull him back from the edge, but it was too late. Matthew's free hands clawed desperately at the air as his feet left the ground. For a moment, he was weightless, then gravity greedily snatched at him.

His searching fingers seized onto something cold and rigid, halting his descent. His body twisted and swung, legs kicking and stretching for purchase. Denied a solid rest, Matthew clutched even tighter to his hanging lifebuoy. He saw Berry standing on the landing, staring at him in amazement and fear. And he saw below him a crumpled maroon form with an even darker substance spreading away across the inlaid tiles. Matthew wrenched his gaze up and back to Berry, to the landing and safety. How to get from here to there?

Hudson burst into the foyer and saw his predicament. “Matthew! Dammit, hang on, boy!” He pushed a small table toward the center of the floor, trying to align it with Matthew’s position, but he soon realized it would be insufficient to break his fall. “Help me take down the drapes,” he called to Berry, “and form a rope.” Matthew thought that also seemed like a far-fetched solution. His body jolted and he looked up with icy dismay to see the long chain suspending the chandelier slowly pulling away from the ceiling. A stream of plaster sprinkled his eyes, burning and blinding him, but he couldn’t afford to wipe his eyes this time. Nor could he afford to wait for his friends to rescue him.

Matthew locked his ankles together and swung deliberately, pumping his legs back and forth like a pendulum with a focus on getting as close to the landing as possible. If he could time his motion properly, perhaps he could swing back onto the upper floor. He watched the broken rail recede, then rise, closer this time, just a bit closer...

The ceiling groaned in defeat, surrendering its hold on the grand chandelier and its problem-solving passenger, forcing Matthew, in turn to release his own hold. Once more, he was weightless, grasping, sinking as his friends’ voices rose in denial and despair at the sight of him falling short of the landing.

Once more, Matthew’s windmilling hands hit something solid: the railing of the stairs rather than the landing itself. He tried to hold onto the baluster, but his injured forefinger and thumb were still too weak to fully close. Matthew pressed his feet against the side of the staircase and tried to climb up before his grip slipped, but he had already spent the last of his luck. He watched, numb, as his hands parted from the handrail and his lifeline retreated from him. Then, a terrific pain ripped through his body. An explosion erupted in his head and waves of fire clambered up his spine.

When the twin conflagrations of agony collided, darkness filled Matthew's senses.

*

"Make sure all the wheels are solid and tight. I don't want another breakdown on the way home." Hudson's strident voice carried through the open doorway, piercing Matthew's consciousness like a fishhook and hauling him back up into awareness. The racket of the wheelwright's hammer and saw making final repairs reverberated through his skull, which began to vibrate in kind. Matthew grimaced as additional aches fell into line behind it. The return of full cognizance brought with it an awareness of where he was and remembrance of all that had happened.

Berry had disregarded instructions to stay in the safe room, which was fortunate, because it was the only reason Matthew was still alive to feel his many pains. "I had a terrible premonition that you were alone and in danger," she had confided. "Cornelia told me it was the voice of God and that I should heed it and go to you." Whether delusion or foresight, her feeling had paid off handsomely because Ashton McCaggers had put his frying pan weapon to the best possible use by doubling back to where the women were sequestered and offering it to Berry for protection—Matthew's, as it turned out.

Falling from the stairs, a shorter distance than from the landing, had wrenched his back and planted a lump in his scalp. Nevertheless, Matthew was still better off than the patroon, who had definitively been crushed by the falling chandelier, if striking the hard floor hadn't been enough to do for him. By the time Matthew had regained his senses, the entire household was roused and in a panic, save for Cornelia Van Ryn, who looked curiously serene. She had said prayers for her husband's soul, but didn't seem aggrieved by her widowhood. "I've told the servants that you fell and Dirk perished in a skirmish with the Dragon, and that the dread beast has vanished for good. Thank you for delivering us, Master Corbett."

She had summoned the local physician, an elderly man who spoke only Dutch, to see to Matthew's injuries, and through Cornelia, he had pronounced that a few days of bedrest were sure to set him right. Dame Van Ryn had invited Matthew and Hudson to remain as her guests until he felt

well enough to ride out, but Dragonwyck's comfortable mattresses weren't enough to tempt him to remain in the imposing old mansion, even if it were now dragon-free. Next, Dame Van Ryn had offered the family carriage to transport him home in comfort, but the seats weren't long enough to accommodate Matthew's supine form. Instead, Berry and McCaggers would take the carriage and Matthew would lie in the back of their hired wagon while Hudson drove it to the docks.

And still, Dame Van Ryn's gratitude was not exhausted. "She's paid the rest of our fee in full, with a bonus to compensate us—well, you—for pain and suffering," Hudson had shared. "I guess she's glad to be rid of her fiend of a husband." Matthew didn't think 'glad' was quite the right word. Cornelia looked...satisfied. Her face, drawn and pallid before, now sported a radiant freshness. Freedom suited her.

A heavy tread crossed the foyer to where Matthew lay on his makeshift stretcher—the erstwhile door to the kitchen passage. He opened his eyes to the sight of Hudson's dirty boots. "The damn thing is finally fixed, so I've been assured. I stowed our baggage already and tied up our horses so they can walk behind the wagon. Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Matthew asserted through gritted teeth.

"Very well. We'll get you moved and make it quick. McCaggers!" Hudson called. The slim man appeared from wherever he'd been lurking, possibly in the conservatory, where Van Ryn's accursed plants were being systematically uprooted in search of the missing treasures. Earlier, a painted canvas wrapped in cloth had been discovered planted beneath the laburnum tree. Dirk VanRyn's likeness could now finally take its place in the hall with his forefathers, provided anyone wanted to hang his portrait for posterity.

"You take his feet, I'll get his head," Hudson instructed. "Be my eyes." McCaggers squatted, smiled reassuringly at Matthew, and slipped his hands beneath the door on either side of Matthew's ankles. "Have you got a strong grip? All right then, up we go." Matthew felt his body rise, the wood scraping against his back slightly. He grimaced as he was carried toward the exit.

"A little further to the left," McCaggers directed. "No, left. I mean my left."

"Agh!" A wave of flame and ache rippled through Matthew's body as the top of the door collided with the door frame, causing him to clench his

eyes shut.

Hudson huffed. "This won't work. Back up, McCaggers, turn. I'll do the steering." Matthew felt himself rotate and start to slide. He pressed his fingertips against the door as his journey resumed.

"Back up straight, just like that. Careful stepping over the sill."

Matthew's legs tilted up as Ashton moved in response. "Are you carrying me out feet foremost?"

Hudson paused. "It would seem so. Hm. Perhaps Lady Van Ryn isn't so crazy after all."

Matthew Corbett exited Dragonwyck as foretold, and passed down the long drive to the newly repaired wagon. He heard pattering footsteps approaching, then Berry's eager voice.

"Oh, Matthew, are you in much pain? Here, take my shawl to cushion you." A warm hand cupped his neck and another tucked something soft between his skull and the rough wood. "I'm afraid they'll have to take you the long way around to the river crossing. The bridge is a complete loss. I overheard some of the men talking about plans to rebuild it. One has suggested a new design for something bigger and better than before. A covered bridge."

Hudson grunted. "What's the use of that? Sounds frivolous."

"Travelers could take shelter on nights like last night. Moreover, a covered bridge would be sturdier than what existed before. If lightning hit such a structure, the roof might ignite but the bridge itself might be saved. Besides, a covered bridge sounds picturesque. I'd like to make a sketch of it when it's done."

"I didn't think you'd be in such a hurry to come back here."

"Well...I don't have to come back as soon as it's built."

"Here we are, Matthew," McCaggers announced. "We'll ease you down for a moment and do what we can to make the wagon more comfortable for you. You'll be out of here soon." Ashton and Hudson gently lowered the injured problem solver, but even the slight impact with the ground made the bones in his spine groan. Berry's shawl spared his head some of the pain, and her presence did a good deal more to ease his discomfort. She knelt beside Matthew to keep him company while the others shifted supplies and rolled out blankets loaned by Dame Van Ryn.

"When will Dame Van Ryn be leaving?"

“She won't. Dragonwyck is her home, and it's safe enough now.”

“She'll remain here alone?”

Berry shook her head. “She told me she is planning to write to her youngest brother and invite him to live with her and manage the estate. Also —” Berry hesitated. “—she's expecting at least one more person to arrive by the spring.”

“Oh. In that case, congratulations to her.” That would account for Cornelia's recent illness and new robustness. Matthew hoped the next patrol of Dragonwyck would stay far away from oleander and his ilk.

“Matthew... would you like me to ride back with you? I would be happy to help tend to you while Hudson drives.”

Matthew considered having Berry's restorative company during the trip to the river crossing. Then, he considered what her recent history with wagons had been like. “Thank you, but I think it's best if you ride with Ashton in the Van Ryn coach.” He hastened to relieve the hurt that flared in her eyes. “The roads through these hills are very bumpy. There's no reason we should both be jostled uncomfortably. The coach is well-cushioned and should make a pleasanter trip for you.” And if the coach breaks down, it won't strain my back. “We shall see each other on the boat for the ride back to New York.”

“Very well. Matthew.” Berry stood to go.

He swallowed. “You've ...you've already given me the greatest help by intervening last night. Thank you for that, Berry ... for helping to save my life.”

She smiled, mollified. “Have a nice ride.”

McCaggers jumped down from the wagon and took up the injured man's feet again. “Once more, Matthew. One, two, three!” He and Hudson hoisted the makeshift-stretcher and its burden into the rear of the wagon, pushed it flush against the edge, and packed blankets around it to keep Matthew from sliding. Then, McCaggers shook Matthew's good hand, wished him well, and rejoined Berry. A few moments later, Matthew heard Hudson signal the horses pulling the wagon. They began to trot, the refurbished wheels began to turn, and the horses behind the wagon began to walk after it. Every now and then, Matthew glimpsed a snout or mane from his prone perspective. Mostly, he saw the passage of brilliant leaves dancing in the wind, occasionally tearing away from their branches to fly after the wagon.

“Are you all right back there?” Hudson called.

“More or less.”

“You can certainly say you earned your fee on this assignment.”

“Ye-e-e-s,” Matthew agreed grudgingly.

Hudson picked up on his tone. “What’s the matter?”

“I still haven’t quite resolved the problem of whether the Dragon was natural or unnatural. Much of what we’ve experienced still seems incredible.”

“It was just what I told you from the beginning: a crazy Dutchman,” Hudson countered.

Matthew mulled over that explanation and decided it was suitable. With that, he closed his eyes and allowed the wagon to rock him into a restful state that would remain free of dragons and angels, mysteries and miracles, at least until they returned to New York.