

DOCTRINE OF JUSTICE

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PROLOGUE

Dear Laurie

Remember when we had this spiritual gathering way back in '81? I've arranged a similar one in my private island this time with some other people and scheduled it for a whole week. Be at my beach house before 5 in the evening on 21st of this month, the boat leaves at 6. You know how much your presence would mean to me.

Frank Owens

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1. DIANA DIVES

Vancouver. Fall of 1990. Just after lunch, Lawrence got himself invested in packing his things in his olive green suitcase for quite an unusual journey. Among the things he packed, there was a letter which served as a proof of the invitation, which was from his long-time friend, Franklin Owens, who was a leading entrepreneur in the city.

Lawrence wasn't the type of person who would do well in crowds. He was a lawyer by profession and knew a lot of people of high standards as a result but still was socially inept. That would explain why even a man of high profile that Lawrence was, being profoundly tall with nice brown hair, remained unmarried even at the age of forty.

He lived in his humble house all alone in spite of which, he wasn't well interested in recreation, he was mostly focused on his job more than anything. So he thought it wouldn't be bad to take a break though a 'spiritual gathering' seemed pretty lame. There was one more reason for him to find it so lame - he had once been in such a meeting few years back. On top of all, he didn't want to disrespect Owens, his only true friend.

Eventually, he got himself in some sort of a dilemma, the usual case when he would hear the voice. The voice. The voice had been staying inside his mind since time immemorable, he didn't know what it was and he didn't do anything about it too. Maybe it wasn't even a voice, it could be just his inner thoughts, he wouldn't know for sure. Or could it be just him hallucinating that he was hearing a voice? He couldn't tell.

Do it, Laurie. Get out of here the voice said. Finally it was the voice he listened to, he left his house in a taxi adjourning all his deals for the next week. He convinced himself he wouldn't regret that in the future. Or it could be the voice that convinced him, he couldn't tell.

At the same while, Lawrence's friend Franklin Owens found himself in a tight corner in his mansion, unluckily on the morning of the said date. A distant cousin of him, Davis, who had been staying with him for quite a while, was found dead with a slit throat in his room. In no time, his house was swarmed by policemen and that was when he realised that the chances for him to attend the gathering were rather low. Owens responded as genuinely as he could when he was inquired by the police.

"Look, officer. He's a young fool. He has been searching a job for himself since forever. He always comes to me for help. Him being in my house is the most common thing you can find in this part of the city."

"Um... Lets get to the ground level. Can you explain to us who is he exactly? What is he to you? How are you both related?" one of the officers stacked a number of questions in front of him to Owens' dismay.

"Is the word 'complicated' not enough for you?" he replied sadly with a distinct amount of frustration.

When he arrived at the beach house, Lawrence got to know that Owens wasn't there. But Owens had already arranged one of his servants to escort Lawrence to one of his private yachts which he had arranged to bring the guests to his private island, so it wasn't big deal. Owens had originally named the boat 'Diana' in remembrance of his maternal grandmother but then changed it as 'Diana Dives' to give it a very lively feeling. Lawrence was in fact the last person to arrive at there, all the other invited guests were already on board. They were all dressed as fancifully as wealthy people would. He saw men everywhere inside the boat except an old woman on a wheelchair. While none of them seemed to notice his arrival, there was a familiar face amongst them who greeted him with a smile.

"Lawrence!" a middle aged man in a beach shirt and shorts, wearing a ten-gallon hat and smoking a cigar stood up and shook hands with him. He wore a huge ring that bore a distinct eagle crest with gems surrounding it.

"Mr. Benjamin!" Lawrence exclaimed a bit apathetically as he was not at all pleased to meet him.

Mr. Benjamin Lockwood, the plumpy guy looking distinctly shorter than Lawrence, had once met Lawrence when his cousin was convicted of a felony and luckily things ended favourably for him.

"I didn't know you knew Mr. Owens," Benjamin wondered.

"If a man is wealthy in this city then most likely I have met him on some occasion," Lawrence said casually.

"So how do you know him?"

"Since high school. How come you met him?"

"I'm warning you, it's not a pleasant story."

"Not half as unpleasant as the cases I deal with, I bet."

"Well, there you go." And so, Benjamin started to share his tiny hour-long history with Owens in the most unnecessarily elaborated manner, showing off all his talking skills. Eventually, the 'Benjamin-Owens' stories became 'only Benjamin' stories that made Lawrence regret why he met Benjamin in the first place. While everyone was minding their own business, chatting, drinking and smoking, Lawrence was very much displeased with Benjamin's awfully made up stories about his past. He couldn't even focus on his surrounding, who were there or how many were there.

After some of the very boring minutes in his life, Lawrence finally succeeded in gathering the courage to ask for an excuse and escaped to the lavatory. On his way, he shared a momentary eye contact out of nowhere with one of the guests, the only woman there apart from the old lady in the wheelchair. *She couldn't be older than thirty* he thought. Maybe it could be the voice in him, he wouldn't care. The woman unlike others was just wearing a black leather jacket and jeans from which he presumed she might actually not be as wealthy as the others.

On his way back, he stopped by the woman and introduced himself, "Excuse me, young lady," he bowed down a little so as to speak to her softly and no one would hear him talking. "I'm Lawrence Weinberg, Mr. Owens' friend and personal lawyer. May I get to know about you?"

With a little hesitation, she replied, "I'm Marcella. I... uh... I'm a friend of his."

"That's nice. May I ask a favour of you? I don't want to impose it on you but may I sit next to you so that I can be spared of Mr.

Benjamin's pathetically woven tall tales?"

"Well, of course," she chuckled on Lawrence's comment about Benjamin and let him.

Lawrence was wrong to think that no one saw him because an unfamiliar pair of eyes was fixed on him as soon as he began to talk to Marcella. And he didn't personally know the owner of those unfamiliar eyes or that he was staring at him. He stayed silent, reading magazines till sunset after which there was an announcement from the captain for the departure of the boat. It was said that by early morning the next day, the destination will be reached. Surprised, everyone raised their concern about Owens' absence to which, one of the servants provided the answer.

"Pardon me, gentlemen. Mr. Owens contacted us. He happened to come across an unexpected affair, one that requires his presence and he wouldn't be able to join us in this gathering. Also he insists everyone to carry on without him and sends his apologies."

"Did he just say that?" the man with a big moustache from the front seat stood up and approached the servant. It was the man who was staring at Lawrence and Marcella. "Yes, sir. We just received his call..." before the servant could finish his sentence, the man continued, "He spoke to you and not us? What was he thinking?" He kept frowning at the servant till he turned his eyes away from him.

"Easy, Mr. Lambard. What do you think the servant has got to do with it?" an old man threw himself into the scene trying to ease down the situation. Lawrence now got to know the man with the moustache was Lambard. Mr. Jeffrey Lambard, Former chief of police, was essentially hot-headed and sometimes treated others in a nihilistic way for which he was famously known. His rough voice, grey and black hair with a short beard and stiff face added to his intimidating presence. He was also less friendly, so how he ended up being friends with Owens and what was the business between them both always remained a mystery.

"You think that's fair of Owens, Priest?" Lambard responded to the old man with the same anger. Laughing, the old man replied, "What, I am a priest? I think you know exactly what I am."

"Then, why the hell are you wearing a white gown?"

"It isn't a gown, first thing. And the colour white is to enhance the spiritual feelings. It's really got something to do with psychology, superficially speaking."

"I'm not inclined to argue with you, pal. But what was Owens really thinking? I can't spend my time with a bunch of strangers and I don't think anyone here can. Is there anyone here who doesn't want to continue this journey? Any like-minded people here?" Everyone remained as calm as a tide-less sea to his question.

"Alright, people. You think you still want to continue this trip without Owens. So do continue your trip without him. I'm not going to bend any of you to my will," saying so, Lambard left the servant unharmed, untypical of his short temper, came back to his seat and continued his smoking. Everyone was anyway truly disappointed because of Owen's absence to an extent as it was Owens, the connecting link between all of them. Lawrence could see the disappointment in Marcella's face but he was just as surprised as everyone else as none of them wanted the journey to end after all the preparations they had made.

"Who is that old man supposed to be?" Lawrence asked Marcella about the man in the white tunic.

"That's Mr. Henderson. He's the spiritual counsellor for this trip," she replied without much interest.

"Really? That's new. Owens did the counselling part last time."

"He did? I never knew there was a last time. When was this?"

Suddenly, Lawrence felt someone grabbing his shoulder as Marcella gasped. Lawrence turned back to see who it was. "Do, by any chance, I know you, Mr..." Lambard who seemingly got himself teleported to the back of Lawrence, asked softly, contrary to his nature.

"Um... Lawrence. I don't think so, Mr. Lambard," he shook hands with Lambard who nodded once at his reply.

"Do you know each other?" Lambard asked them both with a smirk.

"No, we just met," Lawrence replied modestly. Lambard turned his attention towards Marcella, "Are you alright, Mrs. Paterson?"

"Yes," Marcella turned her head away from Lambard slowly with an awkward fading smile. Lambard felt the situation and left the place smiling. After he left, Lawrence asked her, "What's he doing, your husband?" as Lambard addressed her 'Paterson'.

"I'm not really interested to talk about it. And I'm now divorced anyway," Marcella snapped at him. After a momentary silence,

Lawrence asked a bit more calmly, "So, what's that with Mr. Lambard?"

"What's what?"

"I mean, you actually, sort of, made him leave."

"If it's Mr. Benjamin for you, it's him for me. The only difference is this man demands my past stories," Marcella said in a hysterical tone that made Lawrence chuckle who had no idea of what to reply.



2. OWENS' PARADISE

Inspector Martin did not ever relish the idea of being harsh in handling the suspects or the convicts, a characteristic not every policeman shared with him. He was leading the investigation in Owens' house and before lunch, he got to meet Owens in person in his room. He stood slightly reclined onto the wall nearby and made his talk while Owens was comfortable on his sofa. "I heard he had been involved in frequent quarrels with a chief butler of your house, Edvin Bodholm last week."

"You don't know Davis. He quarrels with everybody. For everything. He will quarrel with a cook just because he cooks," Owens was very disinterested to even talk about Davis which Martin keen eyes noticed. He tried to shift the focus away from Davis for a while, "So what about this Edvin Bodholm? What kind of name is that anyway?"

"He's half Finnish. He's now in my private island, I've already explained that to you colleagues. About that spiritual gathering."

Martin slowly walked towards the sofa opposite to Owens, resting himself smoothly onto it, he pulled a cigar out of his pocket, "May I?" Owens nodded. Just as he lit the cigar he continued, "I'm sorry, Mr. Owens but I'd appreciate it if you would just say it again." Owens was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable as it seemed to him that Inspector Martin might suspect him.

The boat was surrounded by thick fog and it wasn't even dawn yet which added to the poor visibility of the vicinity. Lawrence was standing in the bow of the boat, covered himself with a blanket as it was too cold, helping himself with a cigar Benjamin lent him while others were still asleep. Lawrence was used to waking up before sunrise and if he didn't, the day wouldn't be normal for him. Out of

nowhere, he saw a light amidst the fog and that's where the boat was headed. When he asked the captain he cleared him that it could be a beacon on Owens' island as he was sure the island was close. The servants alarmed everyone they were close by waking them up so that they could ready themselves. Owens' island was one of the thousand isles scattered throughout that part of the ocean and was essentially the biggest of them all. The mansion was at the centre, surrounded by trees everywhere and a tiny rocky hill covered in green behind. A man covered all over with woollen garments holding a lantern invited them with the vital warmth at the entrance.

"I'm Edvin Bodholm. I'm the caretaker here," the man introduced himself to everyone. "Don't just stand there. The coldness is just a bit too harsh these days."

Bodholm was the chief butler in Owens' mansion, he took after his father who served Owens' family since several years ago, before Owens was even born. He was secured for the job as a gesture of appreciating his father's long years of servitude. Apart from his mansion in Vancouver, Bodholm was also well aware of the functioning of Owens' other mansions and beach houses in the city, his private island and his private docks. He also possessed the ability to command and lead the other servants and that was why Owens had high regards for him and chose him to take charge of the private island as long as the guests stayed there. But he wasn't well treated by anyone other than Owens. Everyone called him names both vulgar and foul. It wasn't because of anything he did but because he was black. Because of his skin colour for which he held no responsibility. Because they thought they could do it and no one would question it. That was the cruel situation Bodholm was in, serving those who hated him and those he hated all through the years with a smile on his face.

The sun was already rising, making it a beautiful scenery to watch. Bodholm led them through the stone path between the trees to the mansion. There was a wooden display board on which it was written in white paint 'Owen's Paradise', for which the old woman on the wheelchair chair being pushed along by the servant right behind Bodholm asked, "This board is new. Why is it misspelled though, mongrel?" That was the old woman's name for Bodholm and it was his responsibility to keep track of the names everyone had for him. "Everyone asks that, Ma'am. It isn't really a misnomer though. It is named after Mr. Owens' grandfather and also because he didn't like the presence of an apostrophe unfollowed by an 's'," he replied with a smile that he obviously faked. They all could sense how hurtful it must have been for Bodholm but they thought they couldn't and didn't do anything about it. That was how ignorant

and self-centred they all were even at the sight of what they knew was immoral.

"The name sucks anyway," the old woman whispered to herself. Lambard noticed something weird too and he asked Bodholm about it, "Where is the emergency boat, goat? I didn't see it at the wharf." Goat. That was Lambard's name for him. Bodholm didn't act like he was hurt and replied gently, "Captain Chuck is in the city, probably busy. I think that's why." Marcella gave a weird look at Bodholm that passed quickly. Noticing all that, Lawrence realised that at least some of them were familiar with the place as if they had been there before which made him wonder why hadn't Owens introduced him to it. Within minutes, the mansion appeared in their sight and as soon as Lawrence laid his eyes on the mansion, he was reminded of Owens' beach house. He also pondered if it was supposed to be a replica. But as he entered it, all his predictions were shattered.

There were several sets of furniture covered in plain silk cloth along the eastern wall of the hall; they were set aside obviously, considering that it was too much for the expected number of guests. The remaining wooden furnishings, few chairs and a couple rectangular tables, which were the best of them, were set neatly along the western wall. The hall was so big that it covered all the ground floor and it was decorated lavishly with golden lamps at every corner and the furniture; the walls that were painted yellow amplified the effect of the lamps sharply. It felt like the hall of fame with all those weird paintings bordered with dull golden frames with intricate designs and markings; the beautiful antiques of old ages, brightened with strange colours perched on the well furnished multi-legged wooden stands; the red curtains with markings of various colours that gave a medieval feeling, hanging over at the right spots; the black marble flooring that reflected all these in an epic, soothing manner.

The fresh herbal odour that filled the hall felt like being in an isolated place with no one around, left only with one's own feelings. There were wooden shelves carved beautifully with shapes of mythical creatures and were filled with books that preached how to get deep into oneself mentally. Lawrence at once realised that it was going to be better than the last time. The kitchen, dining hall and a number of bedrooms, all fitted with a rest room, were all upstairs. There was a doorway at the end of the hall that led to the backyard. There were wide, grilled, glass windows on both sides that were covered with red curtains marked with golden stripes. A stony path that continued from the doorway split the backyard into two portions: one with a swimming pool and the other with a tiny lawn, a

common lavatory and a generator room that served as the power source for the whole place. The stony path led to the woods behind the mansion and discontinued abruptly at nowhere. Admiring it all, Benjamin asked Bodholm wondering, "Whoa, it must need an enormous number of labours to maintain this, huh?"

"You may find it hard to believe but right now, it's just me and my wife, the labours here," Bodholm replied humbly, a characteristic trait of him. "Mr. Owens sent few of his servants with me two days ago, they helped me arrange everything here. When they were done, they left earlier yesterday."

"But what about the cooks?" Marcella intervened, this time, it was a characteristic trait of her. Bodholm stared at her at first as if she had asked something she shouldn't have but replied soon, "My wife cooks well."

"She can cook all by herself?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes. That's what Mr. Owens arranged for." Bodholm took his leave and went upstairs. As everyone were keen on setting their things in their corresponding rooms, they all left the grand hall pretty soon too. On his way upstairs, Lawrence ran into the nervous young fellow who was seemingly the most calm and silent character among the others.

"Can you please come with me for a moment?" he requested Lawrence but wasn't looking straight at him and was rather cautious if anyone saw him.

"May I set my baggage in my room before I join you?" Lawrence asked him gently as the man was someone he wasn't familiar with.

"No, no! It's pretty important," the young man was getting too anxious which Lawrence couldn't understand why. He led Lawrence to the back nearby the pool and spoke softly and quickly at the same time, "Something is really wrong, Mister. About this trip. About the priest man."

"Hey, are you all right? Why are you getting so excited? You can speak slowly," Lawrence noticed the restlessness in him.

"I am speaking slowly. Look, mister. Owens is a good friend of mine. But he says that I'm being paranoid these days. What kind of friend talks stuff like that?"

"I don't think he's wrong and after all, why are you telling me all this? I don't know why I'm being involved in your private affair. I

don't even know who you are."

"It concerns not only me, it involves everyone of us. I spoke to everyone before you came. They don't listen. It's the priest man. Mr. Henderson. It's him Owens brought me to. His ways are extremely weird. You get paranoid only after attending his sessions. He's cursed. He's damned. He's..." The young man started blabbering after delivering the long sentences in a rapid fashion. Lawrence grabbed his shoulders, bent himself a bit forward and looked him into his eyes. "Hey!" he called him out loud just to make him stop. "You need to calm yourselves, alright? You need to calm yourselves. You hear me?" The young man nodded, his eyes left tears as he closed them tight.

"I need you to freshen up yourselves. I'll meet you once you're all right. I'll listen to you then, alright? All right, so what's your name?"

"Fredrick."

"Right, Fred, now come on," Lawrence brought him to his room upstairs. "You can look after yourselves? You can do it or must you need me?" Fredrick didn't reply at all, he just entered the room and locked his door. He set his things in his room too like everyone else and took a little nap. Later when he met Marcella in her room to invite her for lunch, Lawrence asked her about Fredrick. "I don't know how he's connected to Owens but I heard from Lady Olenska that he was doing drugs for the past few months after he lost his daughter to hepatitis. Owens hooked him up with Henderson from whom he had been taking advice for years," words flowed from Marcella's as if she had been memorising them for days.

"Who's Olenska?" Lawrence asked just what he wanted to know.

"The dame-on-the-wheelchair. She's Owens' grandmother's sister but she's been close to him for so long. She knows everything, everybody. She's a living legend. Everybody calls her 'Lady' though she's not from a royal family or something." Lawrence noticed Marcella's excitement when she talked about Olenska but again, he didn't want too much details. "You heard anything odd about Mr. Henderson's spiritual sessions?" he finally got to the point of his talk with her. Marcella felt offended when he kept asking questions he wanted answers for rather than paying attention to the details she shared. She felt like she was using him but replied him however, "He hasn't started yet, right?"

"I meant when he got hooked up with Fredrick."

"You wanna talk about Fredrick or Henderson, you better go to Lady Olenska. I'm already pissed off with this trip so just spare me all the boring talks," Marcella snapped suddenly that Lawrence didn't see coming. He couldn't even sense what caused her to say that. With no choice other than to leave her alone, he didn't prolong the conversation. He thought she might be upset because of Owens' absence.

The breakfast wasn't well served, everyone was busy in settling themselves there, the purpose of their eating, for the moment, was just to hold their hunger. That was why they wanted a proper lunch for which they were quite ready, everyone was resolved and revived. Lambard went checking on every room to gather everyone at the dining hall. When he came across Henderson's room, he heard someone arguing. He wantedly opened the door without knocking so the argument would discontinue. Inside the room, he saw Henderson and Bodholm who were both standing still. The three looked at each other like in a Mexican standoff, speechless and confused, Henderson and Bodholm wondering if Lambard had heard them, Lambard wondering what they were arguing. It was finally Lambard who broke the silence, "Lunch is ready, comrades."

"Fine, Mr. Lambard. We're on our way," Henderson replied at once to break the tension and proceeded to close the door.

Lambard thought it wasn't his concern what they were arguing about, he didn't wish to ask. Soon, everyone gathered at the dining hall, Bodholm had been so keen on preparing dishes as simply as he could because Owens asked him to. He told him that the guests shouldn't be distracted by the foods in a spiritual gathering. Bodholm served the dishes in porcelain crockery on the round table which was more than enough for ten people to dine at a time. It was now that Lawrence realised that there were actually eight of them who had been invited by Owens as counting was easier now. There was a huge lofty bronze chandelier with a dozen candles placed majestically at the centre of the table. Around the base of the chandelier, there were ten tiny glass figurines of Christmas elves equally spaced with one another. "There are ten of them, huh? Just like the ten of us," Lambard commented on the elves. It was the tiny details that provoked the sensation of medieval age. In spite of all that, everyone was almost displeased with the lunch because it was mostly vegetarian, the ultimate consequence of Owens' good intention. But none of them spoke up about it. They looked at each other maintaining silence hoping someone would speak against it.

Once again the grumpy Lambard was the one to speak up. "Why don't I see no meat on the platters?"

"It's the wish of Mr. Owens. He wanted the dishes to be vegan. For everyone," Henderson explained.

"I don't see him either." Lambard snapped at him, making him feel helpless though he spoke the truth. Meanwhile, Bodholm played music on the tape deck that Olenska requested but all they heard was a seemingly unending buzzing noise. When Bodholm proceeded to analyse what was wrong with it, a gruff voice started to speak.

"Mr. Owens. You have got yourselves involved in a number of despicable dealings in your past life that degraded the livelihood of innocent people. It's too obscene to even call it a crime.

It caused a wave of murmurs among them, provoking a chain of questions, "What is that supposed to be?", "Why is it played?", "What does that mean?"

"Dr. Samwell. Not so honourable in business, eh? Scandals in buying accessories for medical equipments. As shameful as it gets.

Witnessing the commotion around the young man in glasses, Lawrence guessed that it must be Dr. Samwell and he wasn't wrong. Dr. Samwell wasn't particularly talkative with everyone, he only talked well with those whom he already knew and that was only Olenska among them.

"Dr. Henderson. Mad for money? Hurt lives just because you can't control yourselves? Still gotta learn more, it seems.

Henderson had lowered his level of sight, whispering to himself, "I've been fighting it."

"Mr. Lambard. Can someone be any less disgusting? Loathing for particular races. How deep has it

sunk you into committing sins!

Anyone could have said what was going to happen next. Lambard stood up from his seat as if he had sat on a porcupine. "What the hell was that about? Is that meant to disrespect us?" he was yelling while the tape was still playing. He proceeded to break the tape deck which provoked the others to stop him. Amidst the confusion, Lawrence spoke up, "Easy, Mr. Lambard. You don't want to know who did this? You want to, you stay calm." He said so because he thought they could find some clue about whose voice was it or who could possibly have done that and everyone was unanimous with his thought.

"Mrs. Paterson. Does the word evil need an explanation why you're still on our sight? You murdered an innocent kid, your kid, as a revenge on your husband. What's with motherly love these days?"

Marcella left tears as if she had been awaiting that moment for years, "It wasn't my fault, he was careless." She left the hall, striding towards her room. Benjamin wiped his mouth, leaving his lunch unfinished and walked away from there as soon as he heard his name. "It's ridiculous," he said as he began to leave.

"Mr. Benjamin. Attempted murder and ran dirty business. Could have caused innumerable number of deaths."

"Lady Downhart. The master manipulator. Sole cause of numerous fights in a great number of families."

"Not so sassy as I expected," good old Lady Olenska Downhart didn't seem to be mindful at all.

"Mr. Fredrick. Drugs and more drugs blinded you so much you couldn't even look after your wife and kids."

Fredrick was just as anxious as he was before, only he didn't freak out.

"Mr. Lawrence. As if being an immoral lawyer isn't a big sin, you murdered a man just to protect your puny reputation.

Lawrence didn't even show any sort of expression his face, he just kept staring at the deck without blinking.

"You all may think you can get away with it but you wouldn't think so if you had known the Doctrine Of Justice."

"Still can't see why this place is named paradise," Olenska said it rather loud so everyone could hear her. The content tape felt so out of the place and it definitely hurt their feelings as they were people of high social status - they cared about their dignity and reputation more than anything. They never got the feeling of a refreshing spiritual gathering and now it only got worse.

"It would be right only if we'd gathered everyone here to discuss on this matter," Henderson was quick to make his move on the account of the event. "It's crazy to say this but this event has helped us start our sessions," he chuckled as he said so. While it was a weird statement, it was also too out of place given the circumstances.

"Excuse me, Henderson. I think we can put off your sessions until we find who involved in this shameful activity during what is supposed to be a graceful trip," Lambard said as he had by now developed a theory as to what just happened. "I have something to say on this." he turned towards Bodholm who stood there seemingly blameless and slowly walked towards him, "You played that tape and you had no idea what you were just playing?"

"I don't know. It just said 'Body and Soul 1930'. You can see that on the tape. Lady Olenska gave me the tape," Bodholm quickly shifted the attention away from him.

"My, my. Now it's all come down to me, huh?" Olenska sounded concerned now. "Anyone here ever heard my voice, an eighty year old, wheel chair-ridden woman's voice that harsh? I'm a wheel chair bound old timer for god's sake. I don't know nothing about tapes or cassettes. My husband gifted it to me few years back."

"But you do know a lot of men. And you're rich enough to hire one," Lawrence out of nowhere got himself involved by sharing his view.

"Well, why couldn't it be you? You are always silent, lost in thoughts, maybe scheming about whatever only god knows. Your voice is not so sweet, either," Olenska showed she was good at giving comebacks. Suddenly, Dr. Samwell stood up, "I'm bringing down them both. We have to talk this out together." He took his excuse and went downstairs to calm down Benjamin and Marcella so that they could join them.

"I've not finished yet," Lambard turned away from Lawrence. "When I was inviting everyone for lunch, I happened to overhear an inaudible argument when I came across Mr. Henderson's room. I didn't hear anything unfortunately." While Lambard was explaining the situation, Lawrence looked at Henderson to see how he was reacting and managed to notice him eye signalling Bodholm which he couldn't percept.

"When I opened the door, I saw Henderson and Bodholm standing there silently looking at each other. And just then this happens. Now what was it you were arguing so silently?" Lambard looked into Bodholm's eyes who wouldn't look straight.

"It wasn't a big deal, my friend," Henderson tried to break the tension between them, speaking soothingly to Lambard.

"I'm not your friend," Lambard snapped at him once again, he wasn't going to fall for his coaxing. He opted offense as he would always.

"I talked to him about a book that's named 'The path of your mind'. It's downstairs. You can find it in one of the shelves," Henderson sounded sure.

"Mr. Henderson," Lawrence drew the attention immediately, "I saw the little eye gestures you shared with Bodholm, it isn't obscure for me that you're hiding something. I insist you better share it with all of us."

Henderson remained silent for a moment, Dr. Sam returned with Benjamin and Marcella who had still not recovered from the dismay. "Alright, I'll tell the truth," Henderson looked at Fredrick, "But I have one condition."



3. DOCTRINE OF JUSTICE

Owens was pretty much sure the police had now drawn his name under the list of suspects. He was basically under house arrest; he was not allowed to leave his mansion, nor could he send or receive any calls from anyone. In fact, none in his mansion was allowed to leave which included only his servants as he wasn't married and all his relatives were in other parts of the city. He was having a drink after lunch when Martin and other officers entered his room. They surrounded him, took their seats and made all the arrangements for recording the conversation they were about to involve him in. Martin sat opposite to him while others took their seats wherever they found pleasing.

"You're obliged to speak only the truth. It's important for us to record this. Hope you'll cooperate," Martin switched the tape recorder on. Owens just nodded. "Introduce yourselves."

"I'm Franklin Owens. CEO of the Teq Resources Ltd. I'm right now in my mansion under investigation by Inspector Martin regarding the murder of Melwin Davis, my cousin."

"I'm Inspector Martin. It's 11/21/90, 3 pm. So is it true Mr. Owens that you had a fight with your cousin last evening? Could you expand the view on this particular event?"

Owens started calmly, "Officer, I want to cooperate with you, to find the real murderer. I'm willing to expand the view on that account. Because what happened yesterday between me and him, it has happened over a million times. It was just him and me arguing. You don't know about Davis. He was born to argue with others. You must take my words seriously!" but at the end what he did wasn't too different from yelling.

"I told you we were gonna record this."

"I'm sorry, I..."

"You got yourselves involved in a quarrel yesterday late in the evening with Davis, right?" Martin seemed to have lost his cool that

gave Owens a shock, "Yes."

"What was it about?"

"He lost a sum of money I lent him to safekeep for a future purpose. But he lost it."

"How much was it?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Hence the quarrel. And you flung a hundred dollar flower vase at him?"

"I did."

"You missed anyway. But you were so angry at him, weren't you?"

"Only at the moment. I calmed myself immediately."

"And you were the last one to enter his room last night where he locked himself up after the fight, do you agree?"

"Yes."

"The next morning your maid Francesca entered his room to offer him coffee only to get scared by a dead Davis on the bed . Is this all true?"

"Yes."

"So, do you agree that you have involvement in Davis' murder?"

"I don't. I met him last night after calming myself, only to apologise to him. I mean, why should I murder my own cousin when I don't even have an iota of profit out of it? Being a businessman, I can tell you only profits keep me running." A police officer entered the room from nowhere without even knocking, thereby drawing everyone's attention, "Pardon me, but I think we may have got a major clue, sir."

Lawrence drew Fredrick upstairs with his arm over his shoulder. Fredrick was getting anxious again, he repeated the same question over and over again, "What did he say?"

"Calm down, Fred. He just wants you to take some rest," Lawrence said, balancing his whole weight on himself.

"He asked you to get rid of me, didn't he? He must've said that, I know. My absence was the condition he demanded."

"He said you do drugs and that you're always out of your mind."

"Pay no heed to his words. He's a two tongued snake. That's what he is."

"It's best if you stay calm, Fred. That pill you took will bring you the sleep you need so badly," Lawrence advised him as a caring friend. Surprisingly, Fred stopped talking to Lawrence's relief. He managed to bring him upstairs all by himself, rested him on his bed so that he could take rest. Fred spelled thank you which was only faintly audible and closed his eyes. It was a fact that Lawrence had developed a soft spot for Fred, knowingly or unknowingly.

When he made sure Fred was asleep, Lawrence rummaged into his baggage as per Henderson's wish and found tiny packs of white powder which he assumed was cocaine. Lawrence disliked drugs more than anyone there for he was pretty much aware of its consequences through his experience as a lawyer. But the devil began to sing in his heart too. He got curious about it, he had been curious about it for so long actually but this was the first time he got a chance to look at it this close. *Just once, Laurie. Would it hurt?* the voice poisoned his mind. He dumped them all in the lavatory but hid one in his pocket.

Meanwhile an argument already broke out downstairs, unsurprisingly invoked by the hard-to-satisfy Lambard. "What was that about?" he asked Henderson who gave his reply in his natural calm tone, "The pill I gave him was actually prescribed to him after lunch by a friend of mine, a doctor, who had examined his case. It would put him to sleep instantly which he assumed might help him in his recovery from drugs."

"What does this explanation of yours have to do with what I asked you?" But Lambard sounded like he was far from being calm.

"I had asked Bodholm to supply Fredrick the required medication before lunch but he forgot. Just like that. And that provoked the argument between us which you seem to overhear."

"And why is it that you tried to hide this from us?"

"That's what Fredrick wanted. He didn't want us to disclose this affair to anyone though he wasn't too careful not to let it out in the open."

"How did you manage to come up with this story in the mean time?" Lambard just couldn't believe it.

"Act accordingly to your age, Mr. Lambard. Where were you when the young man puked all over the boat's deck? Obviously he's sick," Olenska intervened in a precedent moment of her character, recalling an incident from the previous day when Lawrence hadn't yet got to the boat.

"I didn't know that. I don't observe what others drink in such a disgraceful manner," Lambard saw the worst in everything.

"Not when you whole-heartedly involve yourselves in things that are twice as disgraceful as this," Olenska secretly pinpointed to Lambard's hideous behaviour towards Marcella. Without doubt, Lambard was infuriated beyond all measures, only he couldn't express it as much, "That was too much, Lady. You don't want me to start thrashing women like I do with men."

Olenska could have talked back in a even harsher manner, only she was too wise to do that. Instead, she just turned away her head scoffing, she didn't want to waste her time on a lost cause such as trying to make someone like Lambard see reason. Lambard wasn't feeling satisfied with his temper, he grabbed the tape deck, hurled it forcefully at the wall, breaking it into pieces. He then left the place with a displeased mind while he was feeling bad about what happened. Given how crazy and controversial that move was, it wouldn't be a surprise if a big argument broke out. But surprisingly, it ended all the commotion the tape evoked. Though they felt it was a shame they lost it, it was also a major relief for them as something that caused trouble to their reputation now ceased to exist.

It was evidently the calm after the storm, they dispersed and got back to their respective rooms, minding their own business, while not even a single session of Henderson had been held yet. Smoking a cigar, Lambard was skimming about his possessions and it was when he saw the shadow of a man from behind. He swiftly turned back only to see Lawrence standing with his hands inside his pockets with a small smile drawn smoothly on his face. Lawrence was queer about what was he doing in the dark as he felt like Lambard was hiding something when he abruptly shoved his bag under the bed but he didn't express it in his face. He thought he had an idea of what was in the bag, if he was actually hiding. "Hello, Mr. Lambard," he said naturally.

"You're trying to scare me? Don't you knock?" Lambard replied with discomposure.

"The door was open, I thought you were in no need of assuming privacy. Anyway, I'm with you on this. I don't trust him, either," Lawrence displayed his contempt for Bodholm.

"What change does that make? He has his own story."

"It's true though."

"So why is it you've come to me?"

"To let you know you have company. See you later," Lawrence left abruptly, not even expecting a reply because his real intentions were different, he was just convinced otherwise when he met Lambard who invariably didn't sound hopeful. He wished to meet Olenska, the all-knowing creature there, as soon as he got the chance. For now, he just wanted to take a stroll in the hall just to keep his mind out of it. He went straight towards the paintings first which seemed to be the best part of the hall.

There were a lot of them but the first thing that drew his attention was a huge painting of a muscular bull with an unusually long tail. The thing he liked the most about it was that only one horn of the bull was visible in the painting. He could easily relate that to an inherent character of a typical human in the sense that everyone would just reveal only a part of them to others while hiding the other part, usually the despicable, vile part in themselves. There were paintings of various themes, a scenery, a woman, a horse and so on. Among them, his attention was drawn by a weird piece of literature, which he presumed so. It was an imperfect wooden slab hung over the wall with poor etchings on it in English but good enough for someone to read. Each letter embarked on it had its own shape, it wasn't Earthly possible for someone to figure out the handwriting on it. It seemed to be random sentences and thus it read:

*Beheaded, those who conduct faith with deceit should be.
For they need no heads in the pit whence they came.
Bewildered, the slandering mischieves have to be,
When their tungen are cut off for their thirst to defame.
Beatan to death, the frail couards deserve to be,
As hearts brittle as eggshells stay not long in the game.
Bourne of the abyss, the scornny haughts miht be,
Yet, fail not to scorch them til they feel shame.
Bestow those who pass injustice with the long lullaby,
Only when it balances the harmed's brame.*

- DOCTRINE OF JUSTICE

His eyes grew wide when he laid them on the words 'Doctrine Of Justice'. He knew he wanted to let everyone know about it. But just then, the voice inside of him said *This isn't the first time you come across these words, is it, Laurie?*

Since Olenska was rigorously wheel chair-bound, someone must be around her always. Bodholm was the righteous person for that, also he could leave his wife in charge of the not-so-precious kitchen but he also had to take care of other rooms and guests, so it might seem reckless of him to always stick to her. He, as a solution, decided to ask the help of someone among the guests to take after her. He approached Benjamin first who denied at once, calling Olenska 'as loathsome as an empty jewel box'. Luckily, the second person he approached didn't do so. It was Marcella. She had already spoken to Olenska and she respected since then as much as she respected Lawrence. She actually believed it would be great if she got to spend time with her because she might know a lot about Owens that she didn't know before and also she was the only other woman among the guests.

"Sick prick! Always dumb in making decisions!" Olenska was facing the wall, opposite to the entrance of her room, scolding someone severely. Chuckling softly, Marcella slowly stepped into the room.

"Excuse me, Bodholm sent me here," Marcella appeared before Olenska, just to get in her sight.

"Oh, thank god!" Olenska turned herself around steering her wheelchair. "I was horrified if it would be Henderson or Benjamin."

Marcella giggled and said, "So you've got a steering in your wheelchair and yet you let Bodholm drive you all the way here?"

"I like it when men work under me. Makes me feel I have control over them. Also, I wasn't going to get my hand tired steering myself down here."

"You're wicked," Marcella laughed, "You're just me in every way." Within a second, her smile faded. "Without the money," she scoffed.

"You know, I don't really like to spend time with people who aren't as wealthy or doesn't hold any authority or something. I actually built the courage in myself brick by brick to dislike people like

ly be of any use to my interests. But I'll tell you, I adore you. I simply can't get enough of you. I even thought of asking Bodholm to bring you but it only occurred to me after he left."

Marcella smiled, she was expressing her joy at what she said, "That's so nice of you. I'm so glad. I'm really glad, Olenska. Thank you so much."

"Oh, don't let your feelings out that easily, dear. I don't do that. It's never gonna help you." Marcella nodded at her with a smile and glanced around the room, "This room is better than mine. I hope you specifically asked for this."

"Better than yours? That is the stupidest thing I've heard in weeks. This room is so tiny, dear. Feels like I am already put in my coffin. Anyway, I wanted to ask you something, Marcella. Why is it you really accepted to join this lame gathering?" Marcella's sudden change of face clued it, yet Olenska waited for her reply to actually hear her say it.

"I don't know if it's appropriate to tell you this. Owens didn't ever mention you. I don't know how he would take it if I told you," there was a noticeable hesitation in Marcella's voice.

"No, no, no. I don't like this tone. I can obviously see what you're gonna say. I just wanted you to tell me the exact words. Not through some mean implications. I hate implications when they're not from my mouth." Marcella just stayed silent, being unable to reply. She was just so doubtful and hesitant.

"Come on! Owens knows he can't hide anything from me. Also, you know why am I here in this miserable floating piece of Earth? Owens told me it was really about something important which I think might just be you. There's no one else here who seems important. Just tell me already." That illuminated Marcella's face with happiness, "He said this meeting would mean a lot to me. He said it was arranged for me."

"What? Just like that?" Olenska looked quite disappointed.

"You know, we've actually met quite a few times before."

"Of what business?"

"Just hanging out, you know. He really liked to hang out with me. He bought me a hat, something called sombrero or something. Something Spanish."

Olenska impatiently yelled to stop her talking completely irrelevant things, "To hell with somberos and hats! You like him, he likes

you. End of story. Good god! Spare me!" Marcella inadvertently smiled though she was in a confused state as to how to react.

"I'm really satisfied he chose you. You could just be the perfect one. But right now, we're both incalculably aggravated by Owens' absence. I heard there's an emergency telephone somewhere here. We can call him, tell him we're done with this whole spiritual gathering deal and that we're gonna meet him at the earliest."

Olenska's idea put a big smile on her face, Marcella was now relieved that she was getting from that sick place.

An hour had passed after Lawrence saw what he saw, yet none other than him knew about it. The hall was all alone until Lambard arrived a few minutes later though he hadn't had any particular reason for his stroll across the hall. He wasn't sure if it would help him control his temper, he just wanted to give it a try. Lambard knew he wasn't being mean intentionally, he would just become a bull let out of the ring if he found anything wrong.

It took him no longer than a few minutes for Lawrence to show him the wooden slab with the words 'Doctrine Of Justice' engraved on it. Soon enough, Lambard gathered everyone of them in front of the paintings there except Olenska and Marcella who were currently missing in their rooms, while none wanted to disturb Fredrick who was sound asleep. Lawrence was among them, he stood still with no intent of expressing his ideas.

"Does it seem new to you, pal? 'Cause it doesn't for me," Lambard provoked Bodholm into a conversation. Lambard had always had a dislike towards Bodholm and now he thought he might have gotten the chance to express it.

"It has been there ever since I stepped into this mansion," Bodholm replied usually.

"What is that supposed to be? I mean what form of art is that?"

"I don't know. I didn't buy it," Bodholm's snap would have surely infuriated Lambard who slowly turned his head away from Bodholm towards others, without even a single expression of anger.

"See, I never wanted to be mean, gentlemen," Lambard sounded unearthly composed but expressed his usual flamboyance.

"You know me. I just express myself genuinely no matter what. I don't feel shy about it. But just look at it. Who keeps a worn out piece of wood amidst million dollar paintings? Looks like some angry drunk punk chiselled these words. I don't even understand certain words in it."

"You said it, Mr. Lambard," Lawrence deliberately joined the conversation. "Who would place such a piece of junk in here? Only a halfwit would. But everyone here knows Owens. And he placed it here, wouldn't something be special about it?"

"Your're getting me wrong, Mr. Lawrence. Those are the exact three words we heard in that stupid audio tape. I think we can all agree on the fact that it wouldn't take long for someone to prepare such a wooden piece of 'literature'. It could be the same one who did the audio tape thing. The tape and this, these are both threats. We can't just pass over it."

"Well, it surprises me none of you see it the way I do," Henderson made his say with a smile. "It's obviously some form of Old English. One does not simply come up with such words. It should either be from an old age or written by someone who had learnt the old form of English."

"I agree with Mr. Lambard, It looks more like a scribbling with spelling mistakes than Old English.," Benjamin showed his support for Lambard's explanation. Samwell nodded at him, "I don't see anything wrong in what Mr. Lambard said either."

"Thank you, gentlemen. Finally! Someone agrees with me," Lambard was rather expressive of his joy after all the frustration with the disagreements he previously suffered.

"Who do you think did that anyway?" Lawrence questioned him scoffingly, while both provoking his anger and disregarding the feelings he expressed. Lambard managed to stay calm however, he once again turned his attention towards Bodholm.

"I have a theory, gentlemen. None of us seems to notice this before. We don't have any testimony if it was really here since the beginning, not that I'm disrespecting the butler but words aren't enough. So, my theory is, the one who did the tape, was able to steal Lady Olenska's precious gift, scammed it, found a way to plant it back into her hands; etched something on a wet wooden slab - yes it is wet, maybe he found it by the shore - brought it into the hall, managed to hang it over here. Now, people. Open your eyes! Who you think could possibly do all this without anyone noticing? Who do you remember played that tape? Who do you think spends most of the time in the hall? Who do you think arranged these

paintings? Who knows well about this island? Come on, I don't want to spell this vicious, hideous victimizer's name myself."

There was dead silence in the hall except for Lambard's subtle and soft panting after his loud speech. Everyone knew whom he meant, he didn't seem to be incorrect. For Lambard, it was a win-win, he successfully sowed the seeds to disregard Bodholm in everyone's eyes. Bodholm was unexpectedly triggered by his words. He was clearly able to see the reason Lambard was trying to accuse him wasn't just that things were all against him but because he truly hated him for his descent. The past few days weren't exactly the best in his life either, he always seemed to look sad and stressful and now his discomfort reached its zenith. He wanted no more to be the victim of the grudge everyone held against him. He always wanted to strike back in such situations and now he was counting on its possibility.

With his fiery eyes, trying hard to control all his emotions, Bodholm stared into Lambard's eyes while everyone was looking at him. He knew everything was against him and that it wasn't wrong for them to be convinced of Lambard's theory. If Bodholm were an usual person, a man of his stature, strong and robust, wouldn't have thought twice to land a blow on someone who was smaller than him. That was how the situation was, Bodholm was a couple inches taller than six feet and with a stout arm like he had, he could just knock down Lambard with a single punch to his face. But he was the servant here and that was why he hesitated.

And so it was getting intense every second because it seemed like Bodholm was going to explode and given that the supposed-to-be-a-poem in the wooden slab was clearly a threat, a threat probably imposed by Bodholm, whom they believed was going to make a move. Amidst the prevailing tension, they heard a voice, "The emergency telephone is cut off!" Obviously, it drew everyone's attention, they turned back towards the direction of the voice. It was the voice of Marcella who came running down the staircase, "We're now practically estranged in this island!"



4. MR. HEARTS

Martin and few of his crew followed the colleague who claimed he might have found a major clue without the knowledge of where he was taking them to. "What's it about, Lopez?" Martin asked him on their way to the ground floor.

"It's one of the servants here, Martin. His name is Hank. I think it's him. I caught him hiding beneath a table in the wine cellar. He's afraid. Not gonna cost us a lot of time, I guess."

"Who's with him?"

"I've got Clark holding his bum."

"Who the hell keeps a wine cellar this secretly?" Martin wondered while walking all the way down there. When they entered the cellar, they saw a young man who was probably six feet tall at least, knelt besides Clark while few other servants stood around there, observing what was happening.

"What's he doing? Begging for mercy?" Martin asked Clark.

"He begged, yes. But that isn't why he's knelt down," Clark replied, giving a look at Martin so as to imply something. Martin was witty enough to understand what was his implication, he noticed young Hank whimpering and discerned that he might have tried to run away but was knocked down by his men probably by disabling his legs. The policemen gathered around him, insisting the other servants to leave. They meant to start the investigation right away because the cellar seemed quite right for the purpose.

"What do you got for us, Hank?" Martin proceeded to do the talking himself.

"Firstly, you must understand it's got nothing to do with me. I don't know what's happening with those who are above me," Hank was gushing out words both hesitantly and apprehensively.

"Okay, so what was that you were hiding for?"

"Secondly, I didn't steal the money. Someone else did it."

"Whoa. Come again. What is the money we're talking about here?"

"You don't know? The money that was lost?" Hank asked in surprise if he had told something he shouldn't have.

"I want you to be a little more explicit," Martin tried to hide his lack of knowledge about the money he was talking about.

"I don't know. I don't know the details. I heard that a big sum of money was lost. I don't know who lost it or how it happened."

"So, how did you know about this?"

"There's this man, all right? Name's Chuck. He's the captain of Mr. Owens' private yacht. The bullyragging one. He told me something about it. Gave me some to hide somewhere."

"How much?"

"Five bigs. Told me he'll bring five more."

Martin gave a look at his crew because this could be the ten thousand dollars Owens mentioned and from Hank's words, it was easy to discern that the money might not have been lost but instead could have been stolen. "Why did you take his money?" he asked Hank immediately.

"You don't know how he treats me. Threatening me is the biggest form of entertainment for him. He uses me for his own benefit and I can't do anything about it. He's got authority over me."

"You could've told your boss or approached the police."

"Neither of them can't watch over my back all the time. I mean, Chuck is more or less a gangster, only he doesn't do any criminal activities."

"You know where he could be now?"

None of them there was feeling good when they heard Marcella, they were really terrified in fact. Marcella's words inspired caution, that was true but in their perspective, her words were nothing other than the cherry on top, were the whole Doctrine-of-

justice situation a cake. Henderson asked her loudly as if the cherry wasn't enough as a topping, "Where is Lady Olenska?"

"She's right upstairs."

"You left her alone?" Benjamin asked with a little sense of caution and fear.

"I can't lift her by myself!" Marcella broke the truth in a harsh manner.

Again everyone was reminded of Bodholm who usually did that job for her. It was obvious that Bodholm was now emotionally fragile and that he was no different from a dynamite with a lit wick. He slowly approached Lambard who was momentarily distracted by Marcella and meanwhile, he took off the chef apron he was wearing. The apron had a huge pocket big enough to hold a butcher knife that he was actually carrying in that pocket. He swiftly grabbed Lambard by his arm and before he could get alarmed, he softly placed the meat cleaver over his shoulder, sticking the sharp edge to his neck.

This horrified everyone, they were expecting the unexpected but not exactly what Bodholm did. Marcella gasped in surprise, she didn't feel comfortable to just stand there, she couldn't help herself but come running down the stairs.

"Nobody makes a move," Bodholm cried and slowly forced Lambard to lie down on the floor on his stomach. "I want you to look at me, Lambard," he said quite calmly, "Fold your arms at your back and don't ever try to move them until I ask you to." Bodholm bent over to lay Lambard in his preferred position, he pressed his booted leg on Lambard's nape hard enough to prevent him from trying to escape. Henderson opened his mouth finally and said, "You know what you are doing?"

"No one talks," Bodholm yelled, frowning at Henderson. "No one tells me what to do."

Meanwhile, Lambard developed immeasurable hatred for him, he wouldn't be able to bear this even if it happened to someone else. But now, it is Lambard himself beneath the smelly, damp, old boot of a servant who was slightly crushing his neck that caused a difficulty in his breathing. Lambard was panting and sniffing both because of his anger and that he was choking a little. Bodholm now, standing upright, folded his arms still holding the cleaver in his right hand, lifted his head and closed his eyes to control his involuntary tears. He realised he finally broke down because of all the ill-treatment he suffered in the past but was also unsure what he was doing

at the moment. His actions just escalated the tension in everyone's mind, they thought Lambard was choking to death.

"Stop it. He's choking," Henderson was more concerned about Lambard's life than Bodholm's threat.

Bodholm opened his eyes, "He's not dying." He slowly lowered his head to level his line of sight with others.

"I feel pity for all of you miserable dastards," he spoke calmly but audibly, "I'm a dead man. You are not. None of you are. You don't know what pain in the butt is. Or how it feels. Just look at yourself. Look at where you all are now. You are under my jurisdiction here, in between my bare hands, don't think I'm not desperate to kill, I can crush you at will. You heard her, emergency telephone is no more. I cut the cord off myself with this very knife. And I can cut off any parts of you at anytime I want to with this very knife and your pathetic little screams won't reach anywhere but be wasted in the air. You're nothing to me. Just do what you're here to do for, you'll leave this place by next week; until then, keep your mouth shut."

Lambard was released from his awful situation as Bodholm started to walk away towards the kitchen saying, "Dinner's early today." At first, it seemed Bodholm taught Lambard a lesson but then by the way Lambard looked at Bodholm as Benjamin and Samwell helped him stand on his feet, it seemed nothing was going to stop Lambard from doing what he wanted to do. And anyone could guess what he would want to do. As far as Lambard could think, what Bodholm did was irreparable and he had to pay for it.

As things apparently cooled down, Lawrence and Samwell went upstairs after what happened with Bodholm because it was already time they brought Olenska downstairs.

"Did I miss something?" Olenska asked when they reached her.

"Everything," Lawrence replied promptly.

Samwell was strong enough to carry her through the stairs, so Lawrence carried the wheelchair. When she was brought downstairs, Marcella joined her, began explaining everything that happened. Lambard sought sometime alone which they felt was the best for him, they let him find recovery in his room. Henderson was organising a gathering both for discussing about their next move in the budding conflict and what to do with their spiritual sessions. Everyone was asked to bring with them their possessions which they considered important and brought for the spiritual meeting. Lawrence brought nothing that fell under both of the categories, he

didn't have to go upstairs so he sat next to Henderson who was staring at the painting of the bull there.

"Bodholm betrayed you?" Lawrence started the talking, subtly hinting that he was still feeling doubtful if Henderson and Bodholm were hiding something.

"I learnt long ago why artists are adored across the world when I saw a painting for the first time," Henderson began a talk about a seemingly unrelated topic which he tried to relate, "The painting was a woman wearing a straw hat, I can't remember the specifics of the painting but I can clearly remember the lesson I learnt. Artists trick us, they make people believe a lie. And god is the greatest artist of them all." Lawrence just couldn't make out what he meant, "Your point being?"

"We are all made more of lies than soil."

"I have something more important to talk about and this concerns you," Lawrence felt like he was wasting his time. "I need your opinion on something."

"Make it faster if you could," Henderson now turned his complete attention towards Lawrence.

"I don't know what exactly it is but I hear a voice inside my head. A consequence of being alone for like the past seven years in my house, I presume. Maybe, these sessions might help to get rid of the voice?"

"It depends. You know what this 'voice' wants?" Lawrence shook his head, he never knew what was the purpose of the voice. Henderson was silent for a moment, still staring at the bull but provided a reply before Lawrence asked for it.

"Everyone gets what they want eventually at some time, only they lack the knowledge of what they really want." Saying so, Henderson left without even asking for an excuse. Lawrence didn't take it personally but was still wondering if Henderson was trying to hide something. Soon, everyone gathered in the hall, including Fredrick, who was unaware of what happened. They sat around the round table which was set nearby the wall mounted with swords and axes of medieval ages.

"If one of you is wise enough, you must also be desperate enough to use one of these," Olenska made a comment with the intent of provoking a conversation, while also indirectly expressing her thought that she had already pictured a vengeful impostor among them whom she believed was even capable of killing.

"You think that is a wise counsel?" Lawrence summoned a question abruptly as he thought Olenska was thinking too much.

"Satirically, yes," Olenska expressed a smile that didn't stay longer than a second on her face.

"I informed Fredrick everything that's happened, Fredrick had known Bodholm for quite a while, he's more like his friend. It's unwise to disregard what he says," Lawrence began the talking seriously.

"And what does he say?" In response to Olenska's question, Lawrence signed Fredrick to proceed. Fredrick cleared his throat to have his say.

"Don't tell me he's not sober," Olenska told Lawrence, thereby abruptly shattering all the confidence Fredrick developed for the moment. Lawrence realised she said that by design as he got the subtle hint buried inside Olenska's words: she wasn't interested in involving Fredrick.

"I can tell you something else. The notion of using Fredrick is way lot better than that of using some old age weapons," Lawrence sounded like providing a humble statement. It took a few seconds for Olenska to realise that Lawrence had read her mind, only then she replied whimsically, "Didn't I use the word 'sarcastically'?"

"Did anyone get to see his wife?" Fredrick finally delivered his say though it wasn't what he wanted to talk about at first. No one seem to say yes because no one was mindful of Bodholm's wife, what she was doing, where was she or even if she existed.

"His wife is Clara. There is nothing he values more than her. Maybe we can talk to her," Fredrick suggested what he assumed was the best.

"If only had Lambard heard this, Clara's fate would have been like a deer in a lion's den," Benjamin made his first comment in a corny way.

"So, we shall not let him know about her," Fredrick stood protective of her.

"Or we shall use the bait to trap the beast," Olenska sounded like she had already made a plan.

All of a sudden, Henderson decided to break the silence he had been maintaining since the beginning of the talk. He pulled out of his pocket, a cut out from a newspaper.

"This is from the Evening Trumpet, yesterday's paper. It was among the papers we were given in the yacht yesterday which I'm afraid you are probably unaware of, Mr. Lawrence. This happened before you joined us. It's about a triple murder down in West End. I don't know if any of you have read it but I'll give you an insight into this matter. Three friends were murdered in an isolated alley in the middle of the night in a gory fashion. The killer is assumed to be some sort of a vigilante who killed them for their past crimes, unresolved crimes. The police have found some clues in the spot, more like a poem explaining how they were killed. The killer has named himself Mr. Hearts. And the most important fact, one that really matters to us is that the final clue the police deduced is a phrase of three words. Doctrine of Justice."

"Is that even real?" Marcella found it hard to believe it which was exactly how everyone felt about it. But Henderson was so sure about it, "Here's the paper. Check it out yourself." He lent it to Marcella who began to believe when she read about it.

"So, we're being suggested to believe that Bodholm is an outlaw who murders?" Olenska wanted to get it straight.

"Interpretations are welcomed," Henderson implied that he was done, it was the others who are required to share their views.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Henderson. But this is highly irrelevant and seems too much of a coincidence. What seems more relevant to me is that, I'm just assuming, you made the whole thing up with this wooden-slab-poem. And you got to plant the words you came across in the papers in it to make it believable. And that cheap tape was your creation for which you, presumably, received help from Bodholm," Lawrence tried to tighten his grip over Henderson.

"Why do you think I did all that? For what reason would I impart the idea that I'm mad for money, something that hurts my dignity?" Henderson sounded enthusiastic when he asked that question as if he was actually expecting an answer rather than proving his innocence.

"I barely know you. I just met you yesterday. How am I gonna predict your intentions?" Lawrence answer seemed to destroy his enthusiasm. Still, he replied with a strong point, "Exactly. You barely know me. How come you judge me to such a repulsive extent?"

"I don't know. You just didn't convince me otherwise," Lawrence was a bit confused as to why was he acting weird. He said something that sounded like him trying to defend himself but acted like he was ready to lose the argument. Lawrence even wond-

ered if it were a trick to get his sessions started or something but he didn't want to end the argument weak on his side.

"What should I do to convince you?" Henderson asked. Olenska, who sensed the talk was diverging too off road, intervened at the right moment, "Gentlemen! Please behave yourselves. I addressed you gentlemen, so please try to keep up to that."

"So, what do we do? Meet this Clara?" Benjamin questioned their next move.

Fred countered him, "Not with Bodholm in your way. I'll speak to him tomorrow. By sunrise."

"The meeting is over, then?" Olenska was tired already.

Marcella made her first comment, a question, "What about the spiritual sessions?"

"They have already been started," Henderson stood up, "I'm gonna go use the lavatory." Lawrence was now getting his suspicions over him as whenever Henderson said something, he always had some sinister meaning hidden in his words.

Olenska was feeling bad about Samwell, her personal doctor that he was silent all the while and turned over to him, "You have proved yourself you're useless. Good job, Sam."

"What do you want me to say? You all spoke well," Samwell replied, unable to realise he missed an opportunity to share his thoughts. In the while, Fred abruptly left his seat, pleading an excuse, thereby unintentionally provoking Lawrence to leave too because he noticed that Fred didn't look all right in his eyes. He followed him all the way to his room.

"Don't you think I must speak to that dog Bodholm personally? Remind him what he is. Hell, I am his employer! He is paid to serve me," Olenska asked for Marcella's opinion.

"If you were to threaten him, you'd be the first one he lays his finger on," Marcella replied. "Seems like your interest in having a control over him begins to backfire on you."

"Would he dare do that? I can erase him and his family from the world in a jiff. What the hell was he thinking?" Olenska was provoked instantly.

"Olenska, please. You're not that dumb. You may as well own the most powerful weapon in the world but he's already sticking a

pistol to your head. You're confined, you must abide to save your head."

"God forbid but that was rude, Marcella. The exact rudeness I expected in you. You do remind me myself," Olenska saw the good in it. Marcella smiled as she was a bit flattered by the compliment.

By this time, Lawrence had gotten upstairs and as soon as he entered Fred's room, he locked the door behind to enhance the privacy. "You don't look all right, Fred. What's wrong?" he asked to which Fred sighed and coughed, he could feel himself shivering and being tired.

"You didn't dump everyone of them, did you?" he asked Lawrence, looking him in the eyes as he grabbed a blanket to help with his shivering. Lawrence realised that Fred knew about the dope he hid in his pocket.

"I can't stop it abruptly. See what happened?" Fred was right about the recovery from addiction - it isn't adversary to discontinue abruptly - but was wrong to think he should continue.

"I was sober this morning. It was because I stopped abruptly and it gave me the hallucinations today. Now, please be nice and return it to me. You don't wish to do otherwise, I'll make sure you'll regret for that."

Lawrence knew he said that because he couldn't overcome the sharp depression he encountered but Fred looked serious, "I won't use it all at once, that won't help me. I'll prolong it for this whole week. That's safe."

Not going to fall for it, are you? The voice was back. *He had had many chances. But this is the first for you.*

"What are you gonna say? I can't wait too long," Fred was not feeling comfortable either with his body or Lawrence's untimely reluctance. "I'm not willing to ask again, I want you to make a move quickly." Lawrence just stood still as if he was thinking with his eyes fixed on the floor away from Fred. Growing impatient every passing second, Fred got up swiftly to snatch it from him.

"Hold it," Lawrence looked at him, "I'm not gonna lie to you, Fred. Also, I don't want things to end up badly for you."

"Don't think you can talk me out of it. I've made up my mind, all I expect you to do is hand over to me what is rightfully mine!" Fred yelled, not even trying to hide his anger anymore.

"I've made up mind too. What's in my pocket, that's mine. I'm not going to give that to anyone unless I want to," Lawrence displayed his arrogance wantonly, only to win the conversation. Fred was indefinitely triggered, he proceeded to spring upon him and suddenly he realised something was odd, he couldn't feel his legs and stumbled over, falling onto his face. He was feeling dizzy, he couldn't force himself to get up.

"I feel like I'm paralysed," he grunted.

"Paralysed is when you don't feel anything," Lawrence replied calmly, "Henderson says all you need is a little sleep. He cares about you."

"Henderson! He's the reason why I suffer!" Fred yelled, still lying helpless on the floor.

"Just try to grab some sleep, Fred. It's only for your own good," Lawrence wasn't going to stay there a second more. He swiftly got out of the room and shut the door. Unusually, he felt sympathetic towards Fred - he was caring about him since the beginning - but Lawrence being sympathetic to anyone was an unusual thing and more over sympathy towards a stranger he just met the very day, that was more than unusual even for his own standards. It might just be because he wanted to help him fight his drug addiction.



5. THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Few police men stayed at Owens' mansion, they now allowed important calls, business related or urgent calls but overheard every single one of them. Owens was allowed anywhere in his mansion with an officer always accompanying him while the investigation was still ongoing. Before sunset, Martin and two of his men were able to reach Owens' private dock where Captain Chuck was assumed to be present.

"Owens currently uses two captains for his yachts. Chuck's the worst one. Hank used the word 'bullyragging', right?" Lopez told Martin while the three of them strode down the backyard of Owens' beach house towards the dock. Martin nodded as a reply. Lopez continued, "There's another one too. Bernie. He's taking the guests Owens mentioned to his private island. They've probably left already."

"You sure it's not Chuck who's left?" Martin questioned Lopez who stood still for a second, doubtfully thinking if the information he collected was actually true.

"That's what one of the servants told me but I ain't sure," Lopez was rather doubtful.

Chuck's cabin resembled a small wooden hut and was a few hundred yards away from the dock. With curiosity steepening every second, they started to run towards the cabin. Were Chuck not there, they've come all the way to Owens' beach house for nothing. Climbing the wooden stairs of the cabin, Martin went for the door while the other officers chose a window each. Martin knocked the door calling out for Chuck but there was no reply.

The windows were shut from inside, the interior wasn't visible through the thick glass of the window panes. It confused Lopez as to why would anyone need a window with such a thick glass pane for a wooden hut by the beach. *Peabrain* he thought, assuming an undoubtedly bad first impression of Captain Chuck whom he hadn't even met yet.

Martin pulled out his gun, signalling his men that he was about to break in. *That's probably not a good idea* Lopez thought, he didn't signal him back to show his disagreement because before he could think of doing anything, Martin had broken down the door which shattered into more than five pieces because he used a force much stronger than needed or because the door was too weak for the force with which he kicked, because of which he slumped over a little but managed to prevent himself from falling.

"He didn't fall, right?" Lopez asked the other guy Bob as he didn't get a clear view of what happened exactly, also the sun was half below the horizon and it was pretty dark there. Bob shrugged at once, pulled his gun and signalled Lopez to follow his lead. Lopez drew his gun too and slowly followed him with quiet steps.

Bob could only view Martin's back, who stood in the doorway, covering as many space as he could or it could be because the door was too narrow. Suspecting it could be something bad, taking into account the fact that Martin was still and not moving, he signalled Lopez to stop and go around to the back. Believing Bob saw something worse, Lopez gathered all the courage in him, slowly started to walk towards the back of the cabin. Fantasizing how to perfectly execute his hard learnt weaver stance, Lopez climbed onto the veranda in a visually ungainly manner.

Taking a deep breath, Lopez kicked down the backdoor, held out his gun in weaver stance exactly as he wanted to. Looking at the prevailing situation, Lopez gasped in surprise and said softly and scoffingly, "Seriously?"

The dinner at the private island was awkwardly silent with Bodholm himself serving everyone. It went like passing clouds, nothing remarkable happened - Lambard's absence was an evident enough reason of that. After all, that was what they felt, just like any human being would - wanting something interesting to happen. They knew Lambard's character, they were sick of him when he was annoyed with the events happening around him even if he was right. But when he tried to face it off by starting an argument or getting into a quarrel, they found pleasure to watch it silently just because they found it way more interesting than a silent dinner such as the one they were having.

Apart from all his pomposity, egotism, racist ideologies - there was a considerable degree of veracity in that claim, pride and arrogance, Lambard was also very guiding, self-aware, social and uplifting. But those weren't visible in their eyes. They were expecting a conflict, a quarrel, a fight, any incident that inspired tension or excitement, something that would happen easily if Lambard was present. That was how much they valued him. As a balloon filled with arrogance that looked funny when exploded. Now that he was absent, they couldn't witness the funny explosion which made them yearn for him for all the bad reasons.

Lambard was fortunate anyway, he could see right through them and read their intentions though he was feeling sad about how everyone looked at him. He was even more worried after what Bodholm did to him. That was why he didn't join the dinner with them. Also the dishes were vegetarian which he wasn't very fond of. There was no supportive reason for him to attend the dinner other than that he was quite hungry, a reason he wasn't ready to sacrifice his pride for. He spent the time in his room, alone, with no lights, sitting on the bed doing nothing but staring into the darkness, embracing his thoughts. Not long after, he heard a knock on his door which when answered opened creaking and light broke into the room, piercing through the darkness, followed by the shadow of a man.

He saw Lawrence at the door who told him softly, "I know what you are hiding. I advise you to tread lightly. I respect you and that's why I'm expecting you to consider my advice."

"No one respects me," Lambard replied with not even a slightest sense of pride with which he usually spoke.

"And no one sees what I see. Except you." Lambard scoffed at him instead of a reply though he felt a little better deep down that someone shared his view.

"I know you won't do it. Good night," Lawrence left the room, closing the door behind him, leaving the room in darkness again. It was now the darkness bothered Lambard after the light departed. He turned the table lamp on just so the room wouldn't be dark.

Nothing ever happened as he wished and there was nothing that he ever wished to happen. That was the easiest description of

the enormously naturalistic Dr. Samwell. For the past few nights, he had been sleepless and the streak continued that night too. He was trying to recline in various positions, turning and rolling, continuously switching for the colder side of the pillow eventually warming both the sides and none worked. Bored, he just kept staring into the ceiling, plunging into an array of thoughts.

Suddenly, he heard someone trying to unlock his door without knocking. Scared, he proceeded to turn the lamp on but enough light breached into the room from outside which caused the shadow of a man entering. The man charged at him, placed a meat cleaver right over his neck before he could make his move. Sam was wise enough to realise it was Bodholm who shushed him, "Don't make a sound. You're gonna be safe. Safer than before, in fact."

Bodholm slowly guided him past the bedrooms, still sticking the knife to his neck. No one was around so Sam was naturally scared also because of the fact that he could be dorky sometimes which was why he could be easily intimidated too. He was brought to the kitchen, the first time anyone other than Bodholm or his wife entered there. The kitchen was a completely different environment with anything there was either black or white, be the crockery, the floor tiles, the walls, the ceiling, everything. The whole room was well lit with various candle lamps which imparted a divine impression. There were a couple couches close to one of the walls, away from the cooking accessories, on one of which, there was a woman reclining and staring at them. He was sure it was Bodholm's wife and that was why he was afraid that she might be angry at him after all the worst things that had happened to Bodholm. But the more he observed her, he sensed something was wrong with her, she was wheezing at a horrifyingly slow rate.

Letting Sam free from the knife, Bodholm spoke to him, he was in tears, "She is dying. Help me save her. You know what my reputation is out there. I'm not very rich either. She's all I've got. But don't worry about your fees. I'm capable of settling it. Just make her better. She must be fully revived." Sam was bemused of how was he going to react as it was a sharp change of emotions the situation imparted to him. But he proceeded with a simple question, "What's the problem with her?"

"She's been fighting bronchitis for a long time and it just keeps increasing every time, tightens the grip over her. It's the case for a very long time, so long it feels like she's been sick since forever and I don't anymore remember the time when she wasn't. It's the pain she's in that agonizes me," Bodholm began to weep. Taking things into his own hands, Sam checked her pulse and analyzed how bad

her condition was. Within a few moments, he realised what was going to happen to her and what they had to do.

Just as Bodholm said, the fog was dense, especially at night. It waded through the trees and the rock mounds of the island, tremendously blurring the visibility. Amidst the fog, there emerged a fuzzy stream of light. It was from the gas lantern Bodholm was holding in his hand, while with the other hand he was dragging something along with him. There was a human figure visible beside him, it was Samwell in his pajamas, unaware of the prevailing fog. What Bodholm was dragging behind was a hearse made of long sticks tied together on which a corpse covered in a white palanquin was rested.

Bodholm couldn't bear that it was his lovely Clara who had now left him in the pitiful world alone. He was even more disappointed that he had to bury her in this island out of all places. He dug her grave himself while Sam held the lantern for him. Softly, he placed her inside, gave her one last kiss on the palanquin, presented her the tulip flowers from the kitchen garden which were the very last flowers she smelled. Pulling himself together as much as he could, he got out of the grave and began to shovel the sand back.

Once done, he intimidated Sam, "No one knows about this. My wife is too sick to meet anyone and the story ends right there. Remember, the knife hangs straight above your neck. And it is me and only me who has a hand on the rope." Sam nodded forthwith, the best thing for him to do at the moment.

Just like that, something came across his mind, so he asked Bodholm, "You think someone would have noticed us? I got a feeling that someone followed us."

"No. That's very unlikely. I've locked all their doors from outside," Bodholm replied staring at the grave for which he decided not to place a headstone until the so-called spiritual trip was over. They both headed back to their rooms as if nothing happened.

For Sam, it didn't mean anything, normally he would feel bad when he failed to cure his patient to an extent. But now he didn't feel like he was even attending a funeral. He never knew her but still, he got to know she was in great pain, which he witnessed himself. He knew he couldn't save her but watching someone die right

in front of him didn't make him feel anything for the first time. He had never felt that before and he wondered if he was still him. Now, that was what kept him awake that night.

He didn't fall asleep until it was very late or in other words, very early the next day, probably around three in the morning. When he woke up, it was past eight and he felt unusual as he heard indistinct voices from the nearby room. He stepped down from his bed and realised he might have got mild cold, probably from staying out in the night in the cold, watching an unceremonious funeral. He walked out of the room to see what was happening outside. Everyone had gathered at the doorstep of one of the rooms and they looked sad as if something bad had happened.

Earlier that morning, Marcella, who woke first, took a walk outside the mansion to grab some fresh air. When she came back, Bodholm, who hadn't slept all night, with very tired eyes, met her in the hall which was all alone. He had a cup of black coffee in his hand and kept staring at her with his drowsy eyes. Marcella was truly scared inside but she just stared back at him. There they both stood alone in one of the biggest of the halls, only staring at each other with no wordplay. Yet, they both had a little conversation in the while as they both understood the meaning behind the staring of the other. Bodholm left the coffee on the table, said, "It's for you" and left upstairs.

Soon, one by one, everyone came downstairs, Lambard, Benjamin and Lawrence, expecting the sessions would start finally. Olenska was awake but felt rather lazy to go to the hall as she was never interested in the journey in the first place. But time went by and Henderson didn't join them, They knew Sam would wake up late and Fredrick was a lost cause but Henderson was usually the earliest.

"Is it all right for me to ask where's the rest of us? I ask because the better half of us are here, which I'm quite content with and also I don't wish to mix the better part with the worse one," these were the first words Lambard spoke publicly after a long time, with a little hint that he was still the Lambard he used to be.

"I'm gonna go get Fred," Lawrence replied.

"I'll go for Lady Olenska," Marcella volunteered.

"You grew lotta muscles overnight, dear?" Lambard commented, reminding her how she made a harsh remark the last time when she said she couldn't lift her herself.

"I believe you've grown enough," Marcella snapped and headed towards the stairs, followed by Lawrence.

"It's unfair if I were not to join you," Lambard followed them upstairs with a sinister thought in his mind.

Benjamin was now alone, knowing it wouldn't do any good to him if he was to stay there, he chose to follow them. He gasped even thinking about the number of stairs he had to climb again.

Though they shared the staircase when they went upstairs, Lawrence and Marcella hadn't had a talk. *Wouldn't you wanna talk to her?* Lawrence thought to himself. But he didn't do anything about it. Marcella headed towards Olenska's while he went for Fredrick's where he got confused as the door was locked from outside. Quickly, he undid the latch, opened the door and just as he stepped his foot inside the room, Fredrick charged at him. He grabbed Lawrence by his shirt collar and yelled at him, "You locked me inside?". Lawrence hadn't even decided what to reply and Fredrick pushed him out. Luckily, Lawrence's fall didn't injure him.

"I didn't," Lawrence slowly stood up as Marcella came out of Olenska's room, "What happened?"

"Nothing, Marcella," Lawrence replied at once.

"He's lying. Just because Henderson wanted me to take some rest, he locked me up inside my room all night," Fredrick shouted. "All because he won't believe me even when I've told and told him Henderson is not a good man, not even close to being one."

"Fred, you don't look well. Did you sleep?" Marcella asked him softly.

"How could I? After all the things Henderson did to me? I won't stop until I've put a bullet in his head." Saying so, Fredrick limped towards Henderson's room, pushing Marcella down as she was hindering his way. Lawrence bent down to Marcella to lift her, "You all right?"

"Stop him," she whimpered.

Fredrick was trying to open the door by turning the knob in the wrong way, implying that he was way out of his mind and he might even succeed in killing Henderson if unstopped.

As he thought the door was locked just because he wasn't able to open it, he began to kick down the door with his other leg and that was when Lawrence proceeded to stop him.

With two kicks, he knocked the door down and forthwith, Lawrence got to him before he made his next move. Lawrence embraced him tightly so he couldn't move but Fredrick wasn't fighting to relieve himself from Lawrence's grip. He was staring inside the room and was so still which made Lawrence confused. One minute he was roaring to kill Henderson in anger, next minute he was all calm and still. Curious as to what made him stop, Lawrence took a look inside and his grip over him loosened. Marcella was even more perplexed about what they both saw in there.

"What are you looking at?" she walked towards them.

Lawrence turned towards her and gave her a fair warning, "You might not wanna look at this."

As of Marcella, curiosity overtook his words, she slowly walked down to the room to take a peep inside. Lawrence was immensely right, Marcella was, for a moment, stunned beyond measure as she laid her eyes on the gory picture of Henderson's torso hanging a little over the edge of the bed with his bloody right arm touching the floor and his head was placed not far from three feet from the doorsill facing them; the floor and the bed were drenched in blood.

Marcella moved away from there, took a deep breath, she was still shocked and the sight wasn't out of her mind yet. She couldn't gather any words in her mouth nor could she scream. She stumbled a bit on the floor and rested herself right there. She was so shocked that even Olenska's loud words, "What's happened?" weren't audible for her.



6. ONE AMONG US

Lopez was half right but was half wrong too. His expectations of a mature, vicious criminal pointing a gun at his colleague Martin felt ridiculously too much when he saw Captain Chuck with his own eyes. A fat guy with rugged brown hair intertwined with grey locks, wearing a beach shirt with monkey printings and cotton shorts was reclined on an armchair, fast asleep. The right part of his mouth and cheek were covered with crumbles of cheese puffs and he was snoring like a grunting pig. The whole place was a mess, nothing was in place, with beer bottles, wrappers and clothes scattered everywhere that even the floor wasn't visible.

In one of the corners, amidst a heap of clothes, there was a face visible. When Martin cleared off the surface, he found it was a woman in awkward dressing, who woke up when he did so. As an exaggerated reflex of cautious instinct, she started screaming, awaking Chuck. Once she realised it was the police, she calmed herself and to cover her body, she grabbed a bunch of clothes within which she had a gun hidden. Chuck knew about it, he noticed that.

Martin made them sit on the chairs that were facing away from each other so that they wouldn't be able to converse within themselves and let Bob stand in between.

"Our concern is Chuck. Why don't we stuck with him?" Lopez whispered into Martin's ears, perceiving from the way he set things that Martin was not just going to stop with the money issue.

"I think a little misdemeanour could have happened here," Martin expressed his thought.

"I say we stick to what we came for," Lopez was pretty much firm in his decision.

Suddenly, Chuck poked himself into the conversation, drawing their attention, "Hey, officers! That's my fiancée. I request you to be gentle with her."

Martin walked down to him with an awkwardly deriding smile drawn subtly over his face. "You say that thing is your fiancée?" he mocked, invoking a couple of chuckles from his men.

"Officer, please. Don't disrespect her. You'll end up earning yourself a lot," Chuck replied using his characteristic poor choice of words.

"So you're threatening me?"

"Of course not," he began to stammer. "I didn't mean that. You're getting me completely wrong."

"I think I got it completely right. You wanna show you're a tough boy? You think that might help you somehow?"

"Of course not! Why would I? You're misinterpreting my intentions because of some obvious prejudice. That's genuinely unfair."

Martin irrevocably lost his temper, "You think that's because of prejudice? You think that's unfair? You think I should care about what a miserable women-hustling twat like you think? You know what I think? I think you've not only involved in a misdemeanour which is obvious but also you've got yourself involved in a murder."

"What? Of course not! How could you possibly think that?" Chuck didn't sound sure at all.

"What's with you and 'of course not'? You're trying to play some tricks with me? You don't know how big a player I am," Martin tried to see it all in the worst way imaginable to strike fear into him which he thought might help in his investigation henceforth.

Lopez and Bob seemed utterly underwhelmed by Martin's untimely expression of anger but because he was their leading man and as he had already ignored Lopez's sound advice, they stayed calm.

Martin abruptly took a step forward to get close to Chuck but unknowingly stomped on a tiny glass bottle which cracked at once. Martin stopped and gasped as if it hurt him, raised his foot only to see a piece of glass stuck into the sole of his shoe. From his facial expression, it was clear that it had gone deep enough to hurt his heel. Bob proceeded to help him but Martin gestured him he could handle it himself. Now Martin's unnecessary anger was actually turning into a serious one.

Chuck used that momentary distraction of Bob to talk to his so-called fiancée, he turned inconspicuously towards her and whisp-

ered, "As soon as I tell you..."

She couldn't perceive the words but realised he was whispering, so she turned attention towards him.

"...shoot him in the head!" he whispered but he stressed the words enough to impart enthusiasm.

Unfortunately those were the only words she could make out, so she immediately stood up, pulled out the gun and shot at Martin, screaming while she did so. Chuck yelled "No!" a bit too loud as he realised she didn't hear him well. Alarmed beyond measure, Bob pulled his gun and shot her at once in her face before she could pull the trigger again. She collapsed on the chair, one of whose legs got dislocated due to the impact of her fall, thus deforming it. She was now lying on the floor dead, along with the breakage of wood, flooding the floor with blood.

When Bob saw Chuck going for the gun she shot Martin with, he shot at his arm while he reached out to grab the gun. He was hit in his wrist and was bleeding out. Due to the shock he encountered on looking at the blood, he stumbled over and cried out in fear of losing his hand. Slowly, he lied down on the floor, catching his breath. Bob took away the gun from the hand of the dead woman who died holding it firmly. When he checked on Martin, he saw he was shot a little beneath his neck and had died at once. Lopez held him firm, applied pressure on the wound so the bleeding could be stopped, if it were anyhow useful and the place wouldn't get any more messy.

Sam guessed right. It was very unusual, all of them gathering at one of the rooms. And when he laid eyes on the horror of a be-headed Henderson himself, he was just as terrified as everyone else.

"From the very beginning, I've been telling you," Lambard began his oration. "Only you've not been paying enough heed to my words. You thought it was my prejudice over him. But now, look. How far he's come!" Again, he blamed it all on Bodholm.

Bodholm came out of the room silently with no noticeable expression in his face, after glancing the crime spot.

"It wasn't me," he sniffed and said softly, looking at his feet.

"I'm afraid that's not enough words from your mouth, amigo. Last time I heard from you, you said you had complete control over this place and you said you were desperate to kill. There's no bigger suspect here than you," Lambard spoke cunningly in an anger invoking manner which could yield a positive output for Lambard that if Bodholm lost his temper and tried to do something terrible, Lambard would be proven right and he could get a chance to take revenge on Bodholm.

Bodholm gently lifted his head and looked at Lambard in his eyes, "I didn't do this. If I were to, I would've done it in front of everyone and it would have been you, not Henderson."

Lambard tried his best to not show his discomfort in his face but failed to do so.

"But we know you and him had a history. He talks to you the most. So it is highly likely that you might know why this happened," Marcella told Bodholm.

"I'm tired already, just leave me alone," Bodholm tried to slip away as he was already devastated by the loss of his wife and felt uncomfortable at the moment.

"Don't try to act brilliant, you filth. You stay right here. You're my servant. You answer to me, dog!" Olenska completely broke down as she had been yearning for this moment for quite sometime.

Bodholm scoffed, he felt really pushed to the edge. He knew his mind was at its least stable state, so tried his best to not break out his emotions.

"Take it easy, Lady Olenska," Lawrence intervened to stop Bodholm from acting in any unwelcome way. "Let me ask you this, Edwin. Fred's door had been locked from outside last night. It is possible that the killer might have done that. So it's possible you could have noticed that."

"Yes, I did it!" Bodholm finally broke the truth, much to Lambard's jubilation, who thought he was close to having his revenge. "It was me. I was the one who locked your rooms from outside. Samwell was with me."

Everyone turned their attention to Sam, wondering if he assisted Bodholm in the murder.

"I lost my wife last night! And the last thing she ever did was cooking dinner for some squabbling gang of cowards like youse. How do you think I'm going to bear with it? You live, die, I don't

care. Just leave me out of the picture. You come to me with such an intent of proving me guilty of some stupid accusations, you won't leave alive." He left the place in anger and disappointment, almost felt like weeping but just didn't.

"So, we can all agree upon who did this?" Lambard asked them.

"But who'll bell the cat?" Olenska took things to the next level.

"Oh, don't worry about that. There's someone here who'd do it for free," Lambard tried to put on airs.

"Talk sense, please. You think killing him is the only way?" Lawrence didn't find reason in their intention.

"We had a leverage yesterday. Now we don't. What else do you think we can do?" Benjamin talked something that made sense for the first time.

Lawrence told them his plan, "Maybe we can collect clues against him. Preserve them and stay silent till we get off from this island, then we have complete leverage over him. We could even get him arrested for what he did. All we need is patience."

"You are complicating things. Killing him doesn't complicate," Lambard said loudly but suddenly lowered his voice, "There's not a single soul in this world to care about him now. It'll be like a fart in the wind. He can die peacefully where his wife died. Not many are blessed with such an opportunity."

"Let's think about what can we do about Henderson first," Marcella grumbled in a dissatisfying manner. But her intention was good and it worked. They began cleaning the room before they assembled Henderson's corpse in the hall after bathing it. Interestingly, Bodholm helped them to do so, which they assumed as a cheap move by him to convince them that he was innocent.

But Lawrence thought otherwise, so did Fredrick, because he knew about him. On the other hand, Lawrence tried to find reason and he believed Bodholm helped them because he lost his wife just the previous night and he must have known the pain of death.

Benjamin imitated the priest at the funeral and did justice to that role. But he felt a little bad that none appreciated him for that as he was the type of person who could be seduced by praises which he was starving for. He was wrong anyway, none at a funeral would likely do such a thing especially when the death was a tragic one. Henderson wasn't exactly a bad person in their eyes though few of them saw him suspicious of the person behind that hideous

tape. But there wasn't any proof for accusing him of any wrongdoings.

None of them knew about his family, even if they did, they could do nothing about it but bury his body in the island itself. Also there wasn't any facility in the island to preserve the body for as long as seven days. Samwell showed them where Clara was buried, which was quite a nice spot beneath a young oak tree, probably planted by Owens. Bodholm joined Fredrick and Sam to help them dig the grave beside that of Clara. They decided to place a headstone for both the graves but couldn't get any equivalent for it in the island, not a single piece of rock with a flat surface or even something wooden.

Bodholm assured he would find one for each of them as soon as he got the chance. They stopped searching, not that they believed his assurance but because they could get it off their minds. Back in the hall, they gathered around the rectangular table for some chats about Henderson which gradually evolved into an argument that provoked them to find the killer.

"We didn't want to disturb anyone. I didn't want to disturb anyone. I didn't want anyone to get to know about the tragedy I endured. That's why I locked the doors. Maybe... maybe I could've forgotten to unlock Fred's door when I got back," Bodholm tried to explain the situation to everyone.

"Are you sure you just forgot to?" Lawrence asked him.

"Probably, yes," Sam intervened abruptly. "I'm almost sure. He forgot. I watched him unlock the doors through the key hole of my door when I got back after burying Clara. I couldn't see everything but I saw him walk past Fred's door without stopping by. Only I didn't think it was a big deal."

"I'm sorry, Sam. I don't have even a little amount of courage to trust your words," Olenska rebuked Sam as passionately as ever.

Offended immediately, Sam confronted her for the first time believing he wouldn't get another chance, "Why is it you always love to hurt me? What did I ever do to you something that hurt you?"

Olenska was confounded by the reply which she was not expecting as Sam had never responded to Olenska's rebuke with words. She had no idea of how to reply so she just raised her brows sceptically at him.

"It is better if you carry on with your conversation with Lady Olenska at some other time privately," Marcella tried to smooth him

down in a way that both of them wouldn't feel disregarded.

Sam initially had no intent of preventing the argument he was about to invoke but changed his mind abruptly for the sake of their important discussion about the killer. He nodded to Marcella but Olenska sighed.

Lawrence described his new point of view, "Or maybe it was the killer who locked Fred from outside. Last time I saw Fred, he was in a state of immense exasperation when I asked him to take a nap. I presume, he, most likely, was awake the entire night which could be why the killer locked only his door when he sensed Fred was awake."

Fred was silent but didn't oppose.

"I believe you're overthinking, Lawrence. I'm now pretty sure I forgot to unlock the door. Plus, we have an eye witness in that case. Sam's got no reason to lie," Bodholm spoke clearly.

"I still can't get over the fact that you act too suspiciously heart-warming in this instance. You're acting too differently after what happened to Henderson. Can you please elucidate on this account?" Marcella conspicuously revealed she was still suspecting Bodholm to be guilty.

Bodholm opened up softly and lovably, "After what happened to Clara, I lost hope. When I saw what happened to Henderson, I was stirred even more. But my grievance for Clara vanished suddenly. I couldn't understand why things happened in such a way at first but something was clear to me. I felt I should be the one to lead the funeral ceremonies for Henderson myself because I just got involved in such a situation. When I wondered why I lost my grief, I realised I was trying to get over with it already. That's the right thing to do. That's how we should express our love to our loved ones even when they've left us. That we still remember them. That's probably the exact thing they expect from us, something that make the love between us true."

The speech really won Marcella's heart, she was suddenly speechless and began to stammer but Olenska overshadowed her stammering with her question, "It was Clara you loved, not Henderson, right?"

"I'm afraid none of you are aware of the friendship between Henderson and me. He had a lot of trust on me. He was surprisingly very open-hearted with me. I'm obliged to revere him and his friendship with me. And I'm sure I'll take care of it. Maybe he was

right. The killer could be the one he saw in the papers. And he could be here with us," Bodholm slowly shifted the topic of focus.

"But there's no one other than us here. How could he be here?" Benjamin asked in the weird tone he used to ask questions.

Bodholm said something that finally shut all their mouths, "Didn't anyone realise Henderson's murder is somewhat similar to a certain phrase mentioned in the supposed-to-be-a-pamphlet? He delivered the message. He made sure we got it. Now he'd made his move. Maybe he is true. Maybe he's a she. Maybe it could be one among us."



7. CONFESSIONS AND COMMOTIONS

There was no way Chuck could stop them take their rage out on him. They grabbed him red-handed, the red being the blood he lost from the gunshot to his wrist. They flogged him once or twice with their batons and forthwith he admitted to tell the truth. But that wasn't why they wanted to thrash him. They witnessed the murder of their colleague, a really responsible officer and friend and they weren't able to do anything. That was what fuelled their anger. For a minute or two, they weren't themselves. Anger disillusioned them and they were no different from an angry bull who would stop raging for nothing. And yet they had a momentary consideration that baton flogs could kill him and because of the feeling that the thrashing must feel like it came from them personally, they started laying heavy blows on him with their fists. First his face began to deform as it was laden with welts and weals, all the while he was crying, "It wasn't me! She did it!" Only after they found their fists to be hurt, they stopped.

Chuck could no longer sit upright, he laid down on the floor like a bloody mess that he was, gasping for breath. Bob stood up on his feet and stared at Chuck writhing in agony. He stomped on his foot and asked, "Do you confess?"

Screaming in pain, Chuck replied yes. He could barely see anything as the welts around his eyes narrowed the range of his visibility. Lopez informed the other cops in Owens' mansion about what happened to Martin. Right after that, they made Chuck sit on the chair, bound his hand to the table and set up the tape recorder they brought in their car on it and recorded Chuck's confession.

"My name is Charles Brendan. I'm known as Chuck in my workplace and around. I work for Mr. Franklin Owens as a part-time captain of his yachts and my working hours vary from time to time."

"That's enough for the introductory part," Lopez wanted things to be done quick. "Now get to the point. Do you know anything about the murder in Mr. Owens' mansion?"

"No," Chuck groaned.

"But you are the one to actually steal the money, aren't you?"

"Money? What money? Is this some sort of euphemism?"

Bob turned the recorder off as he felt Chuck was playing with them. "Tell me one good reason you have got to believe that you're gonna walk out of this. This is endgame for you. You're done. All you can do is confessing your crimes as early as possible. So, get on with it already."

Surprisingly, Chuck opened his eyes as wide as he could to get a clear look at them and scoffed, "What? Seriously? You guys call yourselves cops? Don't I know cops have at least a scrap of the thing called brain? But I'd like to be honest with you, I don't happen to sense that in you. You break into my property without my consent, use me like some lifeless punching bag and having beaten me to a pulp, you force me to confess something I don't even understand? That constitutes a number of crimes including extortion which is a serious felony, I presume. What did you both had in your mind? You planned to break as many rules as you can in one day? You've won if you did."

More than surprise, Bob and Lopez sustained exasperation and anger after Chuck's reply. Sighing, Lopez looked at Bob with disappointed eyes, hoping he might have a suggestion. Bob gestured him to come outside to have a little talk. Standing on the narrow porch, they both conversed silently in a hushing voice.

"He's an absolute jerk. He didn't answer the door first of all," Bob said.

"And yet he's right. At least to an extent. We shouldn't have thrashed him," Lopez worried about their situation.

"Hey, you know what kind of person talks like this. A guilty person. A true twit. We know he's gonna walk the plank anyway," Bob said hopefully.

"I think we did too much, Bob. We shouldn't have beat him like that."

"What? You forgot what he just did? He let some cocotte murder our Martin right in front of us. What do you call that?"

"But we did break and enter."

"What's wrong with you? You're not thinking right. I just told you he didn't answer. He didn't respond to us, remember? That's why we broke in. I mean, what happened to you? You got scared by the lies from his wormhole? Come on, you're not Lopez. Lopez is braver than that."

"I don't know, Bob. But we really shouldn't have beat him like that."

"Oh, God! Then why did you beat him in the first place, huh? He tried to pull a gun on us. We stopped him, that's it. You know what? Just forget about it. You're unnecessarily confused. Get in the car. Close your eyes and stretch yourself. Just take some time to relieve from these stupid thoughts. I'll carry on with him."

Bob went back in after patting him on the shoulder. Lopez couldn't reply, he was both shocked and felt guilty which he didn't fully understand why. He looked at Martin's corpse which they left undisturbed as it was now a crime spot. He reminisced about all the good moments he shared with Martin, how good a man he was and juxtaposed the imagery with that of what he was now. The prospect of death hit him hard for the first time and he wondered how justice would be done in this case.

Bob sat in front of Chuck to begin his way of treating him to extract the truth. "This is gonna be real bad for you," he told Chuck. Suddenly, he heard the sound of approaching footsteps behind him and the cocking of a gun. When he turned back forthwith, he saw Lopez pointing the gun at his side and before he could react, he pulled the trigger.

Shot in the forehead, Chuck slumped a little backwards but due to his weight, the chair leant back a bit too much and fell down along with Chuck, the back of whose head slammed on the edge of the table behind him, immediately snapping his neck. For a moment, Bob was stupefied as he thought for a fraction of a second Lopez shot him. Only when he saw Chuck lying lifelessly on the floor, he got relieved from the shock. When he realised what had happened at the intricate moment, he stood up in both astonishment and anger and turned to Lopez. "Wha-What did you just do? What is really wrong with you?"

Closing the door behind him, Lopez said rapidly, "This is what happened. We requested to open the door, there was no response. We broke in. Woke up sleeping beauty and the prince from their precious slumber. The prince let the beauty kill Martin with a hidden gun. We shot back. Beauty died on spot. Shot Chuck at his

wrist when he tried to grab the gun. Gave a good thrashing for what he did. Bound him in his chair. We opted for isolation to discuss how to proceed and that's when he tried to escape. I shot him in the head. End of story. You got it?"

"What do you think you are? Do you even know what you just did? You killed the prominent suspect, possibly the convict of a murder case before he told anything. Are you really nuts?" Bob seemed to not have heard anything he said.

"Possible convict? God! I saw him whisper to her before she shot Martin. Only it was too late for me to notice. He is the killer! And I passed judgement on him," Lopez had convinced himself.

"And who do you think you are to do that? You broke the law right in front of me and you want me to help you cover your tracks. Just what did you have in your mind?"

"I did justice! You saw Martin get shot in front of you and what were you able to do? You may think I did it in anger but I see that's the way of justice."

"God Almighty!"

"You know the way he talked. He was never gonna confess. He was the type of stinkers who'd hire a lawyer after murdering the judge himself. Martin's death would've never got justice if things had gone otherwise," Lopez shed a few tears unknowingly while he broke down. "If this is how justice can be done then nothing will stop me from doing it. I just want you to back me, that's it."

"You can't be serious," Bob shook his head, looking away from him.

"I know, Bob, deep down you'd want to do the same. Only the way you've seen justice all these years hinders you to do so. Just let it out, I'm not forcing you here. But remember, it's our Martin who's dead," Lopez looked him in the eyes. Bob sighed and gasped. He was indefinite about his decision and stood still with his hands on his hip. Lopez let him take his own time and prepared the scene for the inspection. Bob was still confused, he sat down on the floor, reclining on the wall with his eyes closed. Few minutes later, they heard a knock at the door surprisingly and it was when he opened his eyes. They didn't hear anyone coming. There wasn't a car or any sort of vehicle that they heard, so they could be very sure it wasn't their colleagues. Pulling out their guns, they readied themselves to open the door because it could be anyone undesirable at the moment for which they had to be very cautious.

None of them had spoken with each other since they heard Bodholm's unfathomable words. They didn't believe him straight away but were cautious enough to regard it as a possibility. Were his words any true, they must abstain from interacting with each other until they knew who among them was the liar. And that was what they did for the whole day. They didn't even gather together except when they had food. There wasn't Henderson too now to gather them for any sessions, so they found comfort with themselves, alone in their rooms, doing whatever they wished to. Thus the day ended less problematic and more peaceful than the previous one. Lambard however found no credence in that possibility not just because of his hatred for Bodholm, he didn't also actually sense credibility in it.

Lawrence too wasn't convinced of Bodholm's words because he wouldn't believe things that easily. He needed time to think and he would stop thinking only when he had become sure. And thus he spent the whole day, thinking and enjoying his own company in his room. The next day, he was very eager to spy on Bodholm, hoping that would do any good on this account, now that he had spent enough time on thinking. Moreover, he had always been very curious about what was Bodholm doing every time he was alone. It seemed mysterious to him as Bodholm usually would show up only when he was absolutely needed. The breakfast was just as silent as when they were in their rooms, even when they all had gathered at the same place. When it was over, everyone fled back to their rooms or wherever they found pleasing but stayed alone as for them, nothing felt more spiritual than being alone. Lawrence, however, was still in the dining hall, pondering about the mystery of Bodholm.

Taking a sip of water from the glass, he left the dining hall last, heading for the kitchen where, he assumed, Bodholm must be present. He tiptoed slowly to the entrance of the kitchen from where he quietly peeped in. Just as he expected, Bodholm was there on the couch but there was something he didn't expect too. Beside Bodholm, there was someone sitting whom wasn't visible from the place he stood. Lawrence first didn't find it weird but just then wondered none of them were ready to talk with each other and who could that be. Withdrawing himself, he took a deep breath and disturbed his kempt hair just to make it look like he wasn't feeling really well. Drawing all his confidence he proceeded to enter the

kitchen as he was going to pull an act in front of them. It was what he would do whenever he entered the court room for his client. He found it was Fred sitting next to Bodholm but he pretended to not notice him. "Hey, would it be okay if I make some coffee for me? Headache's killing me," he said casually to Bodholm.

"Could've asked me," Bodholm replied modestly.

"It's just, you know, a bit special. It involves a detailed process and it's hard to elucidate the specifics. Now, may I?"

Bodholm nodded once as a sign of approval though he was uncertain what Lawrence was going to do.

"You got any lemons here?" Lawrence asked while rummaging through the refrigerator.

"Is it lemon tea that you're making?" Bodholm asked in a hysterical tone.

"In truth, I haven't decided a name for it yet," Lawrence replied while still gathering the required ingredients.

Fred turned to Bodholm to ask something he had been trying to ask for a few moments but just didn't get the chance until Lawrence got in. "I know you're not a killer, Ed. It just doesn't sit right to view you as one," he finally told him about which he felt bad in a whispering tone so that Lawrence wouldn't be able to hear them.

"All I can tell you is convince yourself otherwise," Bodholm replied politely.

"But why? You don't deserve to be viewed like that. I mean, what good does it do to you? I need you to tell me why you did that."

"To be honest, you won't believe if I tell you the truth and I believe it is the best if the truth remains hidden." That reply ended the conversation at once. Fred thought he was done there and stood up when Bodholm said something loudly that made him turn back, "You're the killer." Fred quickly turned to him with a confused expression on his face.

"I'm the killer," Bodholm continued. "He's the killer," he pointed at Lawrence which drew his attention too. "What difference that's gonna make anyway, huh? There was a man with good heart here and now he's dead. Everyone left here now is either a narcissism radiating scum or an absolute coward. But I know you're neither,

Fred. I know what you are. You're the cherry on top of a chicken barbecue. You are where you don't belong."

Bodholm left the kitchen before anyone else surprisingly but it wasn't surprise that made Fred stand still. He knew Bodholm was always right about him, so he had to think about it. He looked back at Lawrence but didn't say anything and left the place to show his contempt for Lawrence's act in his room one night ago. Lawrence felt bad about it but he saw himself pitiable because of something else - what Bodholm told about the people there. According to Bodholm, Lawrence must either be very arrogant or a coward. He knew he wasn't a coward. Or at least that was what he believed. But in his life, more than once, people had called him arrogant and so far he hadn't done anything about it. Maybe that was one of the reasons behind his marital status which he was often ashamed of. And again, he hadn't done anything about it either.

Doesn't that hurt you, Laurie? Or are you just pretending to be deaf? the voice said. Lawrence now wanted to do something about his marital status rather than his arrogance. *Wise choice, Laurie. It is long past since you talked to Marcella.* Lawrence dumped the beverage for which he hadn't yet decided a name and headed for Marcella's room.

In the meantime, Sam finally got to meet Olenska in her room as he so badly wanted to talk to her. She was comfortable in her wheelchair but Sam refused to take a seat and just stood. "What happened to you? You've become suddenly all too sensitive?" Olenska asked reminding Sam's behaviour the previous day.

"Will you for once just stop talking and listen to me?" Sam sounded like he was hurt.

"Who are you to insist me to stop talking?"

"Just listen! I ask you to listen for once. Being such an intelligent woman, can't you just control your own mouth for once?" That made Olenska shut her mouth. "I'm a human being. I'm sure your eyes see that but I wonder if your heart does. All I ever did was take good care of you, wouldn't you agree that much? So, what is it really that motivates you to hurt me noticeably every chance you get? What makes you like it? Now you either answer me or fire me, I'm content with both."

"Oh, boy. You want to know the truth? Okay, so here I quote. I know it is you. I really do." Perplexed, Sam wondered what to reply.

"You there, Sam?" Olenska asked hysterically.

"What? What're you talking about?"

"I said I know it is you. You killed Henderson."

"What? Oh, god!" Sam stammered as awkwardly as possible. "After all I've done for you, this is how you treat me? Accusing me for something I didn't do? I mean why would I even dare to think of murdering someone, especially someone I barely knew? All this being a doctor? How can you be so crooked as that? Is there even an iota of humanity left in you?"

"Boy, boy! Stop it, kid," Olenska laughed heartily for a few seconds. "You should've looked at your face. Darn, that face!" Olenska continued laughing.

"What, you think I'm funny too? You're so evil!" Sam was evidently running short of words.

"Enough, boy. I was messing around with you. I damn well know you're not a murderer. You're not even close to being one. But even when I accused you falsely, you got scared like a gal. That's what wrong with you. You know you didn't do it. Yet when I said so, you started to piss your pants. Be bold, boy! You have to be strong, be one of the fighting back kind. If you don't fight back, dead meat is all you are, boy. You are a good lad, Sam. I like you very much. But seeing you as a coward makes me so sick. You've got to be better than that. That's why I seemed to dislike you. It took you this long to even talk back, huh? But I'm still glad you've finally did it, boy. You'll be a better man."

Sam couldn't straight away believe what she said, "So, that's it? This is how you explain yourself?"

"Don't try to bring out the worst in me, boy. Just try to think why I said what I said. I hope you'll understand."

Sam left the room at once, he had to take his time to make out what Olenska's real intentions were. However, he was a bit happy that Olenska really cared for him, hoping it was true. After all the bad thoughts he had about Olenska, Sam was quick to remould them into good ones. He even reckoned it was his cowardice and irrational fear for things that made him the failure he was in his life. He now had to embrace his fears and find a way to evade them all. With positive thoughts suddenly overflowing in his mind, Sam walked down the stairs slowly and relaxed as opposed to his usual fast and miscalculated steps. Meanwhile, he heard a distant rumble and a buzzing sound that echoed through the staircase which made him stop and listen.

"Hey, Sam." said a gruff voice. Sam sensed the sound was probably from upstairs. *"I believe you know me. At least what I do."* Sam immediately recognized it was the same voice he heard in that tape recorder.

"I hope it's time for justice to be done." He climbed up back in the direction of the voice. *"And I will make sure justice will be done for all the crimes you've done. I will also make sure that you suffer a horrible death when comeuppance strikes you. Till then, let's hope you do no more sins."* The voice stopped but he continued to look for it until he reached the entrance of the dining hall where there was a tape recorder mounted on a four-legged stool with no one around. When he checked it, there wasn't any tape inside. Right when he decided to fight his fears, he came across such a haunting incident which only reignited his sense of fear.

As Marcella was not to be found in her room at the moment, Lawrence had no other choice than to ask others about her whereabouts which he was so reluctant to do so. And while he was thinking about it, standing in the corridor in front of her room, Lambard seemingly ran into him. "What, may I ask, you're supposed to be doing here in front of Ms. Marcella's room?" he asked rather blatantly.

"I'm afraid I don't want to disclose it to you," Lawrence replied indignantly without even looking at him.

"Let's be cooperative, here. I just want an honest-to-god answer from you and not any poor attempts to conceal the truth."

"What is the point of this infatuation you've grown for Marcella? A reputable man like you shall not do such a thing," Lawrence said only with the intent of hurting him.

"I don't know what makes you accuse me of such a pitiable indictment. I hope it is not your intention to mutilate my dignity," Lambard tried his best to stay cool.

"It would not be possible for me to do that when there's none left, would it?" Lawrence at once walked away from him, leaving him affronted. Having provoked my Lawrence's hurting words, Lambard exploded, "You've got in you nothing that I can even think of begrudging. That much shabby you are; who are you to lambast my reputation?" Lawrence replied while walking down the stairs swiftly, "You know what? I have a leverage over you. I am the only one who knows your dark secret. If used right, it can very well be the bane of your life and I can seal your fate with my mere tongue. Only I can! I am your god now! You live at my mercy!"

Never had Lawrence been so dramatic in expressing his feelings and when he realised that, he slowed down. He sat down on the last step when he reached it to give himself time to reflect his thoughts. He just now realised, he rendered Lambard desperate enough to make a move against him that could even be lethal. He could just not imagine why he crumbled emotionally all of a sudden. But then he just realised he might have actually developed something beyond just an infatuation for Marcella. *This just might be your last chance for establishing a family, Laurie.* The voice said. *Confess your feelings.*

The ever-haunted Sam was now even more haunted by the tape he believed he heard. Everyone thought it was all over that for some time, they felt free. But now it began to feel otherwise as Sam had gathered everyone on the spot and demanded a decision to be made on the account of the tape recorder, placed suspiciously in an odd place. Lawrence saw Lambard there, he was staring at Lawrence without blinking which not only made him uncomfortable but also reminded him that this event did only delay Lambard from making his move, not prevent it.

"Why don't anyone just pass the news? It's exceedingly exasperating to arrive at the scene personally every time, especially knowing it's not going to end up well for anyone," Olenska spit the truth about them gathering together when she was brought there. Sam explained what he experienced but there really weren't any proof for his claim. The tape deck was empty, no one was around and no one was reportedly anywhere near the place. "Sam, don't you stress yourself because of some sick thoughts. It'll be all right," Olenska encouraged him publicly for the first time, while subtly recalling the conversation they just had.

"You don't know, Lady. It was a threat. I'm the next target it seems, from what he says. I-I am just... I don't know what to do. We know what he did with Henderson. I can't help but imagine if he'd do the same for me," Sam was scared to death, his voice and face both revealed so. He then turned at Bodholm, walked to him and grabbed his hands, "Just tell us if you're the one, pal. I won't harm you. I won't let anyone harm you. Just confess you did that and we'll forget it ever happened. Your system of punishment isn't really sound, man."

"Whoa, whoa, Sam. Hold it. You're treating me as if I'm guilty, that's not right. I've told y'all already. Were I to kill anyone of you, it's best for me to do it in front of everyone. Just like that," Bodholm grasped Sam's shoulders with his hands tightly. "If I want to kill you so badly, just imagine how far your neck is from my hands." Sam immediately withdrew, pushing Bodholm back in the fear that he might just do what he told he would do. "To hell with you, devil! Why is it you prickheads always show your insolence towards the weak? To show you're the filthiest piece of scum in the world?" Olenska rebuked him severely in an old-fashioned manner but it was more than enough to hurt Bodholm's feelings.

"Unity, people!" Lambard invoked his speech in a pompous way he was well used to. "The only thing I ever wanted from you. Show me you've got that and together we can drive him away!" Much to Lambard's surprise and despair, no one replied to his stirring brief oration. Lambard took offense at once, more than he had ever taken before and stood still. Out of nowhere, Fred happened to share a word with them, "Let's assume Sam's right. Just as a precautionary move, what would we do?"

Lawrence involuntarily backed him, "That's it, it's better if we think of our next move." Without saying anything, Lambard walked away from there silently. No one dared to stop him or ask him why he was leaving because they knew why he left and there was nothing to tell that might change things. As if blazing up the tension, Bodholm unexpectedly taunted him, "There goes Mr. Orator! The round of applause wasn't enough, I guess." That just shook everyone. Things seemed fine for once and now it felt like things were going to go worse. Olenska prayed inaudibly, "Secure me from the darkness, Lord. And give these young fools wisdom and light to find the right path in the darkness they lurk." Just as feared, Bodholm's words made Lambard stop. He was just a few steps away from his room and yet he stopped and turned back.

"Says who? The true husband of a hundred dollar hustling bitch? No wonder!" And thus, Lambard sealed the fate of his ongoing feud with Bodholm who was infuriated beyond measure. He tried to charge at him but others grabbed him to prevent a fight.

"Don't do this!" said Marcella. "You're better than that, Ed!" said Fred. "You're letting him win, Bodholm," said Lawrence. "Think before you do," said Benjamin. Above all of that, Bodholm yelled at the top of his voice, not being mindful of their words, "You're a dead goose in my hand, you lousy son of a bitch! I'm gonna make you wish you were never born in a world where I was. I'll cut your tongue, slit your throat and carve you up, pig!" They were shouting

all at once and it looked as awkward as Bodholm's rivalry with Lambard.

Sam was very confused by this commotion that spawned right in front of him in no time for potentially no rational reasons. Being a bold woman with great wit and a sharp tongue that she was, Olenska couldn't bear to watch their stupid fights and the level of its absurdity even made her shed tears. She almost forced her eyes to close, only she couldn't as given the circumstances, anything could happen. With all those rude words Bodholm used at him, Lambard would've easily offended at any usual instance. But this time, there wasn't even a slightest form of disappointment visible in his face. He looked at Bodholm with an awkward grin that not only made Bodholm uncomfortable but also added to his rage. Slowly, Lambard walked down to his room, locked it after entering. Bodholm quit moving at once, thereby letting others relieve.

"This is the first time you people show humanity, I appreciate that," Bodholm said panting. For a second, when Bodholm slowed down and spoke clearly, they thought they had pacified him and their momentary loss of grip over him changed the course of actions. "But I haven't shown mine yet," saying so, he rushed towards Lambard's room, pushing away those who tried to stop him. He hurried to Lambard's room and found out the door was locked from inside. Unfortunately, that was not enough to put out his rage but instead made him more angry. He took the liberty of knocking down the door which he eventually did with his second dash. That was when they thought things had gone too bad, that they might have to witness a murder itself. Lawrence thought that their next move shouldn't be stopping Bodholm from killing Lambard but to protect themselves. And that was why he stopped Fred who tried to run after Bodholm. He whispered slowly into Fred's ears, "Sometimes offense is the best defense."

Fred disagreed Lawrence's subtle idea of killing Bodholm but it could do nothing to change Lawrence otherwise. But surprisingly, Bodholm didn't enter the room, he stood still in the corridor staring into the room as if looking at death right in its eyes. Confused by the looks of a surprised Bodholm, Marcella asked just what anyone would ask, without expecting any reply from them, "Why did he stop?"



8. TRANSGRESSIONS OVERLOAD

The whole day was lost for Owens which personally made him worry. He lost his cousin; lost the chance to partake in the spiritual gathering which was arranged by him in the first place; missed an important meeting with a respectable co-businessman, all the while being locked in his room doing nothing but staring at the walls. Not being allowed to use the telephones was the cherry on top. At least he was able to watch the sunset through the window. He spent hours only thinking about the events that happened the past few days, stretching himself idly in his office chair, swinging his leg to and fro. Suddenly, something odd struck his mind and the swinging of his leg stopped at once. He realised it could be a serious problem and wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.

He knocked the door of his room hoping there was an officer outside, he wasn't unfortunate. "Officer, I have something to say that might help the case," he said politely. The door was opened and the officer asked, "Is it a confession, sir?"

"No. But I think it might lead us to the murderer," Owens replied with great confidence. The officer thought for a few seconds which seemed like long minutes for Owens but agreed as he had to. "Wait here, I'll bring others," he said and locked the door. The officer went downstairs to inform his colleagues what he had to tell but when he got there, he sensed everyone was rather indulged in something else. The whole room was silent while being studded with cops at every corner. Amidst all of them, there stood the man-in-charge-for-now, who was on a telephone call.

"What's the matter?" he whispered to one of them. "Inspector Martin was shot. Can you believe that?" he replied in an even hushier tone.

"Whoa, what happened? Elucidate, please."

"Why are you here, Dan? You should be looking after Mr. Owens," he asked reasonably.

"Speaking of Mr. Owens, I have something to tell, Morrie. He's gonna make a statement which he assures to be useful for our investigation. But please tell me what happened with Martin?"

"Things are getting too bad with what's going on with Martin. You better stick to looking after Owens."

"Why're you not telling me about Martin, Morrie? What's up with you?"

"Because I don't know yet!" Morris cried a bit too loud that broke the prevailing silence, thereby drawing everyone's attention. Without waiting, Morris blamed Danny with his gestures when they looked at them. It drew the attention of young Hank too. Though he didn't know why they all had gathered there or what the telephone call was about, he made sure no one was mindful about him and slowly slipped into the cellar where he was found. The policemen were inappropriately distracted by the telephone call, they were, however, sure that no one in the building could get to the exit without crossing them at some point.

There was a large hidden vent in the cellar that continued as an unusually wide, sloping tunnel which led to the backyard. Not many knew about it, only a few servants knew that such a thing even existed. Even among them, the reason of its existence varied. It was an engineering miscalculation to many though it was originally built for a dirty purpose only Owens knew. Soon enough, it was proved to be ineffective and dysfunctional and so eventually it went out of use and was forgotten. Only a few disloyal servants still used it for stealing tiny articles like silverware, utensils, fabrics and many others from the mansion. It was this vent Hank chose to use when he heard the police arrived, only it was too late to unscrew the lid completely. That was why he hid himself under the table which was initially out of the policemen's sight. Now that he was very lucky that he was unnoticed, he could unbind the remaining screws.

Once the telephone call was over, the man-in-charge informed the others what happened in Chuck's cabin and arranged a crew to go there and collect information. Another team was arranged for handling Owens while the case was going to be handed over to someone else from the department. It was only now Hank's guard realised the mistake he made. All they were able to find at last was an open vent behind the curtain with its grill lid and screws lying on the floor. Now they had to find where the tunnel led to as early as possible. Hank was out in the backyard within seconds from where

he got into the streets, hired a cab at once and left the place before the police even realised his absence.

In spite of all that anger he garnered, Bodholm didn't move at all. It was a wonder for them to see. Only their curiosity was peaking every moment. Soon they heard Lambard's voice, "Move back!" Bodholm took a few steps back away from the door and then came another order, "Turn away and stand still." Bodholm did so, he was now facing them with an inexpressive face though he realised he did a bit too much. Slowly from the mouth of the room appeared the muzzle of a rifle, being pointed at Bodholm, which was both surprising and satisfying for them in the sense their curiosity came to an end. But for Lawrence it didn't. He knew it was this rifle he had been hiding. Lambard stepped out, holding a meter long wooden rifle at Bodholm, still with the same grin on his face.

Indifferently, Lambard decided to deliver a speech before taking any action to express how much he was hurt by them, "I'm not inclined to address anyone of you 'gentlemen' anymore but look at this. Can you even see this? I don't know. But I can. I see a ragged man at his least human state, craving to kill me which makes me feel wrong to call him man. In fact, I don't see a man here. If I did, I would've not been forced to talk all this. I see an animal. And as a human, I chose to pull a gun on this animal. Now, I've brought this animal before you for judgement. Not because I respect anyone of you but because I've been cursed to spend a few more horrible days with ugly people like you. So tell me what can we do with this animal or leave the decision making part to me."

Lawrence was the earliest one to respond, "Kill him." His response invariably surprised the others. "I was wrong to not expect an answer from a lousy pig. I forgot for a moment I slipped into a pigsty. Anyway, I hope I'm not wrong to expect unanimity here. At least." Lambard now felt bit jubilant about his comeback with his words which served pretty well for him as a revenge. It was hurtful for both Lawrence and others, yet they had to answer him. "Maybe we can lock him away," Marcella said hastily in a trembling voice. "That's too fair, my lady. Yet acceptable. What do the others say?" Lambard looked at others.

"Excuse me, Mr. Lambard. I have a question. You brought a gun for a spiritual gathering?" Olenska yet again proved she

couldn't be easily compromised.

"With all due respect, we're dealing with a much serious matter now, I'd appreciate if you really focus on this," Lambard said in a seemingly humble manner.

"You would appreciate? Really? Right after you referred us a bunch of pigs?" Olenska replied with a provoking question.

"If you can see, it's because of this gun I'm alive now. I'm grateful for that. Now, be wise and give me an answer."

Bodholm finally spoke, "I confess." He knelt down sobbing softly and immediately gained the spotlight. "I confess all my crimes. I confess every single one of them, right here. In front of you all."

"Enough of your acts and nonsense," Marcella interrupted. "Get up. You're going to be locked up in a deserted room and that's the best for everyone."

"Calm down, dear. I think we may have to hear this one out," Olenska said immediately to see what was he going to do.

"I'm not going to judge any of you. I take back all of my judgments on you. Just let me say this. I'm not a good man. I've never been. But Clara always wanted me to be, she tried so hard to change me. Only I was too stupid to realise," there was visible sadness on his face.

"I killed many men in my life. For money and respect. Mostly I did for Owens. I won't tell why I did it for him because that's Owens' business. He is the one who has to confess for his crimes not me. I killed and never looked back. Until Clara made me to. I promised to stop everything and I did plan to stop, after one last time. I was supposed to arrive at this island two days before all of you but I didn't. I only came here the day before. It was because I was involved in a dirty business of running a scam and I killed Owens' cousin Davis for that."

It definitely shocked Olenska, who knew Davis very well though she didn't care much for him. "Oh, lord! Why did you do that?"

"Lady, do you even believe him? He has a gun to his head, he'd even say he killed Lincoln. And you'll believe that?" Marcella interrupted again with a sense of anger and shock. Olenska immediately sensed something was wrong with Marcella because not long before she had advised her to not express her emotions so easily.

"You might not wanna make me say this again, Marcella. Be quiet!" she said in a calm and commanding tone. Then she looked

at Bodholm who continued, "You might wonder why Marcella sounds so anxious and there's a reason behind it. It involves the crimes she did, do you want to me to say it?"

It surprised not only Olenska but everyone. Though, Olenska was the one to be surprised the most. "You don't have to say crap about her, boy. I know her better than most," she replied with pride.

"I'll stick to confessing my crimes alone then," Bodholm took a deep breath. "I convinced myself to stop all of it after one last time. Also, I wanted to make as much money as possible out of it, being the last time and all. I got the right chance too. Marcella approached me to make a deal with me and offered a hefty sum of money for it. I was delighted there couldn't be a better chance for me." There was a distinct sense of fear visible in Marcella's face, only she couldn't do anything about it. Everyone other than Olenska noticed that, who was rather immensely focused on Bodholm and said sadly, "You said you'll stick your crimes alone." Bodholm didn't respond to her.

"I did everything as planned. Stole Davis' leather bag. It had cash and cards. Davis had a lot of money in the bank. Owens' money. But he lacked access to it. Only Owens knew the passwords and the signature was his. Marcella learnt the password somehow and the signature wasn't a big deal either. The account is now a clean slate. I got my share only a day before I came here. A hundred thousand dollars. Davis realised it was me. Only he wasn't wise enough to play things well. He blackmailed me to give him the money. He gave me no other option."

Olenska scoffed, "That's one hell of a story you got there. Tell me that's not true, dear." She looked at Marcella who was pretty much shook up and couldn't hide it from her face. She also hesitated a bit to reply Olenska, who was terrified at Marcella's strange behaviour.

"Yeah. He's lying, Lady. W-We better lock him up," Marcella stammered a little, contributing to Olenska's horror. Marcella couldn't even look at her in her eyes, the one whom she respected more than anyone. It took Olenska a moment to convince herself she was betrayed. She got mentally disturbed by it because never had betrayal hurt her as much as this. Her hands trembled without her knowledge, with tear filled eyes, she looked at Marcella. "Tell me that's not true," she said again but her voice had weakened too much. Marcella couldn't control making weird expressions in her face as she was rendered indecisive by her garbling emotions.

Olenska closed her eyes to control herself but only ended up shedding tears.

Bodholm continued no matter what, "I did something unforgivable. I let my anger take hold over me. I wanted to kill Lambard. I was about to kill him. But I confess I was wrong. I don't want to believe I can still be forgiven but I do plead for forgiveness for the sake of it. I'll gladly accept any punishment I'm given if, only if all of you confess your sins as I did. I damn well know one among you is responsible for Henderson's murder. Believe me, that's not how justice must be done. I didn't know it as well. It was Clara who taught me. That's what her death taught me. After all the murders I committed, I never really understood the true pain of death until that. I don't have any upper hand over you but I insist that everyone of you confess your sins in front of others. That's what Henderson really wanted from everyone of us."

No one really responded to him. It was because confessing sins couldn't really improve one's image in others' eyes. Moreover, their stern inclination towards self respect wouldn't let them do it. Lambard wanted things to proceed, he made Bodholm stand up on his feet. "You're going to be locked up in the store room with hands and legs bound. That way, we can be assured that none of us will be murdered and we'll know your meagre horse crap 'one among us' theory is just another pathetic lie of yours."

Lambard walked him to the store room while everyone was watching. Bodholm looked at them hoping someone would be touched by his speech. No one even looked at him in his eyes. That was when he truly realised he was expecting rain in the desert. Though Bodholm was frequently torn between shades of morality before, after Clara and Henderson's untimely deaths, he became very clear on which side he was. He had also set a new motto now, which was very different from his previous one, 'Money always'. He took it upon himself to make them realise how important it was to be on the right side, especially in such an intimidating time; to make them see what he saw; to make at least one of them confess their sins. And he was even ready to dedicate the rest of his life for that, knowing he wasn't going to stay in this world for long. Even if he was going to leave the island alive, he was ready to confess all the crimes he did in the past for which he was most likely going to get a death sentence.

Lawrence was now forced to think about what he had to do next. Lambard was not hiding his gun anymore which Lawrence knew wasn't going to do any good to him but rather might pose a threat. *The gun, Laurie.* The voice said. *The fly in the ointment.* At once, he got himself convinced of making his move. He was going

to forge ahead rather than fall back. Unusually enough, Lawrence didn't have a second thought at all, he was absolutely sure of his decision as if he was born to do that. He left at once to start the groundwork which might be just as important as his decision.

Bodholm's speech couldn't have affected anyone more than Marcella who was both infuriated and ashamed. She would never be seen the same as before. The image of a sweet, beautiful, young woman was permanently destroyed. Who would've thought the loveliest of the bunch was also the meanest. Olenska didn't even think of looking back at her, she left the place by herself. Except Sam, none hadn't left. While he stood there alone, he felt he could reflect his thoughts well. He brought them all together to discuss something really important to him and it ended without even being a little useful to him. How much he was fooled by them!

Understanding the depth of their intentions, he found whatever it was, he had to do it himself. Olenska's words were the first to strike his mind. He had to let go of his fears to be what he wanted to be. The key to his survival and success lied only in his hands. Whatever he was going to do, he had to do it alone. With all the hope he developed at the moment, he grabbed the tape recorder and walked down to his room with sure steps. Suddenly, he gained in him all the courage he had lacked all these years. For a moment, he fantasized himself to be the bravest warrior in all of the world, walking with pride and the idea that no one could do anything to him. He smiled as he did so, he didn't need anyone else after all to make himself happy. And all he heard then was a sudden gunshot whose sound thundered through the rooms, naturally striking fear into everyone.

While Lambard drove Bodholm through the kitchen to the store room at gunpoint, Bodholm didn't say a word. But when Lambard forced him to open the door, still pointing the gun at him, Bodholm didn't immediately do so. He turned back to gain eye contact with him. "What?" Lambard asked mockingly.

"You're worse than I thought you were," Bodholm was channelling his anger to his hands which was clearly visible as he clasped his hands abruptly and forcefully for a moment.

"If that's supposed to hurt me, then you need to know it's not going to work," Lambard was calm enough now that finally somet-

hing happened as he envisioned it.

"I demand you to plead forgiveness for disgracing my wife."

"Do I have to do that for stating something as it is?"

"I won't do anything stupid or anything against you. I'll obey you for as long as I get to be with you. Just let me forgive you for what you did."

"Open the door now. Don't make me say again," Lambard wasn't moved. Bodholm sighed in dissatisfaction with his dissent which wasn't making it any easier. He stood still as an act of disobedience, provoking Lambard to bite the bullet. He held the rifle in position to get a good aim at him and cocked it. It was a surprise there weren't any verbal exchanges at the moment. Bodholm gave a look at him with a smile, "I know what you care for above all. I know it. Boy, you're a real sickness, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're blabbering about but be done with the damn door already."

"You've conceived a lot of fantasies lately, I presume, oddly for a man of your age. Those prominently involving dear Marcella."

For a second, Lambard looked surprised and rigid as if he was going to reply indefinitely and the next, he sniffed and said, "Move, I'll open it myself."

"Given you're a vile prick, how dare you even talk of Clara?" Bodholm was just determined to play Lambard's game against him by trying to trigger him. When Lambard didn't respond, Bodholm walked towards him slowly with hands in the air and said as calmly as he could, "Let's have a talk over. No insults, no threats, no guns. Whatever it is between us, let's be done with that and move on."

"I don't have to talk with a dirty pig like you. You're done. Now get on with it."

"I can tell you how to get Marcella," Bodholm went straight up for a deal when nothing seemed to work for him. Lambard didn't reply until Bodholm spoke back, "Only if this talk over is going to happen."

"Can you think of this proposition from my place? You may get to know what it lacks."

Bodholm was sharp enough to find out the answer at once, "What can I do to gain your trust?"

"Admit before everyone, you lied about Marcella. Eventually, do as you promised and then we're square."

"So, you're ready to take a seat,?" Bodholm sat on the couch in the kitchen, inviting Lambard.

"I have to sit with you? No, I'd stand. I'd stand here with my gun ready, pointing at your slimy butt and I'd hear you talk. Now, talk."

"Talk with you?" Bodholm inhaled sharply. "What was I thinking? I'd rather talk to a deaf mute and still be happy." He rose to his feet and began to walk away without even the slightest sense of fear.

"I may have to pull the trigger. Choose your move wisely."

"To hell with you! I can't be killed again," Bodholm didn't stop striding away from the room. But Lambard did as he said, he pulled the trigger and the gunshot echoed through the empty rooms. Only he didn't aim at Bodholm but the roof. The gunshot made Bodholm stop however who looked at Lambard with horror as he always thought Lambard to be the greatest example of the 'all talk no walk' persona. Looking at the roof, Lambard said, "It won't surprise me if it were your chest the next time." Bodholm wasn't threatened but he felt he was being stubborn in an untimely occasion, so he gave up. Also he didn't intend to die at the moment. He opened the door finally, letting Lambard lock him in with his hands and legs bound to the grocery rack. But the gunshot had caused tension and commotion among the others. Even Benjamin and Lawrence were brought to the kitchen by the gunshot and Lambard took minutes to convince them it was nothing serious.

It was Sam who was devastated the most by this incident. For a second, he thought he was shot; it took him more than a few seconds to realise he was alright. He was so stunned he couldn't even move for a moment. And this just made everything worse for Sam. Now, he had literally experienced the fear of death and it embarked a perpetual dread on his heart which couldn't be removed as easily as it developed. As a remedy, he requested everyone to cooperate with him that everyone should always be together, especially with him so it would be easier to smoke out the killer among them. Or it could help prove Bodholm was the one given that now he was locked away.

Luckily enough, Sam's words were given heed this time, his request was welcomed strangely in accord. As an immediate consequence, the beds were all brought downstairs to the hall and set up neatly close to the west wall with maximal space between one ano-

ther. They made lunch by themselves this time without even a little help from Bodholm though they had to come across him whenever they required something from the storeroom to cook. No one talked to him which didn't bother him at all. However, he dearly expected Fred to meet him but in vain. He saw Lawrence, Benjamin and Marcella taking their turns to fetch something from the storeroom but he spoke to none of them, nor was he spoken to. It was obvious Marcella was very angry with him but she didn't express it.

"You know, there's a hidden wine cellar somewhere in this mansion," Benjamin said to Lawrence while they both helped Marcella cook.

"I'd rather not bet on that," he replied without much interest, crushing Benjamin's hope for initiating a nice conversation. Unanticipatedly, within a few seconds Lawrence replied with a better sentence, "Who told you that?"

"Can you think who?" Benjamin asked with a wide smile on his face now that a conversation was sprouting.

"The Lady?"

"Exactly! I happened to overhear her talk with Marcella and asked her about it. She made me promise I won't tell Sam about it. You know why? Because Sam's a great alcohol addict. You know that? Lad can't survive a day without a sip, I hear."

"So everybody here has a sickness then," Lawrence's view was different from Benjamin.

"What? I mean what sickness do I have?"

"You didn't ask me what sickness I have. You prioritise yourself at every single turn. That's your sickness," Lawrence handed over Marcella the tomatoes he chopped while he was talking with Benjamin. The remark quietened Benjamin's not-so-easily-closed mouth and made him think. But before Lawrence could move to the onions, he spoke again, "Why do you say that, Laurie?"

"No one calls me Laurie. Stick to Lawrence," Lawrence sounded offended.

"Okay, just answer me already."

"See, you lack patience too. If you'd ask me that too is a serious sickness," Lawrence began chopping up the onions while Marcella remained silent all through their conversation.

"Is that a joke? I mean seriously?" Benjamin asked in surprise.

"You may find it absurd but that's just my opinion. It deserves that much of your respect."

"So the same applies for my opinion, right?"

Lawrence turned at him as if he finally said something interesting to his ears. "Yes, of course."

"I think you hold a grudge against me since the case with my cousin."

Lawrence held his knife from the onion suddenly that even gained Marcella's attention. He kept the knife aside, undressed his apron and turned to Benjamin who actually did nothing to help them while he talked, with no intent of discontinuing the conversation until a decision was made. He looked into Ben's eyes and said, "You have no idea how much distress you caused me."

"Hey, it wasn't my fault anyway. I didn't expect the price, to be honest," he shrugged with an awkward smile.

"Let me make it easy for you. You don't have to try to pretend being honest. We all know very well you are not."

"Hey, take it easy, Lawrence. Now you're beginning to sound disrespectful."

"This isn't about opinions anymore. It's about facts. That was my biggest case at the time. I was just starting out. I sacrificed everything I had for it and you came in with your smile and your stupid hat and steal my money, my livelihood! Didn't you realise if it weren't for me, your jackass cousin would still be in the prison, jerking around, ruining your reputation? God, you were soulless!" Now it was Lawrence who broke down but he realised it soon and controlled himself.

Benjamin was surely disturbed inside which made him stammer, "I-I'm genuinely sorry but it wasn't my fault... I..." Lawrence turned away, he discerned he had nothing to say that possibly could make Benjamin confess and grabbed the knife to continue his chopping work. Suddenly, he heard the voice *Do it, Laurie. There mayn't be another such a prospect*. Lawrence stared into the knife he was holding, his hands trembled oddly as his rage hadn't yet subdued. This alarmed both Benjamin and Marcella, they stepped back in caution, thinking of the right words to tell that might help to calm Lawrence down. "Easy, Mr. Lawrence," Marcella said in her soft voice which was unduly trembling. "Put the knife down, please."

"Yes, do it, Laurie," Benjamin added, clearly having forgotten he told him not to call him by that nickname. It was also a haunting

coincidence that Benjamin used the same words as the voice inside Lawrence which only helped in enflaming his rage further. Marcella shushed Benjamin and gestured him to stay calm. Lawrence, finally having gathered complete control over himself, dropped the knife and turned to Marcella who stood close to him. "You deserve my thanks," he said looking into her eyes and proceeded to embrace her. Believing it might help, Marcella didn't oppose but went along with it.

That was wise, Laurie. Desperate but wise. Lawrence withdrew from her soon enough and continued chopping onions as it was getting late for lunch. He was calm yet he didn't speak to Benjamin thereafter. Benjamin too was feeling very bad about the incident. Finally they prepared lentil soup and cheese sandwich, as they couldn't find any meat there, in an abrupt and uncalculated manner.

Bodholm was served in the storeroom itself, Benjamin unbound his hands while Lambard was pointing his rifle at him all the while Bodholm had his lunch. Observing that, Bodholm prolonged the duration of his lunch as much as possible by doing long prayers, arranging the dishes too neatly around him before having them though he was only made to sit on the floor in the space between two racks. Lambard was cursing him in his mind just as Bodholm did as they both felt too haughty to even talk to each other even if it were cursing one another.

The lunch went as mundane as ever, everyone was more than just invested in reflecting on their own inner turmoil. The tragic thing about it was there was nothing that could be called as an 'everyman's problem', everyone had their own problems with only themselves to overcome them. Among them, one was actually pretty much very jubilant and it was the unrelenting Lambard, who was also enjoying the lunch, probably the only one to do so. He was now thoroughly convinced he was better than any of us there in the sense that he was at least morally much more sterner. It would make sense if others highly disagreed with it. And that was probably the exact thing that would've happened had he told it publicly, given the arrogant nature of them. It would be no wonder if it had developed into a feud on account of that.

When the lunch was over, they dispersed at once like a bunch of flies as if they were born to do so. Same was the case with dinner too. Bodholm was made to clean the table and wash the dishes after he brought Olenska downstairs every time. Thus, day three on the island ended smoothly than expected, definitely very different from the way it started.

The next day, things went fast than expected as they found themselves tiny things to do and explore. They had many things to do to keep their mind occupied that even the boring breakfast and lunch passed by swiftly. Marcella dusted the lamps and tables; Lambard went all through the place as if he was taking a little stroll but he was actually searching for a place to hide his rifle; Olenska stretched herself on the bed to take a nap but couldn't after Bodholm's confession; Sam was strolling across, sunk deep into his thoughts; Ben and Fred went to the backyard to spend some time in the pool which was clearly visible from inside the hall and Lawrence was sitting on his bed very still with his head rested on his clasped hands. If there was something that really bothered him at the moment, it was nothing other than Lambard's rifle. Though he felt lucky he managed to evade from Lambard successfully until now, he was still a threat to him.

Last time, the one who directly opposed Lambard was Bodholm and now he was practically under arrest. This made Lawrence think he could do nothing to Lambard by facing him off directly and that from then on it was only going to be mind games which could be trusted to work. And the biggest leverage Lambard had over him was the gun. So he had no other choice than to steal it from him. *Apologize to him? No, not to that prick. It's not even an option, I swear.* He was convinced finally that there wasn't any other option. At the backyard in the meantime, Fred and Ben were all suited up to get into the pool. For others it seemed like they both were minding their own business but they were actually conversing very seriously about a clandestine plot. Since they were facing away from the others, there was no way they could perceive it.

"I can't even trust a damn painting here," Fred said taking a quick dunk. "I see a lion, they say it's a monkey. I mean, if a painter can't paint a monkey like a monkey, then what good are his skills?"

Benjamin chuckled and said, "Okay, let's talk about business. There's a wine cellar hidden somewhere in here."

"What? Like a... a whole cellar? Does it exist really?"

"You bet your buns it does."

"Is it... isn't that a joke?"

"I heard the old lady say it. It's hidden so that we, who've come for some sort of atonement or whatever it is, can be prevented from clouded judgement."

"That's insane, man! How could... I'm not supposed to be here

in the first place but... I don't know."

"So, what do you say?"

"About what?"

"Help me out with this. I assumed from all the things that happened around you that you are an alcohol-lover. Now, I need you to explain to me the accuracy of my assumption."

"That's right. I am. Truly."

"I say we find it but keep all this between us. Only us. You with me?"

Fred hadn't really have any reasons to dissuade, "All right. But how do we find it?"

"Aren't you friends with Bodholm?" Benjamin said the answer with a question.

An hour passed. The sun had gotten pretty low. Everyone were present in the hall at the moment but none of them were chatting or talking with one another. Lawrence couldn't find anything around Lambard that looked suspicious which made him guess Lambard had probably found a place to hide his rifle. He was lying on his bed, facing away from the rest of them. He looked like an idiot as he was too late to realise it. Suddenly, he got the feeling of someone behind him and turned back with a jolt. It was Marcella, looking at him with clasped hands and hesitant eyes. It looked obvious to Lawrence that she was trying to say something but was struggling to find the right words.

"Is something wrong?" Lawrence asked in a caring tone, mostly to improve his profile in her eyes which she couldn't guess.

"I thought I'd ask you the same. Feel better, now?" Marcella asked just for the sake of it to which Lawrence replied simply, "Yep. Guess so." Marcella nodded as if she was glad to hear that but kept standing there. Lawrence figured maybe she wanted to talk to him and gave her an approving look which she perceived he was ready to listen her. "May I sit down for a moment?" she asked humbly.

"Feel free to. You're not obliged to plead for permission."

Slowly, with a smile, she sat on the bed beside him improving the intimacy between them multifold.

"Do you think I'm a liar? A cheat? That I'm liable to do the things Bodholm told?" she asked with wide open eyes to show she

wanted a genuine answer.

"No, no. How could I possibly believe that? That man's a certified liar which is something that has occurred to me on more than one instance."

Taking a soft breath, Marcella said, "I must tell you this, you can never know how much those words meant for me. The hope and gladness that it brings me is out of this world."

"That's nice to hear," Lawrence smiled mildly. An unexpected silence followed, there was suddenly nothing for them to talk about. That was when a queer thought crossed his mind which he let out quickly as a question as he couldn't bear with the curiosity associated with it.

"Can I ask you something if you wouldn't mind?" he couldn't imagine how quickly he asked the question.

"Sure," she replied after a momentary hesitance.

"Were you really friends with Owens?" That really didn't seem to be a comfortable question for Marcella. Lawrence could understand it from the visible change of expressions on her face. "You don't have to answer if that was inappropriate. I was... I don't know how I came up with that weird question."

"No, it's all right. It's just, I really am startled by your question is all. I do have an answer though."

"I don't want to hear if you feel bad about it. I don't want to pull it out of your mouth forcefully."

Marcella stood up abruptly which surprised Lawrence who thought he was getting close to make her answer with his speaking skills that he believed was working. Now he realised Marcella was too cautious to fall for it. "I thought I was gonna get to marry him. Now I know I ain't." Saying so, she left at once, not even expecting a reply from him. She did it because inside she was afraid of Lawrence. She was afraid she might fall for him at such an untimely occasion. She knew she made some mistakes in the past and finally she got to realise she was wrong after Bodholm's confession. It didn't occur to her at once that what she did was actually nothing other than a bunch of deplorable choices. Only after she realised her life was practically doomed now, it did so. She walked towards the backyard to spend some time alone which she thought she needed very much.

Lawrence was just feeling chaotic about it though he was secretly glad that she wasn't gonna marry Owens. He felt it was the

first nice thing he heard in a long time. It brought him a little enthusiasm to carry on with his plans to find the rifle, his only real concern at the moment. His eyes were now riveted on Lambard, he noticed every move of his, hoping he could find any clue. Soon enough, he got to notice a weird behaviour in him. Lambard took frequent sips from a tiny flask, not much smaller than a milk jar. Lawrence found it weird because were it water, he could've just used a glass or one of the bottles everyone was provided with. Moreover, there was a can full of fresh water that everyone used, just a few steps away from him.

He wondered how special the drink must have been for Lambard to store it in such a strange container. There wasn't one good beverage that came to his mind that he could believe worthy of a similar way of storing. Weirder was the fact that Lambard could even hide the bottle in the pocket in his pants. *Now that's totally weird* he thought. He now had turned most of his attention to this little flask, wondering all through the evening what might it store. The evening went fast for him, cooking up various ideas to do after he got the rifle all the while strolling across the hall to and fro while it was the most boring evening for everyone else. Before dinner however, Lawrence managed to save enough time to talk to Sam about how much of a threat Lambard was to them.

"Our best bet is to make our move late into the night, after everyone's asleep. You go look for it wherever you think looks suspicious. I'll join you as soon as I come across any clue," Lawrence told him.

"What would you be doing by then, exactly?" Sam asked curiously.

"I've got something really interesting worthy inquiring. It could help us."

"So, you're saying I should roam about this whole damn place by myself? All alone? After all that I've done not to do the exact same thing?"

That question cut off the series of never ending thoughts that Lawrence came across. It occurred to him that he didn't think of the plans from Sam's perspective. Simultaneously, he realised he had spent too much thinking and it was time to bring it into effect. "What, aren't you gonna answer me?" Sam asked restlessly.

"You're too scared, Sam. There isn't a whit of courage in you. Where do you think that's going to take you to?" Lawrence answered in a chastising tone because he was too proud to accept the fact that he just said something with not enough clear thinking.

Sam, on the other hand, took it differently. It wasn't long after Olenska told him something similar. He thought it was because of himself he had to suffer through the troubles he had been facing for the better part of his life. All because he wasn't bold enough!

"It's all right, Sam. Stay with me. Let's do it together," Lawrence patted his back and went on strolling as Sam stood there, still pondering how weak he was.

Soon, Lambard, Fred and Sam went upstairs this time to cook dinner as they were taking turns to cook. Lambard was not going to cook anyway, he just went along because he respected the prospect of taking turns to cook. In his mind he thought he didn't deserve to cook for the people who weren't respectful and were nothing other than a bunch of uncivil degenerates. He just wandered about the kitchen, looking at Fred and Sam cook.

"Lawrence!" Fred exclaimed to Sam and laughed while Lawrence had left to fetch the ingredients from the store room. "You didn't expect it was him, right? But I swear, man. It was to him Henderson talked before he went to sleep. And what happened after that is legend as you know." There couldn't be a better thing to say to Sam that would further his suspicions on Lawrence.

"So, Lawrence is the killer, huh?" Sam asked him.

"I don't know, man. It's just how I see it. I don't believe the horse crap story about this Heartman or whatever name he cooked up. I don't see credibility in it. It's hard for me to think someone would actually believe this BS."

"I have something to say Fred. You won't believe it's true. It happened just, maybe half an hour ago. He seemed to care about me and extend a helping hand. He said Lambard's rifle is a major problem for me and everyone else and that he needed my help to dispose it. You know what his plan was to eliminate this problem? To send me alone upstairs to search for the gun while he'd be doing something interesting." Fred scoffed and howled, "Coincidence? I think not!" but for a second he thought if he was painting a bad picture of Lawrence.

"I'm gonna thrash some good sense into his head. I want to tell him he's as lame as his alias and I will tell him I'm not afraid of anything," Sam expressed anger and courage as much as he never did.

"Lawrence has an alias? How come I've never heard about it?" Fred asked.

"Henderson said, you know. It's Mr. Hearts not Heartman."

"What, you believe that?"

"There's a killer here and we don't know his name. So I thought it's better to put a name for him at least, you know."

"So you don't believe that story, right?" Fred was surprised by it as he realised that whatever happens, people would buy a story easily than the truth.

"Doesn't matter," it was obvious Sam didn't want to talk about it and so Fred changed the subject of talk.

"You could've named him better, anyway, you know. Something funny. Like, Mr. Spilled Beans or Mr. Beanie Potato. Something like that."

As soon as he said that, Fred could see a weird contortion in Sam's face which made him feel uncomfortable.

"You think that's funny?" Sam asked still with the weird expression on his face.

"I don't know, man. I'm not good at making up names. That's why I asked you in the first place."

"Better not try to do that again. Let's get this started already," Sam gestured him to pass him the garlic.

"If you want any help, just ask me," Lambard said reclining on the couch. "I'm right here."

Fred and Sam, neither of them couldn't take it as a joke. They didn't seem to mind and went on with their work. The dinner was ready earlier than they thought. It was a very simple one though, but not as interesting as ever. Things had now changed in a way that none other than Lambard cared if Bodholm had dinner. Lambard wasn't caring to him, though. He just didn't want him to die soon. When he brought Bodholm food, he didn't bring his rifle with him. The weirder thing was that Bodholm began to explain a dream he said he had when he took a long nap in the afternoon.

"I saw the moon carrying a long thread of silver fabric on one hand and a tiny golden needle on the other," he said with his eyes fixed at the starless sky he saw through the window. "She told me she untwined the fabrics of the sun and that he lost his shine."

"I assume you're hungry," Lambard said quickly before he could begin a new sentence. "So I suggest you to have your dinner as early as possible."

"It's a full moon tonight, right?" Bodholm asked in a ridiculous tone which seemed like he didn't listen to Lambard. "Take me to the eastern shore. I want to see it."

"I'm not gonna let anyone die anymore so I'm not gonna let you out of here," Lambard left the room without waiting for Bodholm to finish his dinner. He locked the door from outside in front of Fred and Sam and said, "Check him up again, before going to bed. If he doesn't eat, don't bother. By the time you're done, I want these back in my drawer," handing over the keys to them. Fred received them hastily while Sam looked disinterested as he couldn't hope for an easier start for his plan to extract the whereabouts of the wine cellar from Bodholm.

During dinner, not much were spoken or talked about, they were actually happy that they didn't. It had become a custom that the faster they left the dining hall, the more they were blessed with peace. But even when everyone had left, Lambard stayed, staring at the elf figurines around the chandelier. He took two of them in his hands and looked at them closely. *Long gone* he thought and stuck them in his coat pocket.

Olenska hadn't talked much since the Marcella's unconvincing transformation from 'Miss Adorable' to 'Abomination', all her world now shrunk to the tape recorder which she kept by her pillow, playing her favourite songs all the time. The only time she did something other than listening to those songs was when she was lifted from the bed for her necessities. It was late into the night, everyone was asleep but not her. She couldn't. She couldn't close her eyes after what Marcella did to her. She didn't sleep the previous night too. *What kind of woman was she? Who would do such a thing? A double-dealing swine. That's the most decent way to put it* - the thoughts that circled her mind.

Suddenly, a dark figure rose few yards away from her, disrupting her thoughts. She, at first, was scared to death by it, only she wasn't pushed by the fear far enough to scream. Naturally, she wondered it was the killer among them, presumably under the alias Mr. Hearts. She just waited to see something that proved she was right. To her surprise and relief, there appeared another figure, evidently a bigger one. It seemed as if both of them talked to each other, Olenska could even hear whispers. She realised there were actually two killers and not one. She was also sure that the shadowy creatures were someone among them, since from the way they rose, it seemed they got up from the bed. The bigger one could be Benjamin was her guess.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't discern any words from the whispers, not amidst Lambard's coarse snoring, who was between her and the shadowy figures. From what she could remember, it was Fred next to Lambard, so the other person was probably Fred. Within a few seconds, the figures vanished and as it was the darker side of the hall, she didn't even recognize when it happened. The brighter side, which was close to the backyard, was lit by the light from the huge LED lamp set overlooking the pool. Assuming the worst, Olenska closed her eyes swiftly to pretend she was asleep. As of her, it was the wisest move given that she was unsure and afraid that they might have noticed she was awake. It was an intense few minutes for her; if she opened her eyes, she would be dead meat, she thought. When she finally opened them, minutes later, as she heard no whispers or anything anymore, there was no one there which panicked her even more. She forced herself to sit upright despite her bad back. Good for her, she could see Benjamin and Fred on their bed, presumably asleep. At least she could see someone on their beds, covered in their blankets. Taking a deep breath, she reclined back, this time facing the other side with much comfort and composure.

Sadly, they weren't actually on their beds, it was just their pillows beneath their blankets. They were both actually upstairs at the moment, trying to open the storeroom with the keys Lambard handed in which was unexpectedly hard for them as they didn't know which was the key and had to try everything.

"What are you doing with the keys, Fred?" Benjamin lost his cool when Fred took long to open the door.

"I don't know, man. I'm trying," Fred's voice wasn't audible enough for Ben.

"Sorry, what? Is there a problem with the lock?" he asked, after which he noticed the awful trembling of Fred's hands.

"Are you all right?" he asked to which Fred mumbled. Benjamin wondered, "God! Don't tell me you aren't dry."

"What? I don't do drugs, man. It's just, you know, the lock, it's tight. The lock's too tight. It's a tight lock." Benjamin didn't need a better proof than this blabber to accuse him for doing drugs.

"What was it? Coke, huh? Right before we're about to do this? If recklessness had a human form, I'd bet it would look like you." Benjamin snatched the keys to open it himself.

Meanwhile, Lawrence got down from his bed, crept on all fours up to Lambard's bed. He had to be overcautious now that Olenska

was the one next to Lambard and the stool on which the bottle was placed was in between their beds. As Olenska was facing in the opposite direction, carefully he lifted the bottle on the stool beside his bed, praying that it wasn't empty. He was lucky there was enough in it for a sip. He emptied it slowly into his mouth to grasp its taste in his tongue. It wasn't enough to clearly determine what drink it was but he could surely say it was wine. Crawling all the way up to Sam's bed as silently as he could, he informed Sam what he found.

"What're you trying to prove?" Sam whispered, still lying on his bed.

"Don't you remember what we were told about having alcohol?"

Sam understood what Lawrence was trying to say and asked, "So they've got wine somewhere?"

"Somewhere Lambard knows while the rest of us don't. Also we can be sure only Lambard knows where the rifle is. That means there is someplace hidden here, large enough to store wine and a rifle that's presumably at least a metre long that also manages to stay hidden from our eyes."

"Better learn to use shorter sentences. I can't really understand your point," Sam replied superficially mocking Lawrence.

"Maybe a hiding place? Like a room built for the sole purpose of hiding? We saw the wine cellar in the store room was empty, right? Maybe they hid the wine in this arbitrary place for the prospect of our journey. So maybe that's where he hid the gun, I think," Lawrence tried to tie up the loose ends.

"You're missing the bigger picture, Lawrence. Even if you're right, we don't know where this imaginary secret hoard is. And we're short of resources that might help us find it," Sam said in a hopeless tone as he was quite convinced Lawrence was the Mr. Hearts and that he was trying to manipulate him into believing a story that didn't sound believable for him.

"Your point being?" Lawrence asked in a short sentence this time.

Suddenly, Sam hushed him and quickly closed his eyes, whispering, "Someone's coming downstairs."

Lawrence rolled laterally to hide himself beneath Sam's bed. Out of curiosity and a sudden rush of adrenaline, Lawrence lifted his head to his utmost, to see what was actually happening. He was able to see a couple pair of legs heading for the backyard. When he

was sure there was no more legs following, he came out from the underneath of Sam's bed and asked Sam who were they and what were they doing in whispers.

With the help of the light from the backyard, Sam could see two men conversing with one another in whispers just like himself and Lawrence.

"There's a lean guy, standing in an awkward posture," he informed Lawrence who replied at once, "Fred, of course. But what's he doing?"

"He's talking to the other guy, a fat guy. I have good reason to tell you that's Benjamin."

"Who the hell did I saw in their beds, then?"

"Probably a couple of pillows, I guess. Just like those in yours."

"Is it that common to use pillows for this?"

"Probably you're just as old fashioned as the trick itself."

"I'm to assume you didn't mean any offense?"

Sam didn't reply and was very keen on them both. "Fred disappeared?" he said in a startled tone.

"What? How? Did you miss it?"

"I don't know. One second he's there and the next he vanishes."

"Sounds like you missed him."

"Benjamin's headed outside," Sam said simultaneously brewing a plan in his mind. "I'll go after him."

"What?" Lawrence didn't get it of course.

"You go back to your bed. I'll go find where's he going."

"Why do you care about where he's going?"

"As far as anyone other than you is concerned, I'm going to use the toilet. If I don't return within five minutes, you come for me." He sounded very bold that even Lawrence trusted him and crawled back to his bed.

Last time when Sam felt courageous in a similar way, he wasn't really bold. He just pretended to be, so as to manifest an impression of bravery in front of others as a backlash to their harsh comments on him. But this time, the case was different. He wanted to be fearl-

ess because he realised fear would not help him. It was his courage that would ensure his survival. Though he suspected Lawrence to be Mr. Hearts, he still wasn't sure what Benjamin and Fred were up to at the middle of the night. He was also aware that Fred was somewhere amidst the darker side of the hall from the fact that he didn't return to his bed nor did he go to the backyard.

For the moment, he assumed Fred was Mr. Hearts and walked towards the backyard as if posing himself absolutely vulnerable in the killer's eyes. Plainly, in this imaginary occasion he developed in his mind, he was walking straight to his death. But he didn't panic, he forced himself not to as if his life depended on it which was actually true in his case.

It actually gave him hope, just as before, to do that. Luckily, Fred didn't show up and Sam made it to the backyard. He noticed the manhole cover near the pool had been removed, Benjamin was probably down the manhole. Just then it struck him that he never wondered how could a manhole be so wide - it even fitted Benjamin! To prevent Benjamin feel suspicious, he actually went to the common toilet but didn't enter as he wanted to keep an eye on the open manhole. He had to wait for a few minutes for Benjamin to pop up and when he did, he pretended to lock the toilet door as if he was coming out just now.

"Whoa, whoa, stop!" Sam gestured Benjamin to calm down to prevent him from making a sudden move. "What are you doing?"

"What're you doing?" Benjamin asked back.

"Can't you see?" Sam didn't wish to say the word himself but Benjamin didn't try to oppose him henceforth.

"It's nothing, Sam," he smiled, unable to continue which was very uncommon for him as he was almost never short of words.

"What are you holding?" Sam asked impatiently, looking at the flasks he was holding in both his hands.

"I confess, Sam. This might sound crazy but there's a whole wine cellar beneath here. It was the foxy crone Olenska who manipulated everyone to hide this from you. Such a despicable character she is! What are you, a little kid? To hide things from you. Have as much as you want, Sam. Live your life." It was remarkable how Benjamin's confession subtly transformed into an advice.

"You don't call her like that. You address her 'Lady'," Sam told him in a commanding tone which surprised Benjamin beyond measure. It sounded like a lion's roar coming from a goat's throat.

"But why, man? She doesn't even respect you," Benjamin felt helpless.

"That's between me and her. I'd insist you to stay away from this matter."

"I'm gonna get back to my bed. I'm leaving the manhole open for you," he tried to walk away from the scene.

"No. You can close it," Sam didn't let him leave soon.

Gasping, Benjamin slowly knelt down beside the manhole, keeping the flasks aside, pushed the heavy metal cover over the orifice of the manhole and stood up, breathing heavily. He then looked at Sam and nodded, wondering in his mind how much Sam had changed all of a sudden. When he entered the hall, he called out to Fred in a whisper. Fred had been standing by the covered furniture, behind the curtain of the eastern window the whole time Benjamin spent down the manhole. Benjamin asked him to stay there as he suspected he was on drugs. He replied Benjamin with a question, "Did you find it?"

"Yes," he juggled the flasks. "But get to your bed right now. We can get back there sometime later."

"What? Why not now?"

"Now's a bad time. Didn't you see Sam?"

"Sam? Isn't he sleeping?"

Benjamin grabbed his hand and walked him to his bed, "You're coming with me."

Sam, Lawrence, Olenska, all three of them were able to see him dragging Fred across the hall. Sam didn't actually want to close the manhole, he asked Benjamin to do that just because he didn't want him to treat him like a coward. Actually, he didn't want anyone to treat him like a coward anymore and Benjamin was just the start.

With the hook nearby the pool, he lifted the manhole cover which had a little handle in itself for hooking. It looked very deep from where he stood. But it didn't pose any threat as there was a metal ladder fixed inside which he used to climb down. It was at least fifteen feet deep and the ground was a bit muddy. It was very dark but he was able to see a little switch beside the ladder and flicked it. A light grew behind him, he turned to see a short, narrow tunnel that was no wider or taller than an average door, at the end of which there was a well lit, cozy room. He walked through the

muddy floor of the tunnel to reach the room that he assumed to be the highly sought after wine cellar.

It was an unsurprisingly tiny room, but big enough to hold a variety of liquor, a set of lavish couches and a small wooden closet. A rifle was rested on one side of the closet which, Sam was very sure, must be Lambard's. He reclined himself for a moment on the sofa, feeling proud of how he dealt with Benjamin. Then he grabbed the rifle, hoping Lawrence would soon come after looking for him. In the meantime, he decided to have some wine. He chose his favourite kind and looked for a glass. Were he the old Sam, he wouldn't have needed any glass to have wine. But now, he intended to stay clear-minded and to respect Olenska's intention. Two pegs and he was done. Yet, it felt like they were the best two pegs he had ever had. Finally, Sam got to spend some time relaxed, with no thoughts nagging his mind whatsoever.

Lawrence, on the other hand, was starting to feel the heat. Ben and Fred had returned to their beds but Sam hadn't yet. If he were to go looking after him, it would alarm Benjamin and Fred who were presumably still awake. For several minutes, he waited though it indefinitely seemed like hours. He observed his wrist watch to keep track of time. The ticking of the watch echoed in his head while he waited and kept on booming to a point where he couldn't tolerate.

With a jolt, he rose from his bed, wiping off the sweat from his face. He couldn't think right at the moment. Were Sam dead, how would things go down? That was the predominant question circling his mind and he wanted an answer so badly. Nothing else mattered to him at the moment more than that. He got down from his bed, his legs carried him to the backyard even without his consent. On his way, he turned back a second to see if anyone was awake. Though he couldn't see well in the dark, he could perceive no one was moving. However, with the small amount of light entering the hall, he sensed a pair of eyes looking at him. All this happened within a second, he didn't even realise what he just saw. When it struck him he saw someone awake, he turned back again but it was late. No one was actually awake or staring at him with wide open eyes.

But he was absolutely certain about what he saw. He couldn't forget the dead look in the brown eyes. And the first name that came across his mind when he recalled the look of the brown eyes was Olenska. However, he wasn't going to spare time to find who it was. He reached the backyard in a few steps and was surprised to see the open manhole. His first thought was that Sam's body was dumped in there but then he thought why would they leave it open

if they were to hide the body. Lesser did he know that Sam left it open purposefully.

He got down the manhole, wondering about its unusual width. He realised it was the wine cellar from the way the room looked and proceeded forward through the tunnel with silent and cautious steps. As soon as he stepped inside, something long came swiftly at his direction. It was the butt of a rifle; it hit his belly, inspiring a sharp pain. It also caused him a strong, unpreventable urge to gasp for air. There was a man in front of him holding a rifle but he could barely see his face.

"It was you, wasn't it?" said a voice which he could surely say was Sam's. "You are Mr. Hearts and you killed Henderson when he learnt about you." Lawrence wasn't in the condition to reply, he just gasped again.

"You're the reason behind all the chaos and yet you lurk among us in the darkness, relishing the frenzy aftermath."

"Sam, you're mistaken. You don't understand. You don't know what you're doing," Lawrence replied in short sentences, now that he found it difficult to breath. He could sense Sam was completely convinced otherwise and there was nothing he could do to save his head. He realised his fate was sealed and there was no way of prolonging it.

"You twisted liar!" Sam swung the rifle at the side of his head, knocking him down. Lawrence fell on the floor, dizziness clouded his mind, his vision was blurred; he could barely see Sam who was pointing the rifle at him, desperate enough to shoot him, believing it was an act of bravery. Gradually, it began to black out for Lawrence as he was losing his consciousness. He could see nothing anymore but was able to hear some voices that echoed in his head, "You're a monster!", "Go to hell!", "Get up, Laurie!". But he couldn't move or reply and slowly the voices faded too. He was lost in time and in essence, wading through the pool of emptiness with no destinations left to reach.



9. NOTHING MATTERS ANYMORE

Bob and Lopez had their guns cocked before they decided to open the door. Lopez even signalled him that he was going to go around the cabin to the front and just then they heard the voice of a male.

"Open up, Chuck. It's me. You heard about the cops?"

Bob guessed it wasn't going to a problem to open the door as whoever it was outside that door, they didn't try to break in or make a wild move but Lopez stopped him. He wanted to know what the guy outside was going to do and decided to wait.

There was a minute of silence that followed their decision which made them feel it was a bad decision because silence could be interpreted as absence of anyone, that whoever it was outside, he might have run off. So, Bob rushed to open the door sighing at Lopez.

He opened the door while still holding his gun in position with Lopez backing him up. It was the same lean, young man, Hank, who got terrified at the sight of them pointing their guns at him. Dead people and the bloody environment inside were decorative seasonings to his horror.

"Look whom we got here!" Bob said in a jovial tone though he was way too far from being cheerful.

He was brought inside but was not made to sit as the whole place was a mess with no usable chairs or any sort of furniture to rest. They informed the others about Hank and requested them to arrive at the scene soon though they were already halfway to the spot.

"What exactly was the business between you and Chuck? We need you to answer the whole history, only the truth, without fail,"

Bob said.

"I didn't know what was happening at first. It was Tuesday night. I happened to see what I shouldn't have. It was that single moment that seems to have changed my fate forever. Chuck had made me clean his cabin, I told you he's the bullyragging kind, remember? He was just that, he was the sickest piece of filth in the whole world. I was doing my work just as he wanted me to and then out of nowhere, a lean nice looking woman showed up at the cabin late into the night. I could only see one side of her face but I've never seen her before and I didn't know what was the business between them. I mean, Chuck meets a lot of women, most of them were wine-pourers for the yachts but she didn't look like one. She was well dressed and looked respectable. She and Chuck had a talk, I couldn't make anything out of it other than that she was leaving the city, never intending to return. And then after she'd left, Chuck came to me with a little package and said, 'You didn't see anyone here' and lent me the package. He said I'll get another such a package next week and all I got to do was to keep my mouth shut. He was strict and serious as never before and I accepted it. When I opened it I found five grands in it. That's the money you found from me. Chuck didn't tell to safekeep it for him. It was my compensation to not tell the truth about the lady."

"Can you identify this mysterious lady?" Lopez asked.

"It was dark outside. I could barely see half her face. I think she probably wanted to hide her face from me."

"So why didn't you tell us the truth before?" Bob was curious.

"I was afraid. You couldn't even imagine what horrible things Chuck would have done to me and my family, had I opposed him. He once abused my sister in detestable ways and I could do nothing to him. We're weak, we can do nothing to someone like him. God, we can't even stop such douchebags from tormenting us. Trying police was worse than suicide. He would have destroyed my whole family."

Hank's confession only made Lopez feel better about him shooting Chuck. The other policemen finally arrived in their wagons, switching the isolated place into a media hotspot within minutes. They wanted to spread the news as widely as possible as it involved the murder of a good police officer. Hank was taken into custody for the while as they could extract a lot more information from him.

Also, Bob didn't expose the truth about Lopez shooting Chuck to anyone. There was definitely guilt in Lopez's heart about that but

he didn't actually pull the trigger out of rage. He did it as a well-calculated move and very cautiously. And he was very sure it was a well deserved fate for Chuck whom he now despised more than anyone.

Owens got what he asked for. A couple of policemen in his room, ready to record him though he told them it wasn't a confession.

"There was this little bag, not so different from an usual hand-bag, that he keeps with himself all the time. When he told me he lost the money, he didn't give me the specifics about how he lost. If I were to guess, he probably kept the money in the bag and in fact lost the bag itself and not the money alone. I say so because I didn't happen to see the bag yesterday. And the bag not only contained the money but also every IDs, license and credit cards he ever owned. I put a lot of money in his bank account. So, if you let me or you yourself try to trace it down..." Owens looked at them in their eyes, hoping they would have understood his point.

The policemen turned away from him to have a talk in whispers as to considering in what way could this information be used in this case. After a minute of discussion, one of them replied, "We appreciate your help, Mr. Owens. It would take some time even if you hold your support for us. And as of this case, you're still not proven to be not guilty. We couldn't let things go bad for both of us, so we would help to shift your office to your mansion. You can do your work from here until you are proven innocent. So, we better hit the road. It was good to spend time with you."

They stood up and shook hands with Owens who was utterly disappointed that he still had to be locked off in his mansion.

"Uh... and one more thing," the officer turned back to Owens on his way to the door. "This is officer Hardy. You want anything, you can ask him. He'll be here with you all the time. Take care, Hardy," he patted his back as he left the room with the other officer.

Thus began the worst days of Owens' life. He couldn't even have thought of what was going to happen next. First thing, he didn't earn the 'good boy' name which he thought his little act of giving them information would gain him. And the other was that

Martin's death became a widespread news, exceedingly overshadowing his cousin's death which made the police work more towards solving Martin's case, compensating his family and calm down the wild debates and controversies the incident lightened up.

So, the next day, he was inquired all over again by people from various factions, including the police, an unidentified federal agent and a few press people too. He could now see no point in having his office shifted to his mansion as he barely had any time to do his work amidst all this. All this ruckus resulted in one bad thing - the police were less interested in the lead Owens gave as it would require a lot of time to yield a result than the other presumable leads.

With the rising craving for justice for Martin, they could do nothing better than making progress. Moreover, Martin was one of them, so it had a lot of gravity from their perspective too. If something such as this could happen to one of them, why wouldn't it happen to themselves? Now that was what concerned them the most.

And Owens was the unexpected victim of it all. He couldn't do anything that he desired. The worse thing was that he was forced to do what he despised the most - being interviewed and inquired. On top of all that, most of them treated him as guilty rather than just a suspect. That really hurt his fame and became a surprise jackpot for his business competitors. It became the worst day of his career and he couldn't do anything about it. Whenever he used the rest room, he would stay there for minutes to stay away from all the nonsense he was made to encounter and would only come out after Officer Hardy asked him to. And by evening, he had asked for an excuse more than seventeen times.

Even Hardy was able to understand why. He let him take all the time he needed since the eighteenth time. From then on, Owens adjourned all his meetings indefinitely to take some breath. He was literally watching his empire crashing down as he watched the interviews and the news about the case being telecasted in the television. It was something he had never experienced before. It was like being put in a cage only to watch your whole life being ruined. And it continued the next day too.

Whenever things went downhill for him, he would give in to consuming alcohol only to cope up with his loss and prepare for the upcoming events. But this time, even wine couldn't help him. He broke the wine glass right in front of Hardy by throwing it on the floor. Then he picked the isolated corner of his room and shrunk

himself to that spot. Hardy could sense he was weeping and approached him.

"Want me to grab you some dinner for you?" he asked genuinely.

"Like that would save my life!" Owens yelled in despair.

"Why isn't your life safe?" he asked doubtfully yet with good intention.

"You don't know me. My father was born in a rich family. One of the richest families you can ever imagine. He was a good man. And yet he was the most reckless and insolent man I have ever known. He was incompetent, he couldn't even protect his own birthright. So what you see here, my mansion, the furniture, all the pompous knick-knacks, including a single clothespin, everything, including my business, I earned it all. By myself. I didn't inherit any crap. Now I think it might paint a picture in your mind. About how much effort it would have required, the humongous toll I was exacted. And I'm losing everything for something I'm not even responsible for. I mean, is there anything worse than this that can ever happen to anyone?"

Silence was the only card Hardy could play at the moment. He grabbed his arm with one hand and patted his back with the other.

"I've lost everything, Hardy," his voice broke in anguish and he shut his eyes to hold his tears. Within seconds, he opened his eyes. "No. Not everything. I've got someone who dearly loves me. This world would mean something to me with she waiting for me and I for her. Believe me, I may sound like a lovely prince from the fairy tales but it is really heart-warming for me to think of her at this time, that she really cares for me. She's in my private island now. Five days and then I'll get to meet her. All I have to do is to sit through the worst five days of my life and it'll be over for good."

Hardy barely replied anything but he felt good that Owens was able to encourage himself and stay strong, so he smiled at him.

"I'd rather forget I was rich and be gone far away with her from all this," Owens didn't say that without pain but felt relieved too.

"You can do that? Your money, your business and everything you've earned all by yourself. They don't matter to you?" Hardy asked.

"Not anymore. Nothing does anymore. Can you do something for me, Hardy? Call 'em all. Bring them up here. I want to be done

with all this bilge. Procrastination won't help me in that regard. By this time tomorrow, this should have ended."

"You sure about that? Not a minute ago, you were weeping."

"It's alright, Hardy. As I said, nothing matters anymore."

From then on, Owens hardly had any time to take care of his personal needs. As soon as he saw a steep decrease in the price of his stocks in the market, he froze all his further investments by talking to the respective authorities over telephone in front of Hardy. He wasted no time in selling all his stocks for profit or loss as he predicted that if he waited anymore, he would be rendered bankrupt as he recently had a bank loan him a big sum of money for the improvement of his firm. But he realised it was pointless to still hope that he could improve his firm, so he began the sale. Many of his close associates warned him it was a very unwise move that it was in fact this way of selling would actually make him bankrupt but Owens wasn't going to change his decision. It was proven Martin's death had nothing to do with Owens but that wouldn't change anything in people's mind. They believed Martin's death happened while investigating a case in which Owens was the prime suspect and there was no other big names in the suspects list, so naturally people developed hatred for Owens. People would easily hate a rich man than a poor fellow. But Owens was brilliant enough to realise this and made all the wise moves to protect himself from bankruptcy.

He even talked to his business friends and competitors about selling his company to them for a few to no profit. To manage his financial status, he had to sell almost all of his properties but he could retain his mansion without loss. Still, he talked to people about its sale along with most of its furniture and fittings. It would net him a few hundred thousands that could be enumerated as his worth. So, at the end, Owens wasn't a bankrupt but a man with money but no home. He had however asked the new owner of the mansion to let him stay there for a few days, until his guests returned from his private island, which was of course not his anymore. Technically, he hadn't sold it yet though the talks were done all in favour of Owens.

It was even rumoured around the city that Owens' downfall was, in fact, a well executed plan by his competitors to squash his so-called business empire that they took advantage of his situation and used propagandism as their weapon to paint the picture of Owens as an evil billionaire. But as Owens himself said nothing mattered anymore, he didn't care about it at all.

However, he had to get by the hard time without losing his hope for which he depended on a wrong crutch; he really gave in to alcohol and smoking. Not a moment was he away from a cigarette, as noticed by Hardy. He could see that in the tenor Owens was, no counsel would come to fruition.

Owens, at some point, tried to talk to Marcella by calling the emergency telephone in his private island though he was aware of the fact that the signal might not reach there. It didn't reach anyway not because of terrible weather but because Bodholm disconnected it as discovered by Marcella.

Two days had now passed and the police finally tied up all the loose ends in Martin's murder, arranged a huge, honourable funeral for Martin and the case was closed. But they were no close to finding Davis' murderer at all. It was obviously because Martin's death took all the spotlight. They asked Hank to identify the lady he saw by showing him the pictures of the servants who worked in the mansion though he already knew most of them. They also brought him the photographs of all the women related to the mansion and the mansion workers which was only partially useful; as he saw only half her face, he couldn't clearly identify the exact person but came up with eight final contenders among whom one must be the sought-after lady. As it was obviously a tedious job and the chances of obtaining a successful result were low, they also had to put effort on other possible leads. That led them to at last consider Owens' lead, a separate team was developed to do the groundwork which would take days to trace the details about all the transactions. They collected the required details from Owens to begin the work but that only worried him as until proven innocent, he couldn't be free and they were just starting the inquiry on that matter, delaying his freedom further.

That evening, after the police had left, Hardy had a little talk with Owens hoping it might help him let off some steam.

"So what is she like?"

"You mean... her?"

"Yeah."

"Well," Owens took a cigarette out of his pocket, lit it with a candle, put it in his mouth and pulled on it vigorously, "I uh... I don't like to describe her."

"Oh. I'm sorry if it felt inappropriate for you."

"It's alright. Let me try. She... you know, her name is Marcella. I met her for the first time probably a year ago."

"So it was slow burn, huh?"

"You can never imagine how slow. It took a whole month for me just to say hi," Owens chuckled heartily like it was the first time in his life. "There were a hundred different occasions and I utilized none of them. That's ridiculously over-the-top reluctance if I may say so. The funny thing is I never realised it back then."

"Why it took so long anyway?"

"It is a weird fact. We shared minutes of eye contact that came out of nowhere which would be ultimately satisfying for us. I hadn't had the guts to speak, I confess but she did the same too. I learnt that she was too shy to do so later on. That's a completely uncanny fact because as far as I know, she's way too far from being timid."

"Shyness is different from frightfulness, isn't it?"

"But often counted as the same, don't they?"

"Not for me. Doesn't sound right, man. It's like saying killing is a punishment. Like it would bring justice."

"Since when did cops start to talk about justice? Better leave it with the lawyers and judges. We've had enough of liars in this world already."

Hardy stared at him, unable to interpret any positive point from his words. "What do you mean? Cops shouldn't talk about law and justice?"

"I didn't mean any such thing. What I actually mean is, killing can bring justice. It can be mercy, either to the victim or everyone else."

"No, Owens. I think you meant something else. Something that's capable of scathing my heart."

"No, no, no. You might've got me wrong. I-"

"It's alright, Owens. I get it. You're too stressful to think right. It's better if I leave you alone for sometime."

"No, it's not like that, Hardy. I like it in your presence."

Hardy began to leave, "You've grown dislike for the police, Owens. I can understand why and you're not to be blamed. Lets stop it right there."

Owens felt a bit bad to have said what he said as Hardy leaving his room made him sad. What made him even sadder later was that it was the last time Hardy spoke to him well.

The next day, the police learnt that among the eight lady suspects, only one was not at home and the others were pretty low level workers and they didn't show any signs of being suddenly rich. The one woman was Clara Bodholm. Davis' bank account was an empty one, so they presumed Clara was behind the whole operation as she had left her home and she might be the one who met Chuck that particular night.

When they tightened their grip with their investigation on Clara, things such as Bodholm not leaving the city on the said day, Clara accompanying him the previous day were leaked. Finally, it was found that the transactions from Davis' account was all made by Chuck at various places. So, it was finally assumed that Bodholm might be the killer and became the prime suspect.

As there was no response from them when the police called the telephone in the private island, they had to send a team over there to learn what happened. With the help of the local navy, they arranged a boat to get to Owens' island with a couple missions - arrest Bodholm and Clara, retrieve Owens' guests safely back to the city. It was on Owens' request that they planned to drop the guests right where they started off their journey. Owens felt sunshine again as he was now free from the clutches of the police though he was secretly under their monitoring. Sad thing was that he hadn't had the chance to bid goodbye to Hardy. It became as if he never existed in his life.

When the day of their return arrived, Owens got to his previous beach house which he had sold anyway very early. The new owner, out of respect, let him wait there. He got to see the sunrise from there and to him, the sun had never shone on him as brightly as that before. Not once did Owens feel so hopeful as he did now, fantasizing his reunion with Marcella and his imminent marriage to her. He even wondered how was he going to explain it to Olenska, the biggest hurdle in his life ahead. He knew she would understand but he was afraid what she would do after realising Marcella's financial background.

But as he had quoted to himself many times the past few days, he said to himself once again, "Nothing matters anymore."

A couple hours had passed and when he recovered consciousness, Lawrence found himself lying on the floor in a different place. It took him minutes to be freed from the blur of his vision after which he realised he was in the same wine cellar but beside the couch in front of the shelves decorated with wine bottles of various kinds. He forced himself up to find out how he got there. The first thing he noticed was the dampness he felt in his right hand and found it was drenched in blood. He sensed no pain or wounds in his hand and so he looked around to see where the blood came from. But what he saw shook him beyond words. Sam was lying on the floor dead, soaking in a pool of his own blood, with a part of his face collapsed beyond recognition.

Immediately, he heard the voice in his head *He deserved it, doesn't he, Laurie?* Initially paying no heed to the words, he searched for clues to what actually happened. There was a thick wooden cane with bloodstain on the floor, right where he was lying a minute ago. It was surprise on top of surprise for Lawrence as he guessed it could have been from that cane he got his hand blood-drenched.

He wondered if it was himself who killed Sam as there were no clues for anyone else to have appeared at the scene. He even wondered if he actually passed out or not. The fear that now haunted him was that if not mentally, was he physically the reason for Sam's demise? Has the monster inside him finally taken control himself? Did he actually beat Sam to death out of rage? But sadly, he remembered none of it, if any of it had actually happened. He wasn't sure what was he going to do and just then, the biggest fear he ever faced arose. Was he really Mr. Hearts, the killer among them? He couldn't answer this too for he also didn't remember anything such as killing Henderson.

Standing there beside a corpse and a pool of blood wasn't particularly pleasing for him; he felt an irresistible impulse to leave the place as he thought it wasn't brilliant or safe to stay there any further. Carefully, he exited the cellar, without getting blood on his shoe soles. He climbed out of the manhole, feeling guilty all the while he did so. He closed the manhole behind him, sorrowfully, as it felt like sealing Sam's coffin himself after the tragedy of his death. He tiptoed to the restroom, making sure on the way that no one was watching. Unable to control himself, he even broke tears when he washed his bloody hands and the wound on the side of his forehead, deeply disturbed by the fact that he was responsible for Sam's death.

Though it was a relief for him to get back to his bed without anybody noticing him, it also made him realise that when he left his

bed, Sam was lying in his bed awake and now he had gone asleep forever but his bed was empty. Guiltiness invaded his heart, causing great pain to him mentally. He couldn't keep his mind from thinking about it and it was only getting worse with time like an uncleaned wound. He kept weeping over it, wetting the pillow with his tears. The fact that he killed a man while he was unconscious prevented him to fall asleep but the concussion he sustained from Sam's blow to his head caused him severe headache that required him to take some rest. It was an hour of mental torture he suffered amidst which he finally passed out as his thoughts gradually subsided.

When he recovered consciousness, he saw Fred looking directly at him, standing beside his bed.

"You alright?" he asked which echoed through Lawrence's head. He gasped in pain as he felt like his head was put in a vice. He pulled himself to get up from the bed and it required a lot of energy from him just to do that.

"Lawrence. I asked you if you are alright," Fred said looking into his eyes.

"Uh... yeah. I guess so."

"But you look like you're in pain."

"Oh, it's nothing," Lawrence disturbed his hair with his hand, secretly covering the wound on his forehead with the hair. "A mild headache is all. Why do you seem so caring all of a sudden?"

"Caring?" Fred scoffed. "I came to wake you up, lazy head. Things are beginning to go south again."

"The heck you mean?" Lawrence asked, rubbing his eyes, while sweating inside, wondering if it was about Sam.

"Sam's missing. Just after he claimed the killer was after him. One hell of a coincidence, huh?"

"Oh, god!" Lawrence tried his best to look shocked. "How? What exactly happened?"

"Nothing special with the small details. Sam's bed was empty and everybody's gone searching for him."

Suddenly, Fred paused, gaining Lawrence attention; he even felt the urge to ask him why he stopped.

But Fred continued, "Except you." That was one of the few moments Lawrence's face displayed horror, he feared what might

en next. "That too is one hell of a coincidence, isn't it?" Fred asked in a deliberately serious tone. Gathering courage in himself, he said in a rather weak tone, "Is this a joke?"

"Do you think it is?" Fred asked still being serious, staring into his eyes. Lawrence couldn't look away, thinking it would make him look guilty. He just hoped Fred would stop staring and it wasn't happening either. As the intensity rose to unbearable amounts, Marcella said loudly as she came downstairs, "I thought you guys were straight."

"Ah, you ruined it," Fred turned to her and yelled. "I almost had him. Just look at his face," he laughed as he succeeded in scaring Lawrence. Lawrence was in fact feeling like he could breathe again, now that he realised it was only a sleazy little game by Fred. He was so relieved only he couldn't show it in his face.

"What? Are you playing games? Didn't you understand the seriousness of this matter?" Marcella questioned Fred.

"I checked the backyard. No signs of him," Fred yelled back to show he wasn't all careless. That shut her mouth however. But Fred continued, "So, why have you come down here?"

"It's your dear friend, Bodholm. He's escaped. And Sam, preordained as the next target, goes missing simultaneously. Coincidence is not the word for this, I think."

There were now enough reasons for them to accuse Bodholm as Mr. Hearts but the problem was his absence. It was the classic murderer-on-the-loose situation now and henceforth they had to spend every minute cautiously.

What they found in the storeroom in the morning was a collapsed rack, spilled tin food and containers. The plastic container seal with which Lambard bound Bodholm's hands to a rack was there on the floor in the undone manner. It was more than enough proof to assume Bodholm escaped from his bounds somehow but how he escaped the storeroom was a bit of a mystery.

The door remained locked and the key was with Lambard the whole night - when he checked both before he went to sleep and in the morning - it was in the drawer of the table beside his bed, right where Fred kept it. Fred did his job right. Might he be arrogant, lazy or frequently hysterical but one thing about Lambard everyone could agree with was that he would never have let Bodholm out of the storeroom even if it had been a life or death situation for him. There were no other exits for the storeroom. So, the only possible way Bodholm got out of there was probably through the window

which was always kept open. But the problem with that was that even if he got out of the window, he had to suffer at least a twenty feet fall to the ground. Naturally, it sounded like a crazy idea. If he escaped the place to live peacefully, why should he die trying?

Eventually, it was guessed that he probably had help. Then came another theory about his escape - the helper was Samwell! Which they believed might explain his absence. The previous night, when Lambard locked the storeroom, Sam was there which proved that he knew the key was with Lambard. He might have unlocked the storeroom door and locked it later to make it look like it was never opened. Then again, there were still questions as to why Sam had to do all of this and where had he gone? What happened to him? Where is Bodholm? The only one who knew answers to all these questions, as they thought, was Bodholm.

But what he actually knew was...

Hours had passed after Lambard left him locked in the storeroom and Bodholm hadn't touched the food he was given. Rather, he was focused very much on the window, hoping he would get to see the full moon. Were he lucky or was it just a coincidence, a bright full moon appeared in the sky which he could see through the window in the cloudy night. It brought him great happiness nothing ever brought him, he felt like he attained the purpose of his life just by seeing it. The silver moon light shone on his face through the window brightly; it felt like freedom though he was still in bounds.

Suddenly, he heard a mild thud at the door that got his attention at once. He could even hear the jiggling of keys and the clacking of the door lock. He was now sure there was someone out of there, someone trying to open the door. It felt crazy for him to think it was Lambard but he was sure Lambard wouldn't trust anyone with the keys. The door opened and someone entered silently holding something long and slender like a stick vertically. Bodholm feared who it might be as the person wasn't visible in the dark until he stepped into the shaft of moonlight through the window. The person was covering himself in a blanket, so the face and the clothing weren't visible but by the looks and the way of walking, Bodholm could only say it was a man. And he knew the blanket too as he was the one to order the very model to fashion all the beds alike. That gave him away that it was one of them but just didn't know who it was.

Another terrific thing he noticed in the momentary duration the man crossed the shaft was that he wasn't holding any stick, it was Lambard's rifle! And before Bodholm could ask him who he was, he

walked past him and placed the rifle on top of the nearby rack. Then, without even looking at Bodholm or replying to his questions, the man exited the room, locking it behind him. Perplexed by what he saw, Bodholm even wondered if what he saw was actually real as he sensed no point in the man's actions.

But the way he saw it, it was an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and he chose not to miss it. After a considerable amount of time in which he assumed that the man would have gone far, he moved his legs over the floor to the rack, wrapped them around one of its iron legs and with all his might, he twirled his legs to bring down the rack. His first try was a painful failure, the iron went hard on his ankles. The next try, he managed to pull the whole rack down, scattering all the packages and containers arranged in it. It didn't cause much sound as he calculatedly let it fall on the wooden stool in the range of its fall, that helped in reducing the sound of the fall. However, the stool ended up losing two of its legs. Bodholm, with his legs, browsed through the spillage, hoping to find something, anything that could help him break his bounds and grab the rifle which was now among the spillage. He too understood that the rifle was the leverage Lambard had over anyone else and that just made him more dangerous than ever and that was why he wanted the rifle for himself.

All he managed to get was a butter knife but he knew he was more than lucky to have got it at least. He carefully brought it close to his head, he was now lying on the floor on the side of his face. Using his tongue, he pulled the knife close enough to grab it between his teeth. He then lifted his head, firmly holding the knife with his teeth, thereby bringing it closer to his hands. Once it landed in his hands, he took a deep breath that he had passed the hard and awkward part. Expectedly, it required minutes of sawing to unbind his hands.

When he was finally free, he thanked the full moon as he considered it a good omen. He threw the rifle out of the window carefully. He grabbed as many breads and buns as he could and filled his pockets to the fullest. There was a thin drain pipe laid on the outer side of the wall not feet away from the window. Bodholm hoped he would be able to use it to slide down, making his travel downwards slower and safer. But for that he had to make a jump out of the window to get hold of the pipe. With nothing but the hope he had mustered in himself, he proceeded to make the jump. Though he wasn't able to reach as far as he thought he would, he managed to get hold of the pipe with his long right hand. He was genuinely thankful for god as finally, the longness of his hand was useful to him. But the sliding journey was too swift and wasn't

smooth at all with the fixtures and the nail heads laid to fix the pipe to the wall injuring his hand as he slid down. At some point, he couldn't bear the pain it caused and involuntarily he let go of the pipe with few feet left to slide through, resulting in a harsh landing.

Again, it was his legs that sustained damage, this time due to the impact of the fall. His left ankle was now seriously injured that he had to limp instead of walking. He limped into the woods, holding the rifle in his hand, thus establishing the classic situation.

After finding Bodholm's absence in the storeroom, Lambard was both infuriated and scared but whenever he was angry, he wouldn't let any other emotions take him over. Until his anger was sated, nothing else would matter to him. As an immediate reflex after he found out Bodholm's escape, he went looking around the nearby rooms in search of Bodholm until he reached the dining hall when he realised it was useless to search for him unless everyone cooperated with him. More than once, Lambard learnt that no one there would act together and cooperation was the last thing one could find among these people. Moreover, he didn't also want anyone to accompany him to pursue Bodholm as he was now his target and he had decided to finish him once and for all, no matter what.

He walked close to the dining table, rested himself on a chair to think what he should do now. His eyes were fixed on the chandelier as he plunged deep into his thoughts. Finally, he succeeded in convincing himself to use his rifle, simultaneously developing the exact words he would have to say the police after they got out of the island to explain to them that how big a threat was Bodholm and that he was a cold-blooded murderer. He believed Bodholm had killed Sam and to avenge him and all the terrible things Bodholm did to him, he was going to kill Bodholm himself. Before he went downstairs, he took a meat knife from the kitchen with him.

In the meantime, everyone was being informed about Bodholm's escape by Marcella and she hesitated to do so when she approached Olenska who roamed about the bedrooms by herself in her wheelchair, lamenting Sam's disappearance in murmurs. There was no point in her doing as she was too worried to think right. She was still hoping she would find him in one of the rooms and she so badly wanted to apologize to him. Marcella realised Olenska was doing it herself because she wouldn't let her emotions out of her in front of others. Yet, she decided not to inform her about Bodholm and left the place.

She then got to meet Lawrence again, this time he was alone in his bed. She was mildly surprised to see him at the very same place on the bed she saw him earlier, from which she guessed he hadn't

yet left his bed. She approached him with slow steps. Though, it made him aware of her presence.

"Haven't you combed your hair? I've never seen you with unkempt hair," she asked him seemingly out of care.

"It's nothing. Just a mild headache. Nothing to worry about," Lawrence tried to get her out of the matter.

But Marcella wasn't easily convincible. She bent over to him a little, grabbed his upper arm, looked into his eyes and said, "Whatever happened, you know you are free to tell me. I'm not gonna judge you. I ask you to be open with me."

If anyone had asked him the same question, Lawrence would have replied them harshly such as *Why do you care?* or *Why should I be open with you?* or something even harsher as, for a long period of time in his life, he was almost alone with no one to talk to or even around him. He actually liked it, he thought only through loneliness can anyone attain happiness. Loneliness also created an illusion that he was better than everyone else. But this time, he didn't want to that. He wanted just once to experience being a family.

"Have you ever felt so guilty for something you did that you spend hours worrying about it and then, suddenly, out of nowhere, for no real reason, you find the guilt in you has completely vanished, leaving no trace of its existence? That's how I feel right now," Lawrence let it out from his heart.

"I have never felt being so guilty. If it were gonna make me feel guilty, I wouldn't have done it in the first place," Marcella said calmly. Lawrence just nodded as the conversation was now something they didn't expect or even liked the way it went.

"If you'll excuse me," Lawrence got out of his bed finally just to get away from her for a moment. She didn't hurdle him either.

The blow to his head seemed to have caused him a concussion as a result of which he suffered untimely dizziness and nausea. He even skipped breakfast, had nothing more than a glass of water the whole morning. Everyone finally assembled in the hall to have answers for their numerous questions with by far, no clues about Sam's disappearance.

"I'll bring in my rifle. That's something he lacks," Lambard made his say. "I don't say this to you hoping at least one of you might pay enough attention to my words but for the sake of it. I'm not compelling or even asking anyone to spend your precious time and soul to work towards cooperation."

Saying so, he headed for the backyard when Benjamin stopped him.

"I agree with you, Mr. Lambard. No matter what. Yet, I have something to add on this matter," he said hesitantly but drew everyone's attention at once. "If one among us isn't the killer, then probably I'm the last person here seen by Sam."

"So, you've taken the liberty of assuming Sam's dead?" Olenska asked which felt like she had at last spoken after an age. Olenska actually knew Sam didn't return to his bed after Benjamin and Fred went to their beds. But she didn't want to express her knowledge before them yet.

"I... It just doesn't make sense for me to think otherwise but let me put forth what happened last night. I and Fred were searching for the supposed hidden wine cellar. We met Bodholm to ask about it. Fred brought me the keys to the storeroom."

"You stole it from me?" Lambard's anger at Fred was sensible but Fred didn't reply.

"We got to know it was under the manhole beside the pool in the backyard from Bodholm. I got down into it while I'd asked Fred to keep watch for me. And when I got out with some bottles of my interests, I ran into Sam who was just coming out of the toilet. He asked me what I was doing, I told him everything. Then I left him to get to my bed with Fred. The last time I saw him, I think, he went for the manhole. I don't know what happened to him after that."

"You saw my rifle there?" Lambard was much invested in his own interest.

"That's it? You sure about that?" Olenska asked Benjamin, unintentionally inciting fear in Lawrence's heart who was afraid if she had seen him.

Benjamin replied genuinely, "I've told everything I know. I don't-," but was interrupted abruptly, not by Marcella this time but by the sound of a gunshot that echoed through the hall. It immediately struck fear into their hearts that they involuntarily sought to take cover except Olenska. She wasn't fast enough, nor was she very concerned about her life. At least, not as much as the others. The sound came from the backyard, no doubt, but they didn't see anyone there. For a minute or so, they waited for something unlikely to happen but nothing occurred.

Just when they decided to move from their uncomfortable postures, beneath their beds, they heard a voice that was distinct and clear enough for them to recognize as Bodholm's.

"You know who I am. I am holding Lambard's rifle in my hand. I shall not pull this trigger again if you listen to my simple instructions. I only want Lambard to come out. I want him to meet me at the wharf. Others stay indoors. If you wanna know what's happening, watch us through the west window in the dining hall."

He said nothing more, still, no one was ready to believe his words. But to all their surprise, Lambard strode towards the backyard.

"Don't be hasty, Mr. Lambard. You don't wanna lose your life for a goddamn wooden rifle," Benjamin advised him.

Lambard didn't stop but turned back and said, "It holds only two rounds in a clip. And he's already used one." Thus, he went to the backyard and disappeared from their sight. From the way he left, they sensed they had to get to the dining hall as quickly as they could if they didn't want to miss anything. They had to also bring Olenska upstairs which usually required a man force of two.

"Leave the chair, lad. Just bring me upstairs. I don't intend to stay there longer than the duration of the incident," Olenska said to Fred in her own way of using words which Marcella used to admire. She still admired secretly but that wasn't enough for her to not hate her. In fact, she hated Olenska just because she had no chance of mending the relationship with her.

It's was remarkably foggy in the woods, one couldn't distinguish a tree from a man. It was in such a condition, Lambard had to walk to reach the wharf. But Lambard didn't mind the trees, he just made sure no one was around him closely because he thought if he couldn't differentiate a tree from a man then the same must apply for Bodholm. Despite his over-the-top confidence, he took his steps forward carefully and cautiously. When he got close to the wharf, he sensed the fog was less denser at the spot and amidst it, he could see a man holding a rifle at him. it was undoubtedly Bodholm, so Lambard spoke up.

Were it anyone other than Lambard, their question would have probably been something like 'Where is Sam?', 'What did you do to Sam?' or 'Is Sam alive?' But his first question was, "How did you find my rifle?" and he strode fast towards him, with a hand in his pocket where he had hidden the knife.

"Slow down, Lambard. Remember who's holding the rifle," Bodholm warned.

"You remember who's rifle you're holding," Lambard replied in anger. By this time, everyone had gotten to that particular window in the dining hall, Fred held Olenska upright so that she could get a good look of the scenario.

"You leave me no other choice, Lambard," saying so, Bodholm raised the rifle, held it against his shoulder, gaining a good aim at Lambard's head. Only then, Lambard slowed down. There was now a distance not more than ten feet between them and they were facing each other like a brawl could spawn any minute.

"Why don't you put down the gun? Whatever you've got to say won't convince me to trust you wouldn't pull the trigger," Lambard said.

"The rifle is the only thing that can ensure my safety right now."

"There is something about your wife I know you're unaware of. It's a secret only I know," Lambard said in a confident tone.

"Don't you dare talk one more word about my wife."

"You know secrets are special, right? So is this. It might even change the way you see your wife."

"If it is your intention to provoke me, better think twice."

"That secret, my friend, is the only thing that can ensure my safety right now."

Bodholm now realised what his real intention was and didn't try to make things worse.

"All right. When are you gonna tell me this secret?"

"Why did you bring me here? And how the hell did you escape?"

"Look at my face, Lambard. Look at what I'm going to say and listen carefully. I don't give a damn about anything. My wife is dead and nothing can be done about that. Whatever story you're gonna cook up about her is not gonna matter anymore. You're now here, in front of me and your life is in my hands, literally. Not even the damn god can ensure your safety now. But one thing can. Doing exactly what I say. Now, kneel down."

Lambard didn't expect it but wasn't ready to do as he said.

"Now I can say your legs are the only things that can ensure your safety," Bodholm insisted him indirectly. Lambard didn't move, not at all interested to give in.

"Is he gonna shoot him?" Marcella asked in awe and curiosity.

"Not until they discontinue the talking," Olenska said, not as a reply to Marcella but to explain the situation to everyone.

"The quicker you do this, the better are the chances of your survival," Bodholm said clearly, implying he wasn't going to wait. "I've made it easy for you. There is no one around to give you the you-are-so-evil look."

Lambard momentarily considered using the knife with the intent of finishing the rivalry between them even if it was going to result in bloodshed. But then, he sensed he wasn't close enough to make it. Left with no other choices, Lambard gave up and slowly knelt down, swearing him inside.

"What's he doing?" Fred asked in surprise.

"I think we've seen something similar before," Olenska said, recalling Bodholm's confession.

"What do you want me to say?" Lambard asked impatiently.

"All those crimes you've ever done. Confess them before me."

"What do you think you'll possibly gain from that?"

"The killer. It was you. You murdered Henderson."

Lambard was shaken by those words, it was even visible in his usually expressionless face.

As they both were quite distant from the mansion, Lawrence couldn't focus on them well with his eyes as it only worsened his headache. So, he took off his eyes from them, withdrew from the window, not minding if he might miss something. Only Marcella noticed him but she too didn't wish to miss anything. He rested on a chair around the dining table and stretched himself. His headache was unapologetically rude to him, his concussion seemed to have worsened over time that he couldn't think of anything else.

He restlessly let his eyes roam about the table unsure of what to do to with his pain. He didn't realise what he saw at first, it took him minutes to actually get it. The tiny elf figurines around the central chandelier. There were ten of them when he first saw but now

there were only six. Unable to interpret what it meant, he spent a couple minutes thinking over it while the others were very much interested in the face-off between Lambard and Bodholm, reading their intentions and every move.

Bodholm asked Lambard after a couple dialogue exchanges, "Got them with you now?" .

"Yes. In my pocket," he replied calmly.

"Slowly, reach into your pocket. Take 'em out and toss them to me. And remember to do it real slow."

Lambard put his hand into his pocket just as he said, took out few tiny pieces of glass and tossed it over to Bodholm. Bodholm slowly bent over, slightly lowering the rifle to take a look at the glass pieces. At once, Bodholm recognized he had indeed been talking to the very killer they were all worried about.

"What is he doing?" Benjamin asked unable to understand what was happening.

"All I can see is, Bodholm's very unwise to weaken his defense," Olenska replied.

Lambard was in the knelt-down position which he saw as a challenge to charge at Bodholm with the knife. As for a fraction of second, Bodholm had lowered his rifle, Lambard considered he might not get another chance and finally decided to use it. Least expected by Bodholm, Lambard pulled out the very meat cleaver Bodholm once stuck against Lambard's neck from the back of his belt where he had kept the knife tucked in. He charged at him, holding the knife in the edge-in position with no intent other than to end things with a bloodshed. But Bodholm was quick enough to parry his charge with the rifle. Lambard slipped a bit in the watery floor of the wharf and his charge was an utter failure.

Lambard's move shocked everyone in the dining hall too as they weren't aware of the knife he had hidden in his pants. And when they realised it was a failure for Lambard, they knew what was going to happen.

"God, he's dead!" Olenska exclaimed, gaining Lawrence's attention, who came back to the watchers-at-the-window to try his best to see what was going on.

"Mr. Lambard's killed himself," Benjamin said in a frightened tone.

"Somebody go! Stop Bodholm!" Olenska yelled in horror, yet no one seemed to move. "At least let's shout to him." Marcella called out Bodholm from there itself though they were very doubtful if he could hear. "Fine, I'll go," Lawrence stood up from the chair, unable to resist the ignorance of others. But when he climbed downstairs, he didn't show hastiness. If he tried to run down the stairs swiftly, every time he took a step, he felt a bump in his head which inflicted him serious pain.

Lambard, however, balanced himself to not fall on the floor with his hand. He lifted his head to look at Bodholm in his eyes to show him that he still was not ready to die in his hands. It was very obvious for everyone Lambard was done, all thanks to his own arrogance and stupidity, now that Bodholm had a very good aim at his head and was only shy of pulling the trigger.

The seemingly never ending seconds only tended to slow down the time for everyone. "What is he waiting for?" Olenska asked with a weird surprise as Bodholm still hadn't pulled the trigger. After all the kills he had done in the past, his hands now trembled to pull the trigger. Though he knew it was the safest move, he couldn't do it, knowing it would be no better than a disgrace to his late wife. Lambard exploited this weakness in his favour.

He charged at him again but this time he was quick enough to disturb his aim by grabbing the rifle while simultaneously swinging the knife at his neck from which Bodholm escaped marginally. Bodholm was bigger than him so Lambard had to rely on his intelligence and tricks rather than brute strength. Bodholm grabbed Lambard's nape with his other hand and tried to pull him away to relieve his hold on the rifle. But Lambard cut his arm a bit below his wrist. Though Bodholm could tolerate the pain and not give in, he let go of the rifle because where he got cut, it was an unusually dangerous place to get cut. The knife got deeper than one would think, cutting open the ulnar artery. It resulted in immediate bleeding, causing him to lose blood profusely and that was why he let the rifle from his hand.

He shoved away Lambard, untied the cloth he had tied around the wound on his ankle which he sustained from bringing down the rack the previous night. He tied it tightly over the cut to stop the blood loss. Now that the rifle was in his hands, Lambard had the upper hand over Bodholm.

"About your wife. It isn't a secret, dog. 'Cause everyone knows who she is," it was obvious Lambard tried to trigger him. Even

Bodholm got the picture of what his next words were going to be and he begged his ears to not hear him.

"A double-dealing dirty slut," Lambard said with pride in a jubilant manner. Bodholm forced himself to tolerate it as he realised Lambard was only trying to make him angry because he wanted to show it was a reasonable murder which would require his own actions, blinded by anger against him.

"I pity for you, Lambard," Bodholm said to make himself feel better. "You've got to spend long days ahead in this scumhole. I'm lucky I haven't got any more than a few seconds."

Without waiting, Lambard pulled the trigger to the shock and despair of everyone. It was at last only Bodholm who kept his word and was indeed truthful. Afraid it was too late, Lawrence began to stride across the path to the entrance as he heard the gunshot. It was heartbreaking for him to think that now because of him, two lives were lost. He actually began to run, his headache didn't matter at all.

For a moment, Olenska and everyone at the window lost their hope. Someone whom they actually saw as the murderer was found to hesitate to kill the man he disliked the most. They felt like being alive again after years of oblivion when they saw Bodholm was still alive. When they saw him jolt as Lambard shot him, they thought he was indeed killed. But the jolt was actually an attempt to escape the bullet. He managed to get his head out of his aim but got shot close to his left shoulder, the clavicle bone must have been shattered.

He then held Lambard's hand to prevent him cut his throat with the knife. It was at the moment Lawrence entered into the scene, a minute since the gunshot. He felt as merry as a butterfly jostling out of a cocoon to see Bodholm alive. He tried to pull Lambard out of there by grabbing him with both his arms around his chest from his back.

"Leave it, Lambard. It's alright. Let it go. It's done. You done well," he tried to talk him out of it but Lambard was still keen on Bodholm's throat, only bloodshed could satisfy. He shoved Lawrence away and succeeded in untying the cloth on Bodholm's wound with his other hand. He scraped the wound with his fingernail causing distress to him. Bodholm still hadn't recovered from the shock caused by the gunshot which was why he couldn't take out Lambard with his strength. Also he couldn't move his left arm because of the pain in his shoulder and the fear that he might worsen the wound.

Lambard's act really infuriated Lawrence along with the gnawing headache. He now grabbed Lambard firmly, Lambard could feel the difference in his grip, with force pulled him out of there and when Lambard didn't give in, he grabbed his neck with the same forceful grip and shoved him away.

"You now do as I say! Drop the damn knife and get back to the mansion!" Lawrence yelled at the top of his voice, very untypical of him that he himself sensed the difference in the cadence of his voice. For a second, he thought he sounded like the voice inside of his head.

"You don't know what he said," Lambard tried to take advantage on the fact that no one was around during the conversation between them. His anger that he couldn't finish Bodholm off was evident from his wide open eyes.

"It is past now. Now, give me the knife and get in," Lawrence extended his hand to him.

"No," Lambard was actually obsessed with murdering him. "Not until I've seen more blood." Saying so, he walked towards Bodholm who was lying on the ground whimpering in pain.

"You're not doing that. You'd then show everyone you are the killer."

"I won't kill him. I just want to bloody this knife more."

"You're not gonna do that," Lawrence was firm in his decision.

"Now what is it with these guys? They don't seem to have animosity," Olenska was already getting tiresome.

"Bodholm isn't holding the gun anymore. Why don't we get down there?" Marcella asked others.

"I'm not moving an inch," Olenska replied at once. "I don't want to miss anything."

"I asked only those who can take care of themselves," Marcella indirectly tried to offend her but she wasn't completely aware of whom she was messing with.

"Please don't make me feel bad for not being born a male. 'Cause if I were, the punch I land on your face wouldn't feel like a pat from an eighty year old dame," Olenska displayed a bit of her roasting skills.

Before Marcella could speak, Olenska continued to speak, successfully interrupting the master interrupter, "Lets not lay waste to

our time debating one another. We already have too much to care about." That did exactly what she wanted: shut up Marcella, have a little revenge on her, bestow everyone with an advice and make everyone disagree with Marcella while gathering their attention on the ongoing ruckus.

Lambard wasn't ready to listen to his words. Lawrence had to hold him by embracing him tightly. It was not his mistake to not imagine the extent to which Lambard was capable of going. He didn't even hesitate to use the knife against Lawrence, he stuck it to his neck to release him. That inadvertently provoked his anger. He landed a blow in his abdomen with his elbow. While it made Lambard loosen his grip, he snatched the knife from his hand during his momentary loss of concentration.

Just as he gained back his attention, Lawrence landed a blow on his face with his fist. Lambard was stunned by it so much that it took him a few seconds to realise he was punched. His cheek turned red and thickened.

"These men are driving me crazy. Just not the way I want them to," Olenska was much frustrated by Lawrence's action not because she cared for Lambard's cheek but the awful situation Lambard had brought him in. "Bring me to my chair, lad. There's nothing more to miss," she said to Fred who was holding her upright all the while. "Don't worry, kid. I'll thank you once you get me there."

"Don't want another apple cheek, do you?" Lawrence asked Lambard who grunted as he gathered the strength in his legs to stand firmly. Slowly, Lambard walked towards the mansion, grabbing his rifle, without breaking eye contact with him. Only then, Lawrence lowered his fists.

When he saw Bodholm forcing himself to stand on his feet, Lawrence rushed to give him a hand. It was when he saw something glittering on the ground and a second later, the glow vanished. Resting Bodholm's arm on his shoulder, Lawrence lifted him up and while he did so, he caught a good look at the shimmering tiny piece of glass - they were two of the glass figurines from the dining table.

Lawrence naturally began to overthink. There were ten figurines at first; weird coincidence was that there were ten of them initially in the mansion if Clara was included. He related the figurines with the guests just like Lambard did earlier and found something strange. As he counted, if Clara, Henderson and Sam were three of the figurines, who was the missing fourth?

Considering the fact that it was Lambard who was ready to kill Bodholm, it felt right for him that the fourth piece was Bodholm. That would ultimately mean that the killer was Lambard; the way he was so obsessed in killing Bodholm was evident of that.

"Ease your hold, Lawrence," Bodholm said panting for breath. "It was nice of you to come here for me. I'm thankful for that. But I've got something to say about the Mr. Hearts. Those elf statuettes..."

"Lambard's the killer," Lawrence said immediately even before Bodholm could finish. Bodholm looked at him with a deeply thoughtful eyes and smiled at him.

"My original plan was to report confession from all of you. Plans change. I think now I'm done, Lawrence," the usual magnificence in Bodholm's voice had disappeared and he looked too weak. "You spread to them what you think is truth. It'll all be over soon."

"Lambard is the killer, right? You don't think so?"

"Trust is the key to the answer, Lawrence. Everyone of you should trust one another. Only then you can find the truth."

"What about you?"

"I have to find time for repentance. I can't get back to the city. All these years I've laid waste to everyone around me and to myself. And now I have got no time left. Leave me be, Lawrence. I'll stay away from everyone."

"Why? You're wounded severely. Someone must tend to it. Moreover, I can't convince them all by myself."

"I've told you everything I can. All that's left is handling things yourself."

"Are you trying to escape the law?"

"I can never get this time again if I get to the city. Like I said, I've got nothing more that I wish to say," Bodholm extended his arm to shake hands with him. Lawrence shook hands without protest. Bodholm nodded once at him and walked slowly towards the woods.

"Hey, wait a minute," Lawrence stopped him. "What do you think could have happened to Sam?" he asked just to find what Bodholm knew of that matter.

"What do you mean? What's with him?" Bodholm asked turni-

ng back.

"So, you don't know?"

Bodholm didn't respond to it, waiting for Lawrence to explain what happened to him.

"Sam's lost. He's gone missing."

"Well, he's the fourth elf then," Bodholm said and without thinking much about it, he took the two elf figurines with him and disappeared into the trees. Lawrence's headache lingered however, he so badly wanted to get rid of it. He grabbed the meat cleaver on the ground and walked to the entrance of the mansion where he saw Marcella.

"Where's Lambard?" he asked her.

"It's nothing. He's gone with Ben to the wine cellar to vault his rifle," Marcella said rapidly. "What about Bodholm? Where is he?"

For Lawrence, her questions weren't audible. Or it could be said that he couldn't pay enough attention to those questions because what he just heard, blew his mind off. Lambard and Ben were about to find Sam was dead. Thoughts raced through his mind again about what would happen if there were a single clue he had left behind. He would be done for sure. He might actually be good at hiding the truth but the same couldn't be said for him lying to others in their face. He had lied about things that he convinced himself to be true but there was no way he could convince himself that Sam wasn't dead.

"I asked you a question, Mr. Lawrence. Two, to be precise," Marcella asked as Lawrence didn't reply.

"He uh... he left. He wants some time for repentance."

"The hell? What did he say about Sam, anyway?" Marcella was able to see Lawrence looking a bit tensed.

"He doesn't know. He left. He wants to stay away from everyone," Lawrence managed to not stammer.

"And you believed him? I thought you are the only man here who's not dumb."

"We decoded Lambard's the killer. You remember the glass elves around the chandelier in the dining table? A few of them is missing. Lambard had been taking them one by one with him whenever someone here dies. And you know what I think about Bodholm's rage on him? He probably killed Clara. 'Cause there

were ten elves at first and with Clara we were ten people. He even made on this before, I don't know if you remember. Right now, I want your support on this. Lambard's the killer. I want you to believe it and help me make everyone believe," Lawrence spilled out words twice as rapid as Marcella.

"Okay, alright. Take it easy. You can tell me slowly and clearly, okay? Just... so what about this 'elves'? Where is it now?"

That was a huge speed bump for the racing thoughts in his mind but it just led to a new path, a series of new questions. Bodholm took away the two elves on the ground and why would he do that? Why exactly did he want to stay away from everyone of them? Did he just want Lawrence to spread the news that Lambard was the killer only to get himself out of the picture? And he did all this to hide something? Something such as he himself was the real killer from the very beginning just like everyone thought? Now would he strike again? And why the hell did he himself not realise this when Bodholm walked into the woods?

Meanwhile, a bigger question arose in Marcella's mind. She asked him, "If Lambard's the one, did we just let Ben to his doom?"

That put him back on his first path - what chaos might Sam's demise bring about. "What shall I do now?" he asked himself loud enough for Marcella to hear.

"I don't know. Warn him or something," Marcella sounded like she had got panicked by the situation. Just as Lawrence got into the hall, where Fred was resting Olenska on her chair, Benjamin came back from the backyard and yelled, "Sam's dead!" Lawrence's initial response was a grunt in anger as he felt indeliberately infuriated by Benjamin just because he found out about Sam. Luckily, he was not carried over by his anger and asked him, "Where's Lambard?"

"He needs help. He's trying to get him out," Benjamin said hastily and signalled Fred to get over there. Olenska noticed it and said, "It was your doing, wasn't it, old Ben?" Least expected by anyone, Olenska didn't look a bit distressed on hearing about it. The real reason behind it was that Olenska had already convinced about it from what she saw the previous night. Lawrence got cautious as he thought she probably saw him too. He decided to stay out of her sight for a moment, so he got to the back of Fred who was behind her.

"What are you talking about, Lady?" Benjamin asked softly.

"I saw you last night. I saw you spend several minutes in the backyard. Did he not, lad?" she asked Fred who just looked surp-

rised. "Yes. This lad Fredrick was there too. Hiding in the shadow, watching after Ben. You were followed by Sam for reasons I do not know. Minutes as lengthy as hours passed and only you came back. Sam never returned to his bed. I think you might still have something to add."

"I've explained everything. There's nothing more I know that you already didn't know," Benjamin never seemed more genuine.

"Can we first get Sam out and then talk?" Fred asked which sounded more reasonable to everyone. Olenska calmed down for her own good. Fred went to the tiny tool room beside the power room in the backyard to grab a rope. Lawrence excused himself to leave for the toilet. His headache was still cruel to him that finally the voice inside him incited an unlikely suggestion while he was inside the toilet.

The white powder has stayed too long in your pocket, Laurie. Maybe it can ease your pain.

There was a time when Lawrence believed no one could convince him to take any form of drugs but his headache seemed to make impossible things happen. Lawrence chose to consume the cocaine he confiscated from Fred. Spreading some on his arm, he snorted it hoping it would help.

Fred got down the manhole to assist Lambard. He tied one end of the rope around Sam's waist while letting Benjamin who was standing outside, govern the other end. By the time Fred signalled Benjamin to pull him out, Lawrence had joined him to share Benjamin's end of the rope. Marcella stood in the doorway of the hall, watching them because she was too reluctant to stay with Olenska alone. She could sense Olenska was whispering like she was talking to herself but she was way too far to make out the words.

On Fred's signal, Lawrence and Benjamin pulled Sam's corpse out while Fred and Lambard prevented it from suffering any damage from the ladder steps or the loosening of the rope. His corpse was brought inside the hall to let Olenska take a look at him. The sad truth was that Olenska was the only one Sam could refer to as his living relative. She was his lawful guardian too. It was one of the rare moments when Olenska was at her weakest mentally. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't help but weep in front of everyone despite the lesson she gave Marcella about not to express herself very easily and openly. Marcella genuinely felt bad watching her cry like that as she knew it was very untypical of Olenska which made her realise how much it would have hurt her. She didn't like

the idea of burying Sam in the island but probably that was the only solution so she had to give in to it.

The voice kept nagging Lawrence when he saw Olenska cry, *Don't do that, Laurie. It will ruin you. It will ruin everything you did.* But Lawrence sought not to pay attention to its words and succeeded in that matter.

He looked up at Olenska and said, "We know Sam used to be afraid always, living in a world of fears, looking at the worst possible outcome in every single action of him. But it is also true that at the time of his death, shortly after he claimed to hear about him being the next target, he gathered all his courage in him. He fought the fears that plagued him and his life. He grew brave." He said it though he was aware that she saw him the previous night out of his guilt but luckily Fred intervened, averting her attention from Lawrence.

"I can attest to that," Fred said without looking at Olenska in her eyes. "The last time I saw him, he wasn't looking afraid at all, not even close. He spoke boldly to Benjamin despite the fact that he nearly freaked him out by getting out of the manhole from the ground and all. Hell, even I would've been scared if someone just popped out of the ground late into the night in the dark. From what I saw, he died a brave death, not succumbing to his fears."

That felt really good for Olenska and everyone else too but the greatest thing about it was that she looked like she was truly convinced that Benjamin didn't kill him. Lawrence volunteered to dig the grave along with Fred next to Henderson's while others covered the corpse in fine clothes and readied a palanquin. He did so because he felt that if he invested his mind keenly on something, he couldn't sense the pain of the headache. However unlikely it seemed, the cocaine did help with his headache, though it wasn't the rightful remedy.

Till they were halfway to finishing the work, Lawrence felt no weakness at all. But as he hadn't had anything for breakfast other than a glass of water, he soon began to feel very dizzy and was about to faint. If it weren't for Fred, he would have collapsed right into the hole he was digging.

It didn't take more than two minutes for Fred to find out Lawrence snorted cocaine. Fine white crumbles of cocaine were seen at the orifice of his nostril. Fred stood as a crutch for Lawrence to lean on.

"What did you do?" he asked him pointing at the white powder

in his nostril both in anger and fear.

"It's nothing, Fred. It was the coke I got from you. Now I get it, Fred. Why it causes addiction."

"You didn't dispose them?"

"Don't think I'm gonna lend it back to you. Actually, you're welcome to share more with me if you've got any left. But believe me, Fred. I only used it for my headache. I only have to depend on it as long as my headache persists."

"Screw you, Lawrence. I thought you were respectable. And now are you really trying to right your action? If you really do so, feel free to expect a punch from my fist."

"At ease, soldier. I know what kind of consequences drug abuse can cause to oneself and his family, probably better than you. The positives are that I am a highly self aware person and I've got no family."

"Lawrence, we better get to work before they see us."

"Tell me, Fred. Didn't I truly hurt you when I snatched the dope from you?"

"I'm serious, Lawrence. We must finish it as early as possible. But yes, I could've killed you for that."

"What stopped you then?"

That was a question which touched Fred. He was with the same wonder as Lawrence. Not that he didn't want to regard the question but no answer crossed his mind initially.

"I don't know. If you really want something to come out of my mouth, I'd say lets drop this and get this going."

"This can wait, Fred. What you're about to say is much more important than digging a hole for a stranger."

"Stranger? If Sam's a 'stranger', then what good am I?"

"Now you've got it," Lawrence smiled. Fred obviously didn't get it, he was waiting for Lawrence to explain it.

"I've said it, Fred. You just have to wrack your brain to find it."

"Don't crap me with this destined-to-be-brothers or something."

"You see, I don't have such a thing as faint heart. Yet my first impression about you was out of sympathy. That's too untypical."

"Hey, let me ask you something," Fred looked terrorized all of a sudden. "I'm not asking this to hurt in anyway. I don't mean no offense, but... you are... like... do you... share the views of homos or something like that?"

"The heck you mean?" Lawrence looked angry and awkward.

"I told you I meant no offense!" Fred was worried if the thing he tried to prevent had happened.

"I thought you may have heard of the word 'friend'. But no, homo's the word, huh?" Lawrence scoffed. Fred found it pleasant when Lawrence said the word 'friend' but he also felt bad about his own action and Lawrence's response to it.

"I hoped at least you'd have the strength to say it when I couldn't," Lawrence continued, "God, how come you're gonna deal with girls in your life."

"I said I didn't mean to offend you. Didn't you hear?" Fred asked.

"Lets not talk one more word of it and get this done," Lawrence grabbed the shovel in his hands.

"Hey, can you handle it? You looked dizzy and all..."

"I can. I can. As long as I don't puke all over this hole."

Lawrence's original intent behind this whole conversation was to spend a few minutes without thinking any of the horrors he came across the past few days including the minutes he spent digging the grave for Sam. Though it turned about to end a bit underwhelming, it got set up to serve as a wholesome memory.

By the time they had completed the digging work, Lawrence felt like his back was about to break and his headache was back, worse than ever. Before the funeral began, Lawrence tried to organize himself by spending some time in the rest room - he felt every part of his body seeming to act on their own. He used the rest of the dope he had on him and it only had the effect of a grain of salt being dissolved in sea. It was only after he blew chunks, the headache finally seemed to subside for real.

Then, he attended to Sam's funeral with Benjamin reprising his role of the priest. By now, he was too hungry that he could a whole

goat and when the funeral was over, he rushed to the kitchen, keeping his mind clear of everything else.

Meanwhile in the hall, everyone filled the chairs around the table to have a talk about Sam. After asking about Lawrence's whereabouts a couple times, Olenska became all silent. Though everyone was primarily talking about Sam, she remained silent. They safeguarded the bloody cane they found in the cellar as it was the only clue in Sam's death. Moreover, they felt worried that Sam's death only reminded them of a certain phrase from the poem on the wooden board and that only scared them. Soon, Lawrence joined them, just after having some breads, only to hold his hunger. Only then, the real conversation began.

And Lambard began it gloriously with a question, "Where is Bodholm?"

Though Lawrence had his share of suspicions on Bodholm, he didn't want to let himself look like someone who had done the mistake of a lifetime. "He's gone. It's a done deal. We're never gonna see him again."

"Yeah we won't if he stabs us from the back," Lambard invoked an argument.

"Let's have a vote then."

"Votes don't prolong our death."

"A vote where each of us gets to say who among us we suspect to be the killer. I have a parchment in my hand. Here's the pen," Lawrence pulled out the pen from his pocket to display it before them, "I'm gonna split this paper into six bits and give one to each of you. I insist everyone of you to fill it with the name of the person you suspect the most. The one who gets the maximum number of votes gets locked for the rest of the time in the storeroom, well bounded."

"You're just telling that I must be bounded and locked in the storeroom literally. I disagree with this voting system," Lambard sounded very disappointed.

"So you confess you're the killer?" Lawrence tried to trap him with words this time.

"I mean everyone here hates me for what I am. No one here share my way of seeing things. Naturally, I'm gonna get the most votes and be kicked out."

"So have you got any better ideas? I'm truly willing to hear."

"I had this little thought roaming about in my mind. How does this killer, among us or not, successfully does everything he wants to and still manages to escape from us? The first answer I came up with was that maybe he wasn't working all alone. We all know no one other than Bodholm knows this island better. It's too obvious he's the one. He played that tape. We saw it. He knew about the verse on that board. We know it. He was awake the night Henderson was murdered. We have proof for it. He tried to kill me in front of all of you. We locked him up. And the very night he escapes, Sam is found dead in the very place I hid my rifle and he has the rifle. Why the hell does none of you see this? I mean, there can't be anything more that you need to accuse him. I almost had him today if you'd seen it through the window you would've known and look at who let him slip. The respectable attorney at court, Mr. Lawrence. It's clear he's the one who had been helping Bodholm all along and that's why he let him escape."

"The way I see it, it was you who was ready to kill Bodholm earlier today," Lawrence replied confidently, "It is my understanding that you said something to provoke him and it failed. Bodholm didn't kill you even when he had the chance. Which makes me feel bad to think that he would create a chance to kill us."

"He himself said he had killed before," the way Lambard looked at him didn't seem to be settling.

But Lawrence continued his say, "And the part where you got me of some wild accusations. Here's my reply to that. That tape we heard. Just imagine the possibility where another copy of it happens to exist in the wrong hands and if any of those accusations on anyone is true, how bad it'll turn out. Now look at me. An A-class attorney who has spent days with you in the very island where all the horrors are happening and knows all the specifics. I'm the best saviour you're fortuitously bestowed with. Can you imagine that if I were actually helping the killer, would I lack the knowledge of playing the game to my advantage by sucking all the money you have worked so hard to earn out of you like a bloody vampire? Believe me, I am capable of doing it. Just think of it, even if I'm distrustful and actually planning such things, you know what would be my most important priority? To keep you all alive! Losing one of you is like a hole pored at the bottom of my honeypot. Why would I do that?"

"Alright, Lawrence. We believe you. Better try not to imagine too much," Marcella said as she thought Lawrence had begun to go

off-road.

"You got anything to say?" Lawrence asked her while Lambard remained silent in return but she just stared at him without a single response. Lawrence understood from the staring that she just tried to pull him out of his situation.

"Let me ask you this one last time," Lambard said, "If there is anyone among you who share my point of view, this is your last chance to inform me."

This time Lambard was a bit lucky as Benjamin stepped up, "I do, Mr. Lambard. And I'm sorry I didn't say it earlier."

"That's too nice of you, brother," Lambard's tiny smile said it all, his painless pride and arrogance. He stared at everyone else for a second and turned to Benjamin, "Lets go." He strode towards the backyard, followed by Benjamin.

"First lets find a place to hide this gun," Lambard whispered to Benjamin on their way out. "We're not gonna strike Bodholm now. Walking out in the woods searching for him is nothing other than suicide. We have to wait till the sun goes down."

"Lets get these beds back to our rooms," Olenska's face looked unwell from all the crying. "With Sam gone, it's pointless that these stay here. I'm already beginning to feel like I'm living in a hostage camp."

"You don't think it's safer this way?" Marcella asked her to show she was more brilliant than her.

"I think maybe it's better if we do as she says," said Lawrence with some serious thought in his mind. "Yes. We may get to find the killer if we make it easy for him. Apparently."

"Whoa, hold up. If the killer's among us, whatever you're planning, it's going to be useless," Marcella spilled a fact.

"It's not a plan. It's a rule. It's actually not to find the killer but to prove if Lambard's the one."

"So say it."

"We're gonna get these beds back to our rooms," Lawrence said in a hushed down voice, yet with the energy of a political orator, "We're gonna stay there, in our rooms for the rest of our time here, comfortable with ourselves. Tonight, we're not gonna sleep. 'We', however, does not include the ones who don't want to see the next daylight. So, hereon, each of us must knock the door in a

unique way, just so we know who's outside without opening the door, as an inevitable remedy to the lack of looking glass in those doors. We must not repeat our knocking pattern. The pattern must be erratic. For instance, if three taps is my pattern, I must tap thrice, take my hands off the door and wait until you open. You, on the other hand, analyse the pattern, wait for a minute or two and must open the door only if the knocking isn't persistent. The point is, Lambard or Benjamin or even Bodholm for that matter, won't have a unique pattern and even if they had, they would repeat it within the interval of two minutes at least. Anyway, we get to know who's at the door one way or the other. All we gotta do is stick to the rules. No one should use the pattern of others at any instant. So, lets begin with Fred. Fred, what's gonna be your pattern?"

"Um... I was listening for the most part but...", Fred's poor attempt at hiding his carelessness failed unsurprisingly as Lawrence asked with frustration in the same hushed voice, "God! Be serious, Fred! We gotta finish this before Lambard and his gang return."

"Uh... okay, okay. Tap thrice, maybe?" Fred replied hesitantly. "Three taps, alright," Lawrence pointed at Marcella with both his index fingers.

Displeased by Lawrence's untimely enthusiasm, Marcella replied without much interest, "One thud."

Lawrence then looked at Olenska who kept staring at him with half-droopy eyes. "Can you knock on doors for me? 'Cause I remember myself being restricted to this wheelchair while also I've decided to not move an inch from my bed," she said in a dull, sarcastic tone.

"Right," Lawrence said rapidly and continued, "Mine is two thuds."

"I think it's best if someone gets this done quickly and moves to preparing lunch," Olenska said staring at the floor, smoothly changing the subject of spotlight. "It gets closer to noon."

Still, they had to wait for Lambard and Benjamin as it was quite impossible for two men to lift a bed all the way up to the rooms. They returned only after around fifteen minutes during which they took few shots of their favourite drinks. Though Lambard protested at first, eventually he came around for the sake of everyone. Now that he got someone to support him, he barely talked to others.

The four together, managed to bring the beds one by one with much difficult. They had to take long breaks in between each beds to prepare for the next. They even thought of dropping the idea but

it was too late as they were already done with three of them. All they could do was thanking Owens for making the staircase wide enough. Meanwhile, Marcella had gone upstairs alone to prepare lunch as it was getting late as usual. By the time they were done with the beds, Lawrence was more hungry than ever and he followed Marcella to the kitchen. That incited suspicion and curiosity in Lambard as he was infamously called by Marcella as the 'watching eyes' for no good reason.

He couldn't help but follow him to the kitchen. "Stay right here," he told Benjamin when did so.

"You don't look alright today, Lawrence. What really happened?" Marcella proved Lambard wasn't the only one being troubled by curiosity.

"It was headache, alright? It'll pass, don't worry about it," Lawrence said as he chomped on a handful of blueberries.

"You're hiding your scar. That's why you're making up stories of having a headache. Something happened last night, right?" Marcella said it disrupting Lawrence's momentary relief that it was all over.

Marcella didn't expect Lawrence to reply and continued, "What happened with Sam, you're somehow related to it. And Lambard somehow got to know about it and that's why he thinks you're an accomplice to Mr. Hearts."

"Now who's trying to imagine too much?" Lawrence asked promptly.

"I'm not trying to accuse you, Lawrence. I just want you to be frank with me. You know you can trust me."

"Oh, yeah? Who's actually hiding things here? Too much or not, there's some truth in what Bodholm said about you, can you disagree with all your heart?" Lawrence began to suspect Marcella after he saw Bodholm hesitate to kill Lambard that he might not have actually been lying the whole time. "You cheated my friend!" Lawrence's face expressed disgust that only hurt her.

At the exact same moment, Lambard made entry, "May I join your cooking expedition? I can assure you I'd be of great use."

There was a sudden mood change in Lawrence's mind. Guilt surrounded his heart if he really did too much against her that he missed his shot for marrying. While Marcella was really hurt by Lawrence, she was quite strong to overcome it at once and said, "You can peel the onions, chop them up, toast some bread and

mash some potatoes," to finally teach Lambard some lesson as he always skipped his share of work.

"Whoa. Looks like a two-man job, doesn't it?" he asked, looking at Lawrence with a smile that almost looked like a grin.

"I've been doing all of these for the past few years by myself very well and I think you too are capable of doing it as I consider it as a one-woman job. Isn't it very weird to consider a one-woman job too much for you?" Marcella jumped from teaching a lesson to roasting him deliberately.

"Anything for you, my lady," Lambard said in a soft tone as he moved towards Lawrence which Marcella understood as him trying to get Lawrence gather the requirements.

"I think, Mr. Lambard, that maybe this one-woman is too easy for you and to up the difficulty, just so the work is worthy of your effort, it would be best if you gather the ingredients yourself and, you know, it could then be called a one-man job, just as you wanted," she said in the most modest way one could with words. Lambard hadn't had the calmness in his mind to reply but instead left for the storeroom smiling. With Lambard's presence, Lawrence couldn't talk to Marcella, so he dropped the idea of doing so and got on with helping her cook.

It seemed like being in the dining hall after so long when they had their lunch there as a surprisingly unanimous decision. Similarly, it was very untypical that things went so smooth without a single discomfort, argument or insult of any form. Maybe it was too tiresome for the men after the hard time with the beds that they were more keen on sating their hunger. But as they say the calm comes before the storm, the much appraised momentary serenity began to fade.

"Those are fine little elves," Lawrence was staring at the figurines, "I remember seeing ten of them not long ago. Four are missing now. Care to elaborate, Mr. Lambard? It seems you've been stealing them lately."

"I don't steal nothing. Enough of these ridiculous accusations, Lawrence. I can't tolerate to hear such blasphemy whose sole point is only to defame me. I've come across lots of such nonsense in the past few days and I'm too tired of it. Learn and try something new, please," Lambard looked upset as he took a sip of wine from his little cask.

"Stealing may not be how you see it, Mr. Lambard but that's how it looks. You took the statuettes from here and we want to

know why," Lawrence wasn't ready to stop at nothing but an answer.

Benjamin intruded at the moment strangely as he had never done such thing, "Why are you so obsessed with accusing Mr. Lambard, Lawrence? Doesn't it ever hurt you brandishing lies every time you speak. Are you-"

Lawrence didn't even let Benjamin finish his sentence, "You are not a part of this conversation, so stay out of it. I suggest you to watch our mouths while we talk and learn to speak properly."

"I have a rifle," Lambard said to draw the spotlight to him, "I have ammunition way too much to kill a bunch of people. Were it my intent to kill you all, I would have done it very easily and very well and I would have been spared of the sick presence of y'all and your pointless squabbles."

"Let's first finish the lunch and have our conversations later," Marcella suggested though they had already decided to drop the argument. Then on, no one talked. They were truly done with all the bickering they came across by this time. Many things seemed to lose the importance they once had as life had now narrowed down to just surviving. When lunch was over, they dispersed to various directions regardless of the fear of the killer. Only Lawrence waited till Lambard left the place to make sure the elves remain untouched. While Lambard left, on his way, he bent over close to Marcella and whispered, "Your eye shadow stands out today, dear." There was a visible change of expression in her face which Lawrence noticed.

Soon, the dining hall was alone. The six elves remained. Everyone found solace in their rooms, in loneliness. But that wasn't the case with Lawrence and Marcella. Marcella had asked him to stay behind so that they both could spend some time in the hall to talk out whatever it was happening between them. Lawrence locked the backdoor of the hall, not for any wild reasons but as a safety measure on the off chance that Bodholm was the one. He seated himself opposite to Marcella on the other side of the table.

"I never saw him the way he saw me," Marcella kept a straight face while she opened up. "What I did, I didn't do it just for me. On the surface, it may look like I'm selfish but I'm not. My father was a broke man. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make enough money. Being his daughter, I know the importance of money and I'm not gonna be a miser of it or adapt evil ways for obtaining it. I did get money from Owens, mostly with his approval. The only time I fell to such wrong ways, I didn't cheat Owens. I only scammed his cousin, the biggest douchebag I've ever seen. He's the

one who didn't realise the importance of money, he spends for his own desires mindlessly. The money was worth more in my hands than his. I worked on it and it resulted in the worst way possible. Bodholm killed him and while it disturbed my senses, on the other hand, I also thought he deserved it. A lot of money is saved, a number of sins is prevented. I don't try to right my actions. I only try to live with it. I'm not a monster. And uh... I ask this only of you."

Marcella bent her head forward close to Lawrence's face with wide eyes and said in a coaxing tone, "I don't want to go back there. If you'd come with me, I'd forget everything, the money I had, my lost family, everything and begin my life anew. A life only for us. No one to judge or bicker around us. It'll be as we want it to be."

Marcella was now so close to him and her voice got only more and more soft and soothing that Lawrence didn't want her to stop speaking. "All you got to say is yes," she whispered into his ears and only now he realised she had gotten very close to him. *Yes, Laurie. Say yes. Your dream's coming true*, he heard the voice. But then, something struck his mind. He was all alone in the hall with no one around except her. What if, just an 'if', Marcella was the one and he had tripped into her trap unknowingly. Fear crawled into his heart like an eight legged tarantula, silent, spooky and serpentine, poisoning his thoughts.

"You're so beautiful, Marcella," Lawrence slowly sneaked out of his seat, without avoiding eye contact. "I really wish I had more time to think of it," he slowly took steps away from her.

Marcella, noticing his weird movement, said, "Why are you evading from me?" in the same coaxing voice.

"Wouldn't you be glad if I express my wish before tonight?" Lawrence asked softly.

"Yes, okay. I'm ready," she replied stuttering with folded arms.

"Two thuds and it'll be me," he said with a smile while panicking inside. He strode to the staircase, turning away from her. She followed him too which made him feel uncomfortable. While he ascended the stairs, he heard a sudden, low creaking sound from behind which struck fear in him that Marcella did something and so he practically ran upstairs but displayed it as a feat of 'the quickest climb' by laughing to Marcella, "I won."

When he was out of her sight, he slowed his pace to his room, taking deep breath while he did so. But then he sensed it was just an 'what if' thought and there was no proof that she was the killer.

Anyway, he was still breathing and he thanked god for that and went to his room.

Marcella too got to her room, locked the door, sat on her bed alone with her thoughts. She was wondering if she spoke right to Lawrence, for several minutes that she lost track of time, biting her nails in the while. Suddenly, she heard a knock at the door. As it was out of the blue, it didn't at once struck her to observe the pattern. She was doubtful if it was two knocks or three but waited if the knocking persists. Not once in her life did she wait for someone to knock at her door and she hoped she never would again. About a minute later she heard three more knocks and a voice from outside said, "It's me, Marcella. Benjamin. Spare some minutes?"

Despite her suspicions, she opened the door as she knew Benjamin wasn't capable of killing also when everyone was just in the nearby rooms.

"I've got something to talk with you, Marcella. Can I sit?" Benjamin asked.

"No disrespect, Ben, but I'd prefer that you not. It helps us get back to being on our own quickly, you see," Marcella said but she didn't sit either.

"Alright. I'll be done in a minute. I know this isn't the way to do this but I'm incapable of doing it any other way. Just hear me out. It'll be a great help. I feel sorry for Lawrence. I shouldn't have done what I did to him. But I swear, swindling him wasn't my intention or that I had a particular sense of dislike for him. I just proved to be inefficient at the moment. I was lazy for real, the biggest mistake I made that's got him develop hatred towards me. Hell, you saw the way he took the knife in his hand didn't you? Anyway, I'm saying this to you because I think you know what happened between us. Moreover, Lawrence likes you very much, he'd listen to you."

"Are you being a ruse to Lambard's plot?" Marcella asked out of the suspicions she had earlier.

"You're not listenin' to me. I'm speaking out of my heart. I valued you as high as someone who'd understand me," Benjamin said it with a straight face that Marcella felt he was truly not lying as he lacked his signature untimely laugh while he was talking. "I might not be much older than him but I've always felt like a father to him. I saw him grow in standards and I cherished to look at it. See, no matter how much he insulted me publicly or privately, I never really tried to hurt him back. I don't want this to be a bloated conversation so let me get to the point. You know how special this is, right?" he pointed at the huge ring with the eagle crest. "This is not only

costly but also a gift. I regard this very highly. I don't have the courage to look him up in the eye and ask him to take this as a token of my apologies while he sees me as an enemy. I would develop the courage to do so, believe me. But I need you to talk sense to him before that. I ask this as a friend. And even if you don't see me that way, it's all right. But do this as a favour for your friend Lawrence for all the respect you have for him. I implore you. You can never know how much this would mean to me. Can I hope you'd do that?"

Marcella looked at his pleading eyes and nodded slightly without fully understanding why she did so.

"Thank you," Benjamin nodded back, made his excuse and left the room. Marcella locked it behind him and started her second session of drowning into thoughts that lasted longer than the previous one. Benjamin seemed absolutely genuine just like he was when the most terrible things happened. Even if Lambard had something to do with it, all that he said seemed to be true. Moreover, she was glad she had gotten now a reason to talk to Lawrence and she decided to go talk to him, finally after an hour as the sun began to set.

She got out of her room, there was no one around. She found it supportive and walked to Lawrence's room. At the last minute, she felt too hesitant to knock on the door that she even considered to drop the idea. What made her proceed, she didn't know but she thudded the door once as was her pattern. She waited restlessly for a whole one minute, the time it took for Lawrence to realise it was indeed Marcella. When the door opened creaking, it immediately put a smile on her face, only it wasn't long lasting.

She saw a hand come at her abruptly, it grabbed her arm and pulled her in forcefully. Someone forced her to the side of their body so that she was braced close to the person with her back on his chest. It was a man, that was all she could say for sure but she wasn't in the state to speak or shout as he placed a tiny knife against her neck, shushing her. Was it Lawrence or not, she was pretty much convinced he was the killer.



10. JUSTICE

Olenska couldn't rest her mind, knowing that Marcella was still out there, scheming whatever evil plot only god knows. As much as she cared for her once, she hated and neglected her now. Her hatred was unimaginably worse that she was even ready to get rid of her. She knew Marcella would try to find some way to escape her inevitable fate which could be a lifetime in jail or worse and there was only one way to prevent her escape. To kill her. Her body might have been confined to a wheelchair but she was desperate to kill Marcella. Not only was she motivated by revenge but also she thought it was the only way justice could be done in her case. She had slipped a knife from the dining table earlier into her handbag with the intention of slitting Marcella's throat with it. For obtaining a chance to do that, she had to first pull an act that she had forgiven her. She knew Marcella couldn't be easily fooled and for that she had to put her life into her act. And most importantly, she had to wait for the right time which she thought wasn't close enough.

The funny thing was that while Olenska was thinking about all of this, Marcella was in fact under threat. The man sticking a knife to her neck said, "It was you, wasn't it?" Marcella at once realised it was Lawrence's voice. "Lawrence? It's you?" she asked softly.

"Tell me you lied. Tell me you are the killer," Lawrence threatened her by pressing the blunt edge of the knife against her neck.

"I swear, Lawrence. It's got nothing to do with me. God, why are you treating me like this?" Marcella asked softly as she began to weep. *Why, Laurie? It was indeed no god or devil that prevented you from getting married. It was you after all, Laurie. It was always you.* The voice echoed in his mind as he thought if he was giving in to a small suspicion and letting the dream life that he was finally getting close to achieve, slip away from him. That made him withdraw the knife. She turned to him with teary eyes, sobbing and looking too weak to harm anyone. Lawrence thought he went too far, not listening to the voice that warned him it was a bad idea born out of a stupid suspicion.

"I'm sorry, Marcella. I'm sorry," Lawrence gasped and continued, "Sit down, please. We have to talk."

Slowly she sat on his bed, wiping the tears off her face, trying to keep her face as straight as possible. Lawrence thought she might be a tricky liar and might have even made a lot of avoidable mistakes but she wouldn't go as far as killing someone.

"Listen, Marcella. I didn't do that for any bad reasons and I know you know. You just seemed suddenly very suspicious to me and that's why I did that. To save myself. I'm sorry I did that though I think I shouldn't be. I'm sorry because I care for you and I don't want to hurt you. Can you understand? I need you to accept my apology. Please," Lawrence grabbed her hands and looked at her eyes keenly without blinking. Marcella was a bit surprised that he didn't ask her why she came in the first place but she wasn't in the right mind to talk about it.

"Just let me go to my room," she stood up abruptly as she was still in shock. "I want some time to calm myself," she said panting.

"Of course. You can leave. Just tell me you've forgiven me. I can't put up with the guilt of hurting your feelings."

"You want me to say anything, you can come to my room at a later time," she left without saying anything else. Lawrence felt like the most idiotic person in the world and that feeling was likely to thrive until he knew she had forgiven him. He was also really glad that he was able to not let her respond to his actions in a bad manner and of that matter, he felt a bit victorious.

While she walked to her room, Marcella wept again silently that she was too helpless and that she felt like she escaped death on a close margin though she knew Lawrence wouldn't do that.

The evening was another boring one and no one got to meet one other except Lambard and Benjamin who were discussing most of the time about their next move in Bodholm's matter. Fred was very much interested in cleaning his room which he hadn't done since he came to the island and didn't bother about his late acknowledgement to do so. Olenska was praying and talking to herself as she was lying on her bed. Sometimes she was loud enough for Marcella in the nearby room to sense her talking, only it was too less audible. What Marcella was doing was the biggest mystery at the moment for Lawrence and it seemed like she was never going to open the door. Even at the dinner she was not to be found that everyone other than Olenska tried to get her out of the room though she replied she was fine every time her door was knocked. It was finally at Lambard's request that they were very afraid about

her not opening the door that she came out just so everyone could be relieved of the fear and tension. Lambard was secretly glad that she responded to him which he found very rare and beautiful.

Lawrence found the whole situation too awkward and cringeworthy as it was all happening because of his one stupid suspicion. He wished it never happened even more than the deaths that he even thought it would have been better if he were dead at the moment. When she had dinner with them, she didn't even look at Lawrence which he felt bad about. Once the dinner was over and everyone got back to their rooms, Lawrence checked the elves, six remained and only then he left for his room.

When they would wake up, it would be just one day and one night more for them to get out of there. It was very pleasant for them even to think it would be all over soon. Funny it was to think that they actually came there to spend some time peacefully and everything turned to be the exact opposite of what they expected.

A couple of hours passed since the early dinner and everyone was just fine. Fred was still awake but he felt he was about to fall asleep soon from all the tiresome work with shifting the beds. Lawrence was counting every second as a delay to talk to Marcella but he wanted to wait until he was a bit sure he could reach her room undetected by anyone. Marcella was doing the same too, worrying about the way she talked to Lawrence and wanted to apologize to him. But she wasn't ready to get down to his room herself as she so badly wanted him to come to hers, to know if he had really listened to her.

She had shut all the lights in her room off as the moonlight through the window was enough for her. Moreover, she didn't like to keep lights on at night as she felt it would ruin the feel of night. It was a bright full moon at the sky which was very clear that the stars could be seen clearly.

Suddenly, she heard two thuds at her door and was very happy Lawrence had come. But she wasn't celebrating yet as she had to wait if the pattern was over or not. She waited for two minutes, successfully holding her anxiety all the while and slightly opened the door. Through the narrow crevice she saw something shining in the moonlight that looked like the tiny figure of a bird, an eagle to be precise. She realised it was Benjamin's eagle crest ring but it was very sloppy as the finger wearing it was leaner than Benjamin's that she felt it was about to fall off. Marcella was very glad Lawrence had indeed truly listened to her that he had accepted Benjamin's ring. But then it occurred to her that she had actually forgotten to

talk to Lawrence about Benjamin's apology after he place a knife at her neck.

Who was it then, at her door? She wondered the same in fear but it was too late for her. The hand wearing the ring grabbed her neck and shoved her onto her bed while the grip around her neck persisted. She couldn't see who it was in the dim light and she was already choking. Her door was closed smoothly that if even anyone were outside, they wouldn't even hear it shut.

Earlier that day, when Lawrence and Marcella had their little talk in the hall alone, after Lawrence got his 'stupid' suspicion and began climbing the stairs, he heard something behind which he feared was Marcella's doing. Only it wasn't her. She even wondered what it was but then Lawrence began running on the staircase as if it were a race, distracting her.

It was actually Lambard, hiding behind the unused furniture to eavesdrop what they were talking, who got hit on his head at the tabletop while he tried to move. He heard everything they were talking about and he also got to know Lawrence was going to meet Marcella sometime later when he said "Two thuds and it'll be me." When they both had left, he came out of his momentary hideout and met Benjamin in his room to talk about Lawrence and Marcella.

"I don't know what to say, Mr. Lambard," Benjamin replied him. "I'm already worried about the way Lawrence sees me. He doesn't like me, you know. I won't say I was right but I feel sorry for him."

"Do you think I must too, Ben?" Lambard asked in an irritable tone as he didn't want to hear about his history with Lawrence. "I'm sorry to ask this but do you think I really should be worrying about how he feels about you while trying to save all of our lives? I think our lives are more important. Do you feel the same, Ben?"

"Yes, Mr. Lambard. I'm sorry for bringing this up."

"Bringing up such things isn't a mistake, buddy. Bringing 'em up at the wrong time is. I'm glad you're sharing this with me, it's just not the time, I hope you can understand that."

"Yes, Mr. Lambard."

"Good. Now before we land our attack on Bodholm, I have to deal with this unfinished business I got with Marcella. You know

this is a suicide mission for me, right? I may not get to do this later. I'm sorry I couldn't explain it to you. It's only between me and her. Once I'm done, I'll meet you in the hall where you'll be waiting with the supplies I've asked you to collect and we'll make our move against Bodholm. I think I might also have to visit the privy before we launch our attack."

Suddenly, Lambard became silent, probably something struck his mind, Benjamin thought. Before he asked what it was, Lambard told it himself, "About that ring, Benjamin. You told me you couldn't give it to Lawrence yourself, right? I think maybe you can talk about it to Marcella. She can convince him."

"Thank you for your suggestion, Mr. Lambard. I'll look to it."

At the surface level, it seemed like Lambard cared for Benjamin's feeling but deep down it was actually a test to determine if Lawrence had a soft spot for Marcella as he thought if he happened to have so, he would come to Benjamin asking for the ring. Luckily for him, things didn't go well for Lawrence when he got maddened by that one suspicion as a result of which Marcella failed to inform him about Benjamin's kind gesture. It led to Lambard believe Lawrence was not so intimate with Marcella after all as he didn't approach Benjamin. He also spied on Marcella and learnt she had met Lawrence at some point. However, he realised that only after she met Lawrence, Marcella locked herself in her room. So whatever happened between them didn't end well. He also noticed Lawrence's dislike for Benjamin when he didn't respond to Benjamin's "Can you pass that to me?" at the dinner table that night. So his theory about the whole thing was that Lawrence hated Benjamin so much that he even probably had a fight with Marcella when she told him about Benjamin's true intentions.

Keeping all that in his mind, he formulated a new plan after dinner and had a talk with Benjamin.

"You know why I actually took those tiny elves with me, Ben? You wanted to know why, right? So here goes the answer. You've heard of the correlation between the elves and us, right? When Henderson and that mutthead's wife were gone, I took two with me. This morning when I knew about Sam and Bodholm and took away two more. You know why? 'Cause I know Bodholm had killed Sam. As you know, I was right. Only there was no one to believe me. No one! You may now wonder why I took two when I was only sure about Sam? The other one was for Bodholm himself 'cause I was sure I was gonna get him. Nothing's changed now anyway. I've got you at my back and we're gonna get him together tonight. We proceed as per our plan, nothing's changed. You grab

everything I asked you to and wait for me at the front door of the hall. And remember to shut the back door before that. Now, give me your ring. He fouled up with Marcella, let me try this time. When I'm done with this 'Marcella business' I told you, I'll get this ring to him. Satisfied?"

"I don't want you to do that, Mr. Lambard. It's obvious he hates you too. Let's not get you both in a bit of a pickle," Benjamin cared for the welfare of them both.

"You've done a great deal supporting me amidst this pile of rubbish and I'm grateful for you. Let me thank you. I'll finish this ring business."

"I'm really glad to hear that, Mr. Lambard. But maybe you were right earlier. We've got a big thing such as saving our lives and this doesn't hold that much of importance, I can tell you. It's better if we just drop this idea. I've already caused a fight between him and Marcella, I suppose."

"Look, Ben. I told you this is a suicide mission. I might lose my life fighting that prick Bodholm and I'll be glad to die fighting a monster rather than be stabbed in the back or killed in my slumber or worse. I want Lawrence to know that I'm gonna fight for every-one of us even if it might take my life away. I'm gonna talk to him one way or the other so just hand over me the ring."

Benjamin was astounded by his speech that he was ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of others that he shed tears and embraced him, "You're a great man, Mr. Lambard. I feel sad that no one here understands you."

"Alright, Ben. Just hand me the ring. I'm more than satisfied to have you at my back at least," Lambard patted Benjamin to stay strong and got the ring from him.

Poor Benjamin didn't know what Lambard's real intention was. Lambard was ready to die not for those people whose guts he hated as much as he hated the devil but to have his revenge on Bodholm even if he were to die in the process. He asked the ring from Benjamin not to give it to Lawrence but to trick Marcella into believing it was Lawrence at the door. He didn't even had the idea of talking to Lawrence at all. He wore the ring in his finger, reached Marcella's room, thudded the door twice with his clenched fist as he learnt from Lawrence's quote "Two thuds and it'll be me" and waited for two minutes in the fear that she might be asleep but Marcella opened the door to his fortune before he decided to leave.

When the door opened, Lambard believed he finally got to attain what he was yearning for so long - Marcella herself!

A few minutes later, Lawrence got out of his room to talk to Marcella as he hoped it was time. He slowly tiptoed to her room, very cautious to not expose his presence to anyone. As he approached her room and was about to knock, he felt someone behind him and turned back at once as a reflex action. Fred's door opened slowly and Fred poked his head outside to check if anyone was around and the first thing he saw was a fear-stricken Lawrence staring at him weirdly.

"The heck you're doing!" Lawrence exclaimed in a whisper and tiptoed to him.

"The hell you're doing!" Fred replied and got out of his room completely, locking the door silently.

"I think I've got the killer," Lawrence grasped Fred's shirt mockingly in a satirical manner.

"What do you think I'm thinking right now? What if I'm the one who got the killer?"

"You'll be dead, twat. Tell me what were you trying to do."

"You know, I could ask the same of you."

"I was trying to get to Marcella and apologize. What about you? Gotta find mines hidden in the earth? I can tell you there are worse things to care about here."

"Where do you think Lambard might have gone at this moment, Lawrence? 'Cause I know for one thing that he's not in his room."

"What're you talking about? What's your point?"

"Can we get down? I'm afraid we might alarm others."

"This is a bad place to whack me, Mr. Hearts? Stop breaking my balls and tell me where you're getting at," Lawrence mimicked a mobster, half-intendedly.

"Lambard is not in his room, man. Can you guess what that could mean?"

"How do you know he's not in the room?"

"I heard his door open and close. I heard his voice. I'm sure it's him. Lets get to the part that we're unsure of. Lambard being

here out there means probably Ben's backing him and probably they are out planning something big."

"Maybe trying to hunt Bodholm?" Lawrence decoded it.

"Or maybe Benjamin will suffer being the next victim. I mean, you think it is Lambard, don't you? So think of Benjamin being alone with Lambard the whole night. What happens to the sheep in the wolf's lair?"

Lawrence was actually glad to hear Benjamin was in danger though it might not be true and asked, "So what are we going to do about it?"

"We may get to prove Lambard's the killer if we are able to track him. And maybe we get to save Ben and maybe Bodholm too, for that matter."

"So we track him down, watch the wolf feast on the sheep and then we can get the wolf red-toothed."

"What about saving the sheep?"

"The sheep is not worth the risk, I can tell you. It isn't gonna yield wool to weave a hundred coats while itself being a sleazy turncoat. Moreover, if Lambard doesn't get Ben, how could we prove he's the one? Tracking him isn't a piece of cake but of course a whole lot better than waiting in the room for the killer to knock at the door."

Fred didn't understand what he meant about 'sleazy turncoat' but nodded to him.

"What surprises is that this suggestion comes from someone so stupid such as you," Lawrence mocked Fred and asked him to come with him to help him track down Lambard. He had his share of suspicions on Fred but he was pretty much sure he wasn't the kind of person who would desperately murder someone. They climbed downstairs together silently with nothing as a safety measure other than the fact that they were together.

A few minutes after they had left, Marcella's door opened a bit too loud as if someone tried to open it forcefully. It frightened Olenska who just had a few minutes of sleep in two days as she woke up in fear. As she slept on her wheelchair itself, she easily got out of her room by herself as her door had no sill. She was careful with her door to not make any noise. As soon as she saw Marcella's door wide open, she grabbed the knife from her bag in her hand. She wanted to get a look into the room to know the situation as from where she was, the sight at things inside wasn't very detailed,

so she drove her chair a little forward only to see the door close suddenly, she even heard the clacking of the lock. Just as she worried she missed her chance, she still saw light coming out of her room as if she just turn her lights on. As she got a bit closer she realised the door wasn't actually closed, the light came out from the narrow crevice of the open door which was straight in her sight. It didn't take her long to realise that something got in between the bottom rail and the sill of the door frame which was why the door didn't fully close. It seemed as if Marcella wasn't aware of that, if she were, she would've corrected it already. She drove in closer and found that 'something' was a huge eagle crested ring stuck in between. Olenska was shocked very much as she knew it was Benjamin's and wondered how the ring ended up being there. She drove even closer and peeked into the room now that she got a very clear view of the inside.

Meanwhile, Benjamin was in the tool shed in the backyard, gathering the supplies Lambard asked him to. He had collected a five metre rope, the one with which they pulled Sam's corpse out of the manhole, a pry bar, a shovel and a headlamp as there weren't any flashlights. In addition to those, he had Lambard's rifle hung over his shoulder. He took a sip of wine from his hip flask now and then in between his work. After collecting the supplies, he came back to the hall, locked the backdoor and walked down to the entrance where he sat on the doorstep to take some breath. He gazed upon the sky and admired the full moon. Soon, he found himself unable to focus on it. His eyes were very sore because of sleeplessness that he couldn't keep them open. Also he was afraid he might fall asleep which he believed was very dangerous and so he periodically took sips from the hip flask. Soon enough, the flask was empty so he wondered if it would be right that he got down the manhole to fetch some wine. Suddenly, he heard someone inside the hall, presumably from the direction of the staircase, so he naturally thought it was Lambard.

It was very dark but he didn't call out to him just as a cautionary step. He expected Lambard to call out to him which wasn't happening. Gradually, fear took control over him that he began to sweat profusely, his breathing rate escalated, his eyes were now wide open as if the soreness vanished completely. He had the headlamp in his hand, willing to hit the switch as soon as he heard a disturbance. Were it because he was thinking right or he believed it was right, he jumped out in fear onto the pathway that continued from the doorstep to the wharf and ran to the bushes nearby to hide himself.

Too bad he didn't know who was climbing down the stairs - it was none other than Lawrence and Fred, who too were frightened when they heard someone at the entrance. It was only Benjamin jumping on the stone pathway in fear but it was too dark to see him. While they wondered if they actually heard something, they believed it could be something as ordinary as the flapping of a bird's wings. What they heard next really scared them that they abandoned their plan of chasing Lambard. It was nothing more than a faint sound of a loud thud but it came from upstairs as if someone fell very loudly that it easily led them both to believe the thing they were very afraid of had happened. They ran upstairs together to get to know what happened. Everything seemed to be normal, all the rooms remained locked which made them suspect if something happened in the kitchen or the dining hall. But then, no one other than both of them seemed to have heard the noise and so they felt they must be alarmed.

As soon as Lawrence thudded at Olenska's door twice, she opened up at once without even analysing the knocking pattern as if she had been waiting at the door all the while.

"Did you hear it, Lady?" Lawrence asked.

"Like it happened in my head," Olenska stammered as if she was scared. From her words, Lawrence assumed it must have happened pretty close to her room. As Olenska's was the first room, the only room close to her was Marcella's. Lawrence's heartbeat escalated to immense rates and in addition to that Marcella didn't respond to Lawrence's knocking. But they heard creaking of something, presumably the bed which had a nuanced pattern as if someone was trying to communicate, only they couldn't understand what it was.

Lawrence tried opening the door but it wouldn't budge. So, he tried to knock it down. When his kicks failed, he began dashing onto it repeatedly. He wasn't thinking right and he was already too weak from shifting the beds that he couldn't channel enough energy into his legs or arms. Fred and Olenska were terrified and asked Lawrence to stop freaking them out as he didn't tell them anything about what he was going to do. Since Olenska's 'Like it happened in my head', Lawrence heard nothing, his mind couldn't focus on anything other than opening the door until Fred pulled him away from the door forcefully.

"What happened to you, man?" Fred asked him, holding his upper arms. "What are you doing?"

"She's not responding. Try to open the door, I'll be back in a jiff," Lawrence ran to the staircase to get down. He didn't listen to Fred and Olenska's pleas to stop. All he had in his mind was to open the door for which he had to get something like a crowbar when his brute strength failed. Fred, unable to hold Lawrence for long had no idea in his mind about where he was going and so he continued Lawrence's task of knocking down the door.

Last chance, Laurie. Remember. It's your last chance. It was the voice in his mind that puppeted Lawrence. His destination was to get to the tool shed in the backyard where he could find something that might help with the situation. But as soon as he got to the hall, he got to know the back door was closed. He worriedly ran to it and tried to open it. He remembered there were multiple bullet locks in the double door but not their specific positions which was hard to find in the dark. Though he managed to undo a couple locks, the door couldn't be opened yet. In the hurry, he couldn't even think of turning the lights on, probably the voice had poisoned his mind too much. Gradually, he slowed himself, took some deep breaths and realised that they used to leave the back door open always. Then why is it closed? Who closed it? That was when Lawrence realised he wasn't alone. He thought every second he spent there was only making him vulnerable. So, he decided to get to the shed by walking around the mansion and ran to the entrance where he came across the tools Benjamin left there. He wondered how they got there and suddenly, he heard a rumble in the bushes which scared him like nothing else. Luckily, his eyes ran over the pry bar among them, grabbed it and left the place without even trying to look back.

Meanwhile, Fred succeeded in breaking the door open; he managed to dash into the door forcefully enough to break the lock down. What he saw inside felt like an image taken right out of a bloody nightmare. Lambard was lying, almost parallel to the door, on his face on the blood spilled floor which was his very own blood with his eyes fixed upon the door, very still and unmoving. Marcella was on her bed with a band tied around her eyes, her body, hands and legs tied to the bed itself with long, thin strips of cloth. Her mouth was filled with a clenched ball of such a similar cloth that muffled her screams into low mumbles. Luckily, she was alive. She had been kicking at the footboard of the bed to whose pillars were her legs tied to, producing the creaking sound they heard.

Fred rushed to her, freed her from her bounds, emptied her mouth, keen to hear what she had to say. The first thing Marcella did was to weep and hug him. "I thought I was gonna die," she told him sobbing hardly.

Fred didn't know what to do to comfort her and just went along with her. "What happened, Marcella? Where you- Did you manage to see anything?" he asked her.

"I don't... I-" Marcella was panting very hard that she couldn't speak. "Alright, take some breath, Marcella. Take your time," Fred patted her. "But please. I want you to be as detailed as possible."

"Lambard. He-he came to my room. He forced himself on me," Marcella then looked at Lambard lying dead on the floor and gasped in shock and fear. "What happened to him?" she sobbed.

"I was about to ask you the same, Marcella. We too found him just now. The one thing we know is that it's your room and you were inside which you are. Tell me everything you know."

"How could I? You just saw what kind of situation I was in. You didn't know what that prick did to me. He forced himself on me. He nearly strangled me. Do you see his hand prints?" she showed him her neck that had distinct strips of redness, supposedly from his fingers. "He tied me up, stuffed my mouth with some filthy cloth, what was I supposed to do? I couldn't see, couldn't shout for help. God, I could barely move. I'll tell you something. Even if he were alive now, I would kill him myself," she spat on Lambard's corpse both in anger and disgust she felt because of the filth that soaked into her mouth from the cloth.

"So what do you think killed him?" Fred asked in curiosity.

"You don't know?" Marcella looked at him and Olenska in surprise but Olenska didn't seem to care about it. "I don't know if anybody was with him but from what I know, it must've happened while my eyes were tied." There arrived Lawrence, covered in his own sweat, with a pry bar in his hand. Only after he saw Marcella alive, he calmed himself down.

"Took you long enough," Fred said to Lawrence and looked at Lambard. Though it was surprising for Lawrence to acknowledge Lambard's death, he was more keen on the specifics of his murder. Fred explained everything to him including Marcella's vulnerability and inability at the moment but there was something unlikely in his face that Fred noticed. Everything seemed to happen very fast for Lawrence that in turn made him feel slow that he felt like he couldn't breathe. He couldn't think right, nothing looked right in his eyes. He tried to understand it like everyone else but he couldn't. The way he saw things made him feel suspicious about the event.

"You've got anything to say?" Fred asked Lawrence.

"Found what killed him?" Lawrence tried to clear himself.

"I don't know. We've got to scan the place, find any clues and..." accidentally, when Fred ran his eyes around the room, something caught his attention. It was a shiny little thing beside Lambard which was nothing other than Benjamin's eagle crested ring. He moved towards it, bent over and took it in his hands. Displaying it to everyone he said, "Benjamin's. And where the hell is he now?" Without saying anything, Lawrence pulled Fred out of the room with him by grabbing his arm.

"What? What? You forgot I can walk?" Fred asked irritantly.

"You really believe her, Fred?" Lawrence asked in a whisper referring to Marcella.

"What? I saw in her bounds, man. I untied her."

"The door was locked from inside, right? How could the killer do that when he's outside?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Lawrence. You're saying Lambard committed suicide?"

"What about her? Couldn't she have done it?"

Olenska interrupted their whispering, "If you're really talking about the specifics of the murder, gentlemen, feel free to join me in your discussion too. It seems as if you've left a clue while orchestrating this murder and worry about it now."

"I think this is a bunch of lies. Isn't it obvious?" his voice cracked in sadness that Fred couldn't understand.

"Are you okay?" Fred asked.

"I think Marcella is the killer and I know you can see it too." Those words from Lawrence's mouth shook Marcella.

"I believe you, Lawrence," Olenska said in a loud tone at once as if she had been waiting for the moment since forever. "But what can you do about it?"

Marcella was utterly confused as to why everyone began to speak like they didn't believe her all of a sudden. "What the hell is happening? Am I being paranoid here or are you all? I've just suffered through hell. Why can't anyone see it?"

"Look at this little bitch lie. It's so sweet that you almost like it," Lawrence laughed ruefully as he felt betrayed by her. He felt so bec-

ause no matter how hard he tried to see her in the good light, things always happened to prove otherwise.

"You don't get to talk here, Marcella. Now that's speaking fair, don't try to make it foul," Olenska warned her.

"Stop it, old lady. What's happening between us? I want to know what's happening between us. Is it something like a cold war? Avoiding me at every corner. Trying to hurt me every time you get a chance with your words. I'm sick of it. And all of this because you think I betrayed your precious grandson? You don't know how big a prick he was. Even if I kill him, that would only make me holy for sparing the world from his lousiness."

"You killed Lambard. I saw it. End of story," Olenska sounded calm and clear and began to leave the room.

"Now who's the liar here? She can't even get down from her bed," Marcella scoffed.

"You and I, we're done. I find no reason to trust you anymore," Lawrence looked at Marcella with furious eyes that clearly exhibited the hatred he had developed towards her which was alarmingly horrendous to watch knowing that apparently it took no more than a few minutes for the hatred to build up especially from Marcella's perspective. She was so confused on top of what happened to her that she wasn't able to even come up with the right words to talk to Lawrence who turned his back on her. When he rushed out of the room in anger, she stood there helplessly with no idea of what to do next. Only Fred ran to him, trying to stop him and calm him down. Marcella didn't know where to let her anger and the first person that came to her mind was Olenska. Hadn't she lied to them, things would have been better and importantly, Lawrence wouldn't have been mad at her. The raging winds turned their direction towards Olenska and surely there was going to be a storm. Olenska had gotten to her room by now, from where she yelled out to Marcella, "I want to take a piss. Take me to the privy, Marcella." That hit the mark without fail for Olenska - Marcella was so infuriated that she came to her room rushing just as she wanted her to.

"Why did you lie to them?" Marcella yelled at her. "Why do you want so badly to ruin me? How come you got to believe the cheat you always called a dog? You want me to take you to the toilet? I'm gonna take to your grave!"

As Lawrence descended down the stairs, Fred followed him all the way through, pleading and swearing him to stop. Lawrence's only response was to get down faster than before. Even when they

had reached the bottom of the staircase, Lawrence didn't slow down though Fred did.

"I trusted her only to find I'm an idiot," Lawrence shouted to him when Fred finally got to him and grabbed his arm.

"You are an idiot, Lawrence. That I know for a fact," Fred mocked him out of frustration. Lawrence wanted his mind to be free of Marcella as the pain of the betrayal reached unimaginable heights. The first thing he saw was the closed back door. He walked towards it, past the stocked furniture.

"Something's wrong, Fred. You know, we don't lock this door."

"What're you talking about? You out of your mind? I can't understand the way you talked to her. You know what? The window in her room was open. Just like in the storeroom when Bodholm escaped. Did you even see that? God, what the hell is wrong with you? Maybe Lambard was right about you. Maybe you let Bodholm escape and now you're trying to save him."

"Wh-what? What do you mean the window's open? Just because it's open it means it's one of Bodholm's evil actions? And somehow I'm responsible for it? Tell me you're not doing drugs again, Fred. I'm confused."

"Cut it, Lawrence. Get to the point. Why were you running all the way down here?"

"You say I helped the killer get Lambard? How dare you? Did you see Ben's ring up there? Did you see it? What are you gonna say about it?"

"Did you even hear what I just said?"

"I've got it. Benjamin's been helping Marcella kill and that's how they got to Lambard. That's right. I've got it," Lawrence's weird careless behaviour only scared Fred. "I'm asking you again, Lawrence. Are you alright? 'Cause you sound insane to me."

"Insane? There's nothing wrong with my mental health, Fred," Lawrence said softly and became silent all of a sudden. *It's the headache, Laurie.* "It's the headache, Fred. Yeah, that's why," he said half unwillingly as he wondered if it was a strong point. But surprisingly, Fred nodded slightly and spoke nothing more. Seeing it in the positive light, Lawrence continued, "Something's wrong, Fred. This door is closed. I found some gear at the front. That pry bar I brought, I found it there. I wonder if it's still there."

Many bad thoughts and suspicions circled Fred's mind. Not a single notion occurred to him that was strong enough to disprove Lawrence was helping the killer. He tried to force open Marcella's door and failed while Fred did it in a few tries. When Lambard was found dead, he wasn't even on the spot, it seemed he purposefully left the place, not for any pry bar or tools. Now, he had lured him downstairs to this dark corner of the hall and didn't answer why he ran down to this spot. What if Lawrence just did it to have him killed? Fred slowly walked to the window, "It's too dark, Lawrence. I can't see crap here." He slowly drew back the curtain a little so that enough light from the lawn lamp entered through the glass window.

"Let's just calm down and take a seat, okay?" Fred took a couple wooden chairs out of the unused furniture that had intricate designs carved onto it which manifested Owens' wealth and taste in art. "All we've to do is to sit down and talk it through. We can do that, can't we?" Fred managed to convince Lawrence to do so. So there they sat on the chairs, opposite to each other just pondering over their own thoughts to let the heat die out. They spent minutes in this manner with none of both their thoughts relating to what the ladies might be doing upstairs. Obviously, also the ladies didn't care about them too. It clearly showed what kind of people they were. Arrogant people blinded by self importance. No one really cared for anyone other than themselves.

After what felt like an hour, possibly just a few minutes, Fred asked Lawrence what he had been trying to ask since before they rested on the chairs, "If anything's wrong, just tell me, Lawrence. You can have my trust." Too bad that his choice of words was strikingly similar to that of Marcella's earlier. It felt like sprinkling water on hot iron for Lawrence who had been failing to calm himself and ultimately, he erupted. He threw his hands at Fred's neck with the intent of strangling him. *Trust is the damn answer?* "You are talking about trust? Like trust is the damn answer to this mayhem?" Lawrence yelled and gave a blow to his face with his fist that knocked him down.

After waiting all this time behind the bushes with the rifle at ready, Benjamin decided to get to the backyard where, hopefully he might get a peek into the hall and find who actually came downstairs, what were they doing and finally break the suspense. As there were no windows on this side of the hall, he realised he could see the inside of the hall only through the glass windows at the back which if he were lucky, weren't fully curtained. It turned out he was actually lucky since Fred drew them back quite enough for Benjamin to accomplish his mission. Carefully, Benjamin tiptoed

across the backyard to the glass window and when he peeked inside he saw the unlikeliest thing he ever saw - Lawrence punching down Fred. To his dismay, Lawrence didn't just stop at that. Even after Fred fell on the ground, he didn't shy away to land a couple more blows on his face. Benjamin couldn't hear him yelling in anger or even what he was saying.

Before landing another punch, Lawrence realised what exactly he was doing - beating the one person who actually talked well with him to a pulp. He also realised a moving shadow fall on him which could possibly mean someone was in between him and the light in the backyard. *Someone named Benjamin.* Lawrence figured it was Benjamin and looked at the window though he couldn't see nothing but a part of the shadow which was actually his head. Benjamin looked at him too but he could see things clearly. The look on Lawrence's face revealed it all. Sad thing was that both of them were thinking they were looking at the helper of the killer. Lawrence made the first move as he sprang at the door, as now with the light, he could unlock all the locks. Benjamin predicted this move and inserted the rifle through the door handles outside so that even if Lawrence managed to open the locks, he wouldn't be able to push open the door. It worked and Lawrence had to go around the mansion to reach the backyard. "I'm sorry, Fred. I'm sorry that I hit you. I'll be right back. I'll fetch some water for you. Hang tight," Lawrence apologized to him in vain. Fred could only reply in mumbles, he wasn't even out of the shock from the first hit.

As far as Benjamin was concerned, the rifle was empty which was why he apparently used it for a simpler purpose. While his trick was effective and drove Lawrence away from the door, it was indeed very foolish of him to leave the rifle at the door itself. He must have thought after how cautious, bloodthirsty and dangerous Lambard became, would he really keep his rifle empty? Of course he wouldn't. Benjamin didn't think twice about the rifle after that. Right now, all he thought about was to get back to Lambard and tell him he was right about Lawrence. But he was running out of time, Lawrence was already after him. He couldn't outrun Lawrence, so his best bet to escape would be to hide, just like before.

On his way, Lawrence took the shovel at the entrance of the hall amidst the gear Benjamin left just in case. It took exactly forty eight seconds for him to reach the backyard which was apparently empty, devoid of any human being. He ran his eyes all over the place as swiftly as he could but not a single clue was visible. Now it was time to be cautious and tread carefully. No assurance could be given as to where what might be lurking and what might happen.

Other than the chirping of the crickets in the woods nearby, Lawrence could sense nothing. Until his eyes took a glimpse at the manhole cover which was slightly out of the place. Lawrence was able to see what it could mean. Benjamin was hiding himself inside. Possibly, he did it because it was favourable for him. That could mean it was dangerous for Lawrence to get in and that was why he hesitated. Also he still was feeling traumatic about his previous experience down the manhole. Good thing was that he could still trap him inside and Lawrence believed it was going to be his next move.

He's not the killer, is he, Laurie? What could you possibly gain from trapping him?

Lawrence realised Benjamin wouldn't kill him, so he might not be as dangerous as he thought. Moreover, his past history with him wasn't really endearing too. Thus after a few minutes of fighting his dilemma, Lawrence finally decided to get down there and have his revenge. Unfortunately, Benjamin wasn't as stupid as Lawrence thought he was. Benjamin wasn't hiding in the hidden cellar, all this time, he was sitting in the toilet, not for the usual business but to watch what Lawrence was doing through the fissure in the wooden door and was pretty much able to see the whole backyard. He tricked Lawrence into believing he was down the manhole by displacing the cover slightly. As soon as he saw Lawrence get down into it, he rushed out of the toilet as quickly and quietly as possible. "Thanks to the toilet," he said to himself and ran out of the place. Even when he happened to lay his eyes on the rifle, he thought it was empty and couldn't risk breaking his sprint, which he rarely did, to try to grab an empty rifle. He knew he wasn't fast so he shouldn't make stops which would break the momentum. It is indeed true that people often suffer the most because of ignorance. Benjamin just couldn't see how big of a mistake it was going to be.

Sensing he had been tricked, Lawrence got out of the manhole in frustration, throwing the shovel out first to make an easier climb on the iron stairs. When he got outside, no one was around just as before. But this time he saw something he didn't the last time - the rifle in the door handles.

Regardless of how much Lawrence cared for him, Fred couldn't easily forgive him for the welts he left on his face though he recovered ably from the shock. When he got up on his feet, he looked around for Lawrence. He saw him running upstairs which he found pointless and weird. Weirder was the fact that Lawrence had bloated multifold with jiggling cheeks and a huge belly. The more he looked at his face, the more he seemed to look different from Lawrence. It wasn't even Lawrence. That face belonged to Benjamin. That would only rise another question in his mind along

with the many other questions he already had - what would make Benjamin run like that? All of a sudden, he felt nausea along with a headache, probably from his head colliding on the floor. In urgency, he tried to open the back door which was literally only a feet away. It opened casually as opposed to Lawrence's words. It was because Lawrence by now had taken the rifle with him. But Fred couldn't make it to the restroom, he puked all over his way to the pool and into the pool too.

Lawrence searched for Benjamin in the bushes that stretched along the length of the mansion on the suspicion that the flap of wings he thought he heard earlier might have actually been him. He guessed right but he didn't find him because he wasn't there. Assuming he didn't run into the woods, Lawrence got back into the hall at whose entrance the remaining gear was found disarrayed. That could mean someone walked through it, presumably Benjamin. But he almost forgot about Ben when he got into the hall; he saw the back door wide open and Fred was missing. He wondered where he was or what happened to him given that Benjamin was roaming free. Lawrence began to see Fred as an unwanted responsibility when he realised he forgot to fetch him the water he promised and that now his disappearance felt like it was on him. He forced himself to not think about Fred to try to enhance his rates of survival.

Benjamin, by now, had gotten upstairs and caught his breath for a moment as he was already wheezing from all the running. The first thing to do in his mind was to get to Lambard as early as possible. He kind of limped to Lambard's room, a consequence of his first long sprint in years. On his way, he came across Marcella's room which was suspiciously open. He didn't know by then that he would regret if he peeked into the room and when he did, the world felt like falling apart for him. He almost broke into tears on looking at the horrific murder site with a lifeless Lambard on the floor. He just couldn't believe it. He sat on the floor beside him unable to control himself mentally or physically.

A couple minutes later, he pulled himself together to get up on his feet with no courage and determination to find the killer. He literally blacked out in his mind, he didn't know what to do. He definitely hadn't had any idea of going after Bodholm whom he still thought was the killer. His ring, lying on the floor by the wall, caught his eyes. He didn't know why but when he looked at it again, he felt hopeful and wore it back. Probably because he always considered it to be a gift from the Almighty himself. Only now it struck him where the ladies had gone and proceeded to find them out. It was when he heard some murmuring from Olenska's room

and as it was inaudible he stuck his ear to the door hoping to find whom she was talking to secretly in her room while someone had murdered Lambard. What he heard only shocked him, turning all his suspicions to a different direction.

It was a very cold night as usual in the island and Bodholm knew that better than everyone. And yet he was resting on a rock by the shore at the southernmost part of the island in the freezing cold, shivering and whimpering. He had his legs stretched out at the sea and the waves continually washed them that his feet went numb from the coldness. His wound was severe, he knew that but decided to not fight the pain. He took out the two elves from his pocket and looked at up the sky. It was the full moon he was waiting for. He smiled when he saw it and remembered Clara's beautiful face.

Looking at one of the elves he said, "I tried my best, Clara. I made it. I had everything against me but I did it. It was in my fingertips, the fate of a man I truly hated but I didn't make the decision myself. I left it to the Lord though it was dangerous for me. God, I wish you were with me. Just so I can tell you with a monstrous glee that I did what you wanted me to do, what was right. Of course, it wasn't easy. It's a miracle that I made it but I'm glad I made it. I just wish you'd seen it. It felt stupid but glorious. Also, I'm very glad that I'm going to be done with this world. Yeah, sooner or later, I'm gonna be. And because of that, I'm gladder than you've ever known me to be. I just- Were you here, I'd still be clinging to this world. For that, I'm glad you're not. You're luckier than me anyway. You left earlier. You missed all the worst parts for which I'm grateful to the Lord. I don't know where I'm gonna fall. I don't care where I'm gonna fall. I only want you to know I tried to be the man you wanted me to be and I beg the Lord I be with you. I be with you. Just one little wish. I be with you. And I'll be with you."

Bodholm looked at the bright moon at its full intensity and felt mesmerized by it so much that he didn't look away or even blink. He wanted to look at the light and only the light. Darkness shouldn't shroud his soul ever again. And he firmly believed in it.

Fred had locked himself in the power shed in the backyard when Lawrence found him missing to catch some sleep because, to his knowledge, all his bodily issues stemmed from sleeplessness. At times he even thought all his problems wouldn't have existed if he had slept well during his younger days. He was quite lucky Lawrence didn't go searching for him so he got some time to spend alone. Of course, he couldn't sleep but he was free to lie on the floor, snort the last tenth of the coke he had and stare into the ceiling with nothing but his own thoughts around him. He found solace in doing so and he didn't want to leave. For the whole time he spent there, he was the king of his world, he was completely invulnerable so what could a mindless killer do to him. With the comfort level reaching its zenith, Fred closed his eyes to feel it. Gradually, he slipped into a slumber that lasted for a duration he didn't know how long. When he woke in fear that he had been too careless to let himself get some sleep during such a dangerous time, he thought he had enough rest and got out of the shed to find what had happened during the while he passed out.

The fog had grown unusually thick that it partially shrouded the backyard and the pool was barely visible. With the help of the backyard light, he waded through the fog, successfully evading the pool and reached the back door of the hall. The chairs he set earlier to have a talk with Lawrence remained right where they were. It was almost always silent in the hall when no one was present but not once did it felt as eerie as the silence that prevailed now. However, he walked to the staircase casually hoping nothing bad happened. But then he thought whatever happened, whoever died, none of it was any close to bad as long as he was alive. That was until he reached upstairs where things had apparently gone wild. None of the rooms were closed which was surprising as everyone appreciated their rooms for the privacy it lent them. Fred was very aware of it and that was what scared him. He couldn't really convince himself to not find if others were alive though he was pretty sure from the surroundings that he wouldn't be satisfied.

To keep his mind relaxed he tried to recall his favourite songs that he brought him pleasant memories of the past. The first room he arrived at was Olenska's and when he peeped into it, the songs failed to sound pleasant in his head. Olenska was on her chair, unmoving with her eyes fixed on the ceiling and her mouth wide open. Her head was hung over the head cushion of her chair that her whole neck was visible to Fred. He could see something like a rope burn on her neck which could mean she was strangled to death. Marcella was on the floor, lying close to the wall on her back. The better part of her clothes was blood-drenched though her face and hands remained unspoiled by any bruises or cuts. On a quick

glance, Fred could find she was mortally wounded somewhere around her abdomen.

Though it shocked him to find them dead, he sort of predicted it so he could manage to endure the shock. He kept playing songs in his mind, exited the room to find what was in the other rooms. He did only try to get to his room and he got to see another horror site. The door of his own room was splattered with blood and at the corridor in front of the door, Benjamin was lying dead. There was a wound on the lower part of his cheek which looked like it was caused by a gunshot. Fred said to himself may he rest in peace and moved past him, still playing the songs in his mind and humming to their tone. He quickly checked through the other rooms and found nothing.

Then he arrived at the dining hall from whose window he could see the sun rise. He stood at the window watching over the scenery from there, listening to the crashing waves at the shore and the cheeping of little birds in the trees. The music of the songs in his mind stopped as he preferred to hear the sound of the nature. He could see the seagulls hovering over and the warmth of the sun spreading over the sea. He teared up as he felt their lives had no measure of value to whoever the killer was and wished he was just killed right then while he was still able to watch a stunning example to the essence of life through the window. He didn't exactly enjoy watching it all, he just wished he was killed then and there peacefully and be done with it all. No more fear. No more pain. No more worries. He wished he had the strength to do it to himself and regretted his weakness. Sadly, he withdrew from the window and walked towards the dining table to rest on a chair and stretch himself. His eyes ran over the chandelier on the table which he always thought was beautiful than the chair he was about to sit on.

Naturally, he came to notice the glass elves around it and now there were only two of them. The first thing that struck his mind was that he wasn't the only one alive. And of course he knew who the only person whose corpse he hadn't yet found was. Lawrence of Vancouver. And just as he was gathering his thoughts about his actions, he heard footsteps coming from the tiny washroom attached with the hall. It was Lawrence who came out, wiping his hands with a tissue. He had slung Lambard's rifle over his shoulder which made Fred suspect him. Fred was scared when he saw him as he was pretty sure he was the killer. They both looked at each other in awe and fear and stood still wondering what the other was going to do.

They both just stared at each other but both of them knew the reason behind the stare. They were both afraid of each other's next move which would reveal the truth one way or the other. But the

move might also take their life away which was unacceptable to both the parties. Lawrence stretched his hands out and gestured him to stay calm.

"I can see how you feel, Fred. I feel the same. Let us take a seat and talk this over. Just like you asked me to do before," Lawrence said softly and clearly.

"You killed them. You cheated us," Fred's watery eyes left tears.

"What do you think I think? You disappear suddenly and they wind up dead. Why don't you tell me why you did it?" Lawrence was scared but was cautious and firm in his words.

"Want me to answer to this crap? I ain't gonna do as you say."

"I have a rifle with me, Fred. You're gonna take a seat with me," Lawrence sounded commanding and scary to Fred that he quickly got convinced. He didn't fight. Thus, they both moved slowly until they seated themselves opposite to each other.

"Now lets talk. Lets be cooperative for our mutual benefit," Lawrence suggested.

"I'm done, Lawrence. I'll walk over to the window and watch the sunrise. You put a bullet in my head and forget about it. You'll just be doing me a favour," Fred was hopeless.

"Listen to me, Fred. We're here to talk. I may sound weird, even I didn't believe it first, but I gotta say that. We have to trust each other to get past this. I want you to be cooperative. Lets ask each other questions and answer them truly. Lies won't help hereafter. It doesn't bother me if you ask first. I just-"

"Where are the other elves?" Fred asked the first question before Lawrence even finished his sentence.

Nodding slightly, Lawrence replied, "I took it. I have it now in my pocket. I didn't find you lying on the floor dead so I thought you were still alive. I wanted to tell you I was alive too, so I left two. As a message to you."

"Why did you run downstairs earlier like a damn freak? You still haven't answered that question."

"I barely knew I was running. I was... It was mind-blowing to learn Marcella lied to me after all the time she swore she didn't. I was going crazy. I just wanted to get out of there at that instant. I still can't understand why you want me so badly to answer such a

silly question. It's not even a question. It holds no importance over the blood carnage that's happened here."

"An answer to this?" Fred pointed at the welt on his face that resulted from Lawrence's blows.

"Like I said I was going crazy. I was still angry about it."

"Are you angry now? While we're sitting in these chairs in a talk-this-over situation. I assume you're not. What if I suddenly punch you in the face right now, knock you down to the floor and keep on hitting you till you squeal like a pig? That's exactly what you did to me. Only I didn't squeal. And you're telling me it's because you were pissed off about Marcella, a third person who wasn't even on a chair with us? Yeah, that's completely logical, my friend."

"Look if you suspect me to be the killer..."

"I know you're not the killer!" Fred shouted it to him though he was only a feet away. "I never suspected you in the first place. It is you who suspect me and that's why this sit-down-and-talk kind of crap you're pulling me into. You don't trust me or anyone and yet you talk like a damn sage. Like 'Trust is the only way out of here.' The rifle now you hold, I don't care if it's loaded or not. It doesn't make any difference. You had the chance but you didn't do it. Moreover, I trust you. And that's the end of it. Still got no trust in me? Hear this out. I was never sober. The dope you snatched from me, that wasn't all. I had more hidden everywhere my eyes found a spot, every pockets, every little crevices. I just didn't have enough for the rest of the days here and that's why I fought you. You were damn right it made me unstable. I was unstable. I can't even imagine what horrible things I would've done when I'm unstable. But I can give you a picture of how horrible those things can be. I killed Henderson. I'd killed him and returned to my room even before Bodholm returned from his wife's funeral."

Fred didn't look remorseful or worried but was rather smouldering with anger which shocked Lawrence for all the bad reasons.

"Beheaded? Yeah, Bodholm isn't the first person here to use a knife," Fred continued smiling which showed he was happy to have murdered him. "All those terrible things he did to me in the name of treatment. He disillusioned me. I was losing my sanity because of him. And then I'm made to attend a meeting hosted by the same psychopath who claims to be a psychoanalyst without my consent. Believe me, I did a favour to myself and all of you by getting rid of him. He would have driven y'all crazy. You should be thanking me for that. Even what happened to Sam-" Fred stopped suddenly but

as Lawrence was listening to him keenly he had no other way than to finish the sentence.

"It wasn't intentional, Lawrence. That night, I didn't sleep. I saw you go to the backyard and I followed you. I wasn't in the right mind. I was very high. I managed to figure out you got down to the cellar. When I found you there, you were lying on the floor unconscious and Sam held the rifle on you and was ready to pull the trigger. I saw it the way anyone would've seen it. I thought Sam was the one. I think I tried to talk him out of it but I was truly more paranoid than him."

"Are trying to say you killed Sam too?" Lawrence asked it straight out as he wasn't interested in the specifics of the event.

"I didn't know, Lawrence. I didn't mean to. I don't really remember a big deal of it. As far as I can recall, we argued. Sam probably understood I was high and tried to get me out of there. That's what infuriated me probably. I turned it into a fight and apparently beat him to death with that cane I got from beneath the couch. Only when I realised I killed Sam, I recovered my consciousness. Then I took the rifle in my hand. I wanted to hide it but somewhere else. But then, you see, Bodholm didn't deserve to be locked up like that. It always bothered me. So I took the keys from Lambard's drawer, right where I kept it. I covered myself to hide my identity, opened the storeroom, placed the rifle in the rack nearby Bodholm and closed it. I just thought he'd use the rifle to scare Lambard when he'd open the room the next day but... I don't know how he escaped. I don't-"

"So you accept you're the killer?" Lawrence readied the rifle. "You killed them all and now you're pretending you're ready to die just to deceive me."

"Just the two of them. I don't know who killed the others or how or when it happened. I was in the power shed all this time. I was shocked to see all this."

"That's- Can you realise what exactly you've done? You practically started it all. If you'd just... God! But how can I believe it, Fred? Are you really not the killer? And what of that crazy recording stating our names and crimes? Even if all of this you said are true, you've been hiding it from all of us. From me. Why? What more are you hiding? How would I know you've got nothing else to hide?"

"Just the way I believe you," Fred stood up. "I have unloaded all the burdens I've been carrying. I'm ready to die. I insist you to do it. I don't care if you killed them or not. Either way, it's best for you to

put a bullet in me and make sure I'm dead. I'm all for it. I've snorted the last of the dope. I'm glad I'm not gonna die sober."

He's lying, Laurie. You're right. You're too intelligent to get fooled by him. Don't trust his words, Laurie. Don't hesitate. Just pull the trigger, Laurie. Pull it. You'll thank me for it, Laurie.

Lawrence slung back the rifle to his shoulder. "Nobody calls me Laurie," he said rather loud that Fred heard it and responded to it with a 'what?'

"You've said your part. Now let me say mine. You can sit back. It's been almost two decades since I came to Vancouver and I've been an attorney-at-law for a whole decade. All these years I've been always alone. My family is worse than a train wreck. My parents don't like each other and they blame it all on me. I don't call them my family anymore. I just waited to escape from them and when I got the chance I didn't hesitate and this is where I arrived. Owens was my only friend at high school or college. And then there's no one else in my life other than myself. I thought I was satisfied with it. The point here is for a whole lot years, I've been always alone. Alone at my home. Alone at my office. Alone at church. Now here's the important thing.

"Deep down I wasn't satisfied and I tried my best to convince myself that I was satisfied. I had arguments with myself in my mind on that manner where I had this little person I personified as my conscience. For years, my conscience was the only person I've been talking to. I literally talked to it. With words. Making sounds. It even became a part of my habit. Gradually a part of my house. A part of my clients. A part of my family. A family. Me and my conscience. My conscience wanted me to get a family for myself. I tried and I failed. Innumerable times. It never worked out for me. I can't bend them to my will which I blindly wanted to happen. How stupid it was of me. Only failures. I was pissed off. I wanted it to end. And finally it happened.

"I defeated my conscience. I believed I was satisfied with myself in my life and I needed no one. I thought this conscience persona died with it. But I never realised it didn't. That the persona of my conscience and the mental proof of my existence, my true conscience, weren't the same. All my dilemmas. All my decisions it was a part of me. I didn't sense it until now. It guided me in all the wrong ways. It ensnared me into believing false notions and emotions. It fuelled my hatred. My rage. I was satisfied with it. It made me believe revenge was the way to deal with Benjamin. You know what he did to me, right?

"So, I met Benjamin about an hour ago in the corridor. Right where you found him. And when I saw him, it called to me, 'Laurie, Laurie. Remember what he did to you. He doesn't deserve to live. He must die. That's the right thing to do. That's the only way you can find justice. Do it.' He told me something like he cared for me and some crap and he lent me his ring as an apology. I asked him to wear the ring back and shot him in the head. I don't regret that. Maybe he deserved a worse death, I don't know. But I just shouldn't have pulled the trigger. I shouldn't have. As a man who've dealt with a thousand murder cases shouldn't have done that. It wasn't me who pulled the trigger. I'm proud enough to not get the blame of a murderer on myself. But I did.

"I forced my hands, my fingers to do it. I was just like you. I did it without my full sense. So I'm not gonna get the blame of it on me. Of course, I didn't want to kill him. Just like you. So lets stay together on this. We don't deserve to be punished for the crime we didn't intend to do in the first place. By tomorrow, someone will arrive here. So here's the plan. We killed no one. Whoever killed them, Mr. Hearts, the Zodiac killer or whoever, it's someone we don't know. Someone we're afraid of. From now on, we stay separate. We're hiding from the killer. We don't know what has happened and who have died. The last person we know have died must not be Benjamin and we mustn't say the same person. I'd say Lambard's the last person to have died. And as of me, you, Bodholm, Olenska, Marcella and Benjamin are all alive. You choose the person yourself. But it shouldn't be Benjamin, he's actually the last person. We haven't seen each other since whoever among us went into hiding first. I'd suggest you're the first. It's better if you choose Sam. Never tell them anything that happened after Sam's demise. We leave it to them to tie up the loose ends. We're just confusing them."

"Lawrence, just stop!" Fred had to say it very loudly to even gain Lawrence's attention. He was not exactly happy to know Lawrence trusted him. It didn't sound like Lawrence at all to him. He spoke more than what he had spoken during the whole time they were together at a single instant. It was very untypical of Lawrence. He thought maybe Lawrence was scared that he might be arrested but he tried to break the truth to him. "They'd find, Lawrence. There's no point in what you're doing."

"No, no, no, no. It's gonna work. It must. All we have to do is to trust each other and cooperate. See, I trust you now. I said everything I've been hiding."

Fred decided to go along with him for sometime, "What about Bodholm? He must be alive, right? He probably killed Lambard and

the ladies."

"It doesn't matter if he's alive or dead. He left the place before Lambard's murder. And... yes. Bodholm is the perfect person we can convince everyone to believe the killer is. So whoever asks us, tell them you don't know who is the killer but that your prime suspect is Bodholm. Tell them everything that poses him as the killer and be careful to not let a single word out that contradicts your own words. You tell a story, stay with that story, whatever happens. We don't need to gather any evidences, just have to destroy a few. Like Lambard's rifle. Maybe we can just lay it beside Benjamin, make it look like a suicide. It isn't really that useful anymore when I don't know where the hell Mr. Rationale stacked his bullets if there's any left."

"Lawrence, I need you to listen to me. You're talking more and more like a criminal," Fred tried to pull Lawrence out of the fantasy he was building in which he received no punishment for his actions which he thought was doing justice.

"No, you listen to me. I explained what he did to me clearly. You sound like you didn't pay attention to my words."

"Alright, just tell me what you've got to say."

"I've said enough. I said it all. I need only your support on this. Tell me you've listened to me this time."

Fred thought for a second and came up with something which he thought might strike sense into Lawrence or at least into himself. "That tape said you murdered someone. So Benjamin isn't your first victim after all."

Lawrence didn't respond at once. He stared at him for a few seconds and smiled lightly. "It makes sense to me now. I've always got this suspicion and now I think it's true. About the man behind the tape. It was Owens. There was this guy Shoddy. A stoner with no brains. I had a history with him. He was the most self-destructive man I've ever seen. He ended up spending years in prison because of me though it was mostly because of himself. When he came out, he started troubling me to have revenge on me. Like I was the reason he got arrested. I used to tell Owens about him and all the worst things he did to me. Suddenly, I stopped talking about him and mysteriously he goes missing simultaneously. Days later he was found dead. Murdered. And based on some ridiculous stupid suspicions, Owens thought I killed him. No matter how hard I tried to convince him, he never stopped believing I killed him. In the whole wide world, Owens is the only person who knew about this. And it ends up in that stupid tape. Owens. The only person who knows

about all of us. And the only person to not arrive at here. I wonder if he'd really hired men to do this for whatever his true intentions were. I can see Henderson probably worked with him. He once told me something like artists trick us or something but it is him who's actually tricked us. Tricked us for what exactly? To let us all kill each other? God, he saw himself an artist!"

"Told you he's a psychopath," Fred replied though he didn't listen to him for the most part. He was pretty disinterested in Lawrence's way of dealing with the situation. When Lawrence extended his hand to shake on it, he went along just to end it. While they shook hands, Lawrence said, "This might be the last time we get to speak with each other. It's sad and tragic that we have to part this way. I don't want this to be dramatic. But it's for the good of the both of us. We did what was right. Lets do this together. And we stay out of punishment. I wish you all the luck in this world. Goodbye, Fred."

"Goodbye," Fred said softly and turned away towards the window. Lawrence, who thought it was going to be a very emotional parting was surprised by how simply it ended. Anyway, he wasn't shook by it. He firmly believed now that he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself and finding happiness in life after how it all went with Marcella. Even Fred couldn't stay in his life long. With such thoughts, he walked up to the walk path where Benjamin lied dead. And suddenly, he heard Fred call to him loudly, "Lawrence! Come here! Get a look at this." Lawrence's first thought was the suspicion if Fred was trying to lure him and he readied his rifle. It had a bullet left in it. It had to be an immensely accurate shot if he expected lethal results. Slowly, he tiptoed to the dining hall with the rifle in position, ready for it. But it wasn't what he thought it was. Fred was just peering into the window and said, "Couldn't you be slower?" without even looking at him. Lawrence quickly tucked the rifle away.

"What is that? It- it's... It looks like a boat. Can you come over and see it?" Fred asked confusedly. Though it sounded ridiculously like a ruse, Lawrence too saw something near the horizon that was pretty clearly visible due to the rising sun. He approached Fred to take a good look at it and realised it was truly a boat heading in their direction. They didn't know who were inside or why was it headed their way as there was still one more day left in their 'journey' but they surely knew it was a threat. They had to hurry things up to sell their story.

It was the police officers headed to Owens' island in that boat, directed to arrest Bodholm for murdering Owens' cousin Davis. It was like the death bell for Lawrence and Fred though they didn't

know who were inside. They ran in different directions, didn't even trying to work together. Lawrence had wiped the rifle clean and made sure it got Benjamin's fingerprints on it. He scanned through his room for any sort of imperfections he might have missed noticing and noted none. He cleared Benjamin's gear off the hall's entrance and got them to the power shed including the pry bar he left in Marcella's room, on Fred's request. He left Olenska's room untouched because he wasn't involved in any sort in their murder and it would be foolish of him to enter there and unknowingly leave a clue. He then managed to assemble all the elves he took, back in their place. When he was confident he cleared everything and the boat had got close enough, he settled himself in the store room where he locked himself in as a safety measure against the killer.

Meanwhile, Fred analysed his room for any clues of drug abuse and blew off the tiny white grimes that remained in the spots he used to chop the cocaine up before snorting. He made sure he rubbed off his fingerprints from the cane which he used to kill Sam. When he thought he was good to go, he ran to the power shed when the boat had already reached the wharf. On his way, he did notice the manhole cover was open but didn't try to close it and he had to set the shed up as if he had been there for quite sometime.

Among the officers who were assigned for this mission, there were both Lopez and Bob, who got there only based on their requests and their intelligent work on dealing with the misfortune at Chuck's cabin. They all were quite surprised that no one welcomed them or even tried to find who were at the wharf, without knowing what had happened inside the mansion. To them it seemed like a beautiful and serene place, quite well suitable for a spiritual meeting. They addressed themselves when they reached the entrance of the mansion and stated the purpose of their arrival but there was no response, of course. Assuming the worst, they entered with their guns at ready. They split themselves into teams of three and spread in different directions. They expected bad news but certainly not as bad as what they found upstairs. Who would have thought they were about to find bloodshed everywhere and more dead than the living? None of them had ever witnessed such a horrible manslaughter in their life. It certainly didn't feel holy or spiritual inside as it did on the outside. They wondered if they just walked into a house from a horror picture as it was that unsettling for them to be there.

Their first suspicion was on Bodholm whom they now feared and despised. It was until they organized a search for him which resulted in finding Lawrence in the store room who pretended to be afraid and teared up when they got to him and Fred in the power

shed who had a shovel in his hand which he claimed for his own safety. The search continued in the woods and by the shore and they soon stumbled upon the graves of Clara, Henderson and Sam. *Who the hell is Edwin Bodholm? Jack The Ripper himself or what? Thought this was a peaceful city.* Wild thoughts raced their minds. Not for long of course. They found Bodholm the Ripper dead beside a rock by the shore with the remaining glass elves in his clenched fist. He had lost a lot of blood from his wounds and apparently he couldn't have died a long time ago.

Lawrence and Fred were inquired separately and they told them everything that happened except the parts that concerned them. So, they were the only two who had survived a place eight others couldn't and both of them claimed there had been a mysterious killer in their midst. The police couldn't help but suspect them both as they sounded very weird. Their stories weren't impeccable and the way they delivered it felt too forced and unrealistic. Especially, Fred's poor attempts to hide the true story behind the welts on his face. It was as if they were just trying to evade their questions which felt like they were hiding something. At the moment, they kept them both separated and under their supervision and continued their hunt for clues and evidence. It was a shame that the case was only growing bigger since it started with Davis' murder. Now they had to find this mysterious killer whom might be the Mr. Hearts from some other case as per Fred. They figured they had to stay there till evening by when, hopefully, another team they had asked for, would arrive. Luckily, they had a lot of food in the mansion itself.

Knowing the time left, they worked quick. They packed all the evidences they collected to develop the case, sealed them and readied them for official use. They assembled the corpses in the hall, covered them with white cloth after removing all the valuables and pieces of evidence from them. One important object among them was a cassette tape found in Benjamin's coat pocket. It easily fell under the evidence column and as they had many things to do in the time they had, they left it for the new team to examine without playing it.

When they further examined every spot on the island, they naturally came across the manhole in the backyard that wasn't well covered and found the hidden cellar down the rabbit hole. As they thoroughly examined the spot, they found a secret safe inside the cupboard that had a number lock. They packed it as an object of debatable matter for how suspicious it was, to be hidden in a wine cellar which itself was hidden from plain sight down an unusually wide manhole.

The new team arrived at the island precisely at five in the evening in a particularly bigger boat with all the necessities required to safely bring five fresh corpses and three rotting corpses to the city. The forensics team examined all of them roughly and came up with the first report before getting them on the boat. Lawrence and Fred too were brought to the boat along with all the packed evidences ranging from Sam's death cane, the blood stained knife in Olenska's room and Bodholm's cleaver to the elves in his fist, the mysterious safe, the tape from Benjamin's pocket and a whole lot other. Thus the boat set off to Owens' old beach house where it was expected to arrive early the next morning.

That was where Owens had been waiting eagerly, hoping to see Marcella and a good lot of others who cared about him. However he was most excited to see Marcella and when he saw the boat arrive, he felt hope again. He literally ran over to the wharf with a smile crossing his face after a long time. The first face he saw was Lawrence's and then Fred's and while he was certainly happy to see them again, he noticed they didn't look comfortable and didn't smile back to him. They were surrounded by the policemen who guided them out of the boat. Owens wondered where were the rest of them and within a second, they began unloading the bodies off the boat one by one. Owens didn't believe what he saw at the first glance and then he couldn't help but run towards them. The policemen didn't let him close to the bodies, he was only allowed to see their faces from a distance. He was starting to feel he shouldn't have come there when he saw their dead faces, all familiar but cold and lifeless. Loyal servants. Pedantic mentor. Loving grandaunt. True adviser. Good friend. And amidst them was Marcella. Was she really dead? She was. He stared at her for a moment with unblinking eyes, he didn't know what exactly he was feeling - anger or sorrow. All roads led to a single route that ultimately ended in a ditch. That was how it was for Owens. All hope vanished into thin air. The feeling people encounter before giving it all up.

In anger and utter disappointment, he shoved away the nearby officer and broke down. He wanted to let it all out of him and burn the world to the grounds if it made him feel any better. He collided on the floor and from his view he could see the sky. The morning sun was still bright but he couldn't feel it or the hope it gave him an hour ago. All he could see was darkness that blacked out his hope.

News spread. The case Martin dealt with simply kept extending. The corpses were all brought to the mortuary after doctors had examined and finalized their death reports. Lawrence and Fred were still under investigation no matter how much detailed they could be

ate island. For them both, the fear wasn't over. Fear of death metamorphosed into fear of getting arrested. They were alone in the inquiry cells they were given. They had all the privacy they wanted a few days ago. But nothing had changed. There was still fear and loneliness poisoning their minds. Lawrence wasn't new to being lonely but now he wanted something he had before when he was lonely in his house. Freedom.

On the other hand, Fred already began to suffer. He fell into the valley of depression and anxiety. He hadn't snorted since the previous morning. He wanted so badly to take a snort of coke which had become a part of his behaviour and now without it, he was going crazy. He knew what it was happening to him and why it was happening. Because of the pain he suffered, he even thought of asking the cops to let him have some or he would die.

While in the department building, where the evidences were safeguarded, Lopez and Bob both were welcome to work on the case as the primary victim Martin was close to them. Since the incident at Chuck's cabin, Lopez had been distressed about the choice he made there. Bob too didn't talk to him normally after that. He never saw what Lopez did as justice and Lopez was well aware of it. Amidst all of the confusion, Lopez accepted to work on it just out of the respect he had for Martin and to free his mind from it. He was in the room given to him, examining the evidences when he heard Bob at the door.

"Lopez, they've got something. You might wanna hear this out." Lopez never sensed such excitement in Bob's voice in recent times so he immediately got out of the room.

"I'm coming," Lopez continued, "Hey, Bob. You still think I shouldn't have done that?" Without replying, Bob walked away. Lopez understood nothing had changed for him and followed him to the new inspector's office. A whole team of officers were there, surrounding the inspector's table. When everyone had gathered, the new inspector Marlow began his talk about the tape they got from Benjamin's pocket.

"There's this subject among the victims we found dead by the name of Olenska Downhart. This tape had been recorded by her at different times while she was in the island. She's been an intelligent one to do so as this tape is the game changer of this case. We don't necessarily have to believe everything she says but by far she hasn't been wrong except a few controversial points. She practically states every incident that's happened there till her death. I and Julian have studied the whole tape and there are some specific portions of it

which explain crucial points. This is one such a portion." Inspector Marlow played the tape.

"This is Lady Oleska Downhart. It's the second day of this stupid gathering. The date is 23rd of November. This recording is done by only me and not on anyone's request or threat. No one here knows I record this. Things are going crazy here. The purpose of this recording is to state the details on Dr. Henderson's murder. Yes, he was found beheaded this morning in his room. Yesterday, when the tape of my favourite song was played at lunch, we heard a gruff male voice citing the name of everyone of us and stating the crimes it claimed we did. The bad thing is, we don't have the tape with us anymore. The Napoleon of us, Mr. Lambard broke it."

"That mysterious tape is what started this craziness. We found the broken tape in the garbage. Unfortunately, it can't be restored, the experts say. Now we're sure Henderson is the first victim. But from what the survivors and this old lady said, Henderson's suspicion, hours before he was killed, was on the mysterious killer Mr. Hearts from some other case whom our guests thought to be hiding somewhere in the island. Our boys has searched the whole place and found no one. Anyway, Mr. Hearts has become one of our suspects. On the third day, she claims that Marcella, whom she considered the best match for her grandnephew, betrayed her and that she was responsible for Davis' murder and that Bodholm was just the pawn, just as our survivors said. That proves our survivors were right about that. But not everything it seems." Marlow skipped a few minutes on the tape and played it.

"I loved her like my own family." Olesnka's sobbing was audible softly. "I want to kill her but I can't. You know what? What the tape said about her, I think that's true. She really could've murdered her husband's child, I'd wager. Probably because the kid wetted his blanket. For the first time, I regret being on the wheelchair. My servant Bodholm doesn't seem to be as evil as I thought. I feel ashamed of that. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be able to learn her treachery anytime soon. I don't like him but I now respect him. I don't want to call him dog anymore. When I talked with him, I learnt about that tape. The voice was Bodholm's, he spoke through a tube or something so that we couldn't find it was him but it was Henderson's work. That sick person. May he rest in peace. It's just as Fred said. He's a maniac. That tape was supposed to be a part of his sessions. He did that to create a sensation of fear in us and render us desperate mentally. All he made Bodholm say in the tape is true, I guess. Owens had told him all of that, it seems. The lesson was to confess one's own crimes. But with these sick people, I think it's not going to happen. I'm going to let it stay the way it is now."

I'm not gonna tell this to anyone. I'm going to make another tape with Bodholm. Just for Samwell. He's a coward but he deserves to be corrected unlike the rest of them."

Marlow paused it and said, "So there we have it. That second tape our survivors mentioned. Wasn't the killer's work, the tapes. Speaking of Dr. Sam, we come to this" and skipped to the desired portion.

"Today's 26th of November. The fifth day. Sam's funeral was just over. He was found beaten to death in the hidden cellar beneath the manhole beside the pool in the backyard. I know who did it. It wasn't Bodholm. We've brought the beds downstairs to the hall on Sam's request, thanks to the tape I made, it worked in all the wrong ways. Last night, I wasn't asleep. From my bed, I could see everyone who went to the backyard which is well lit. Benjamin was the first one to go there, followed by Sam, for no reason I could think of. I should've stopped him," Olenska's voice broke. She sniffed and continued, "If only I'd known what was about to happen. Within minutes, Benjamin returned but not Sam. I was afraid. I wanted to get to him but I couldn't. Both mentally and physically. And then, minutes later, Lawrence the demon went to the backyard like he's been waiting for it. Then his dog Fred followed him wagging his tail. They both returned too but not poor Sam. If there's someone who's responsible for Sam's death, it must be the demon or his dog. My guess would be the both of them since they often share the same cause. But I didn't accuse them. That wouldn't be wise for a woman in a wheel chair. I'll wait. My life isn't worth a nickle if I don't get Sam justice. So here me out. There is no one in this world who cares about him more than me. I say these two mutts are killers. This recording is the primary evidence. Whoever you are, inquire this matter in this point of view."

Marlow paused it again and stared at all of them in the room. They understood it was for how similar Olenska's and their ideas were. "Now we're at the culmination," Marlow played another portion of the tape.

"27th of November. Morning 1 am. I'm here to break the truth on Mr. Lambard's death. He'd always had an eye on Marcella, she had explained me about it the day I met her and late into the night, probably about an hour ago, he entered her room by force. Apparently, he'd strangled her and tied her down and was strangely found dead on the floor. Marcella's eyes, mouth and limbs have been tied to her bed when her door was opened. Naturally everyone thought it was the killer's doing but I saw what was happening inside when no one around. She tied herself to make everyone believe her story. I didn't see her kill him but it was obvious she did. If she

didn't, why did she have to pretend otherwise? That fool Fred untied her but didn't realise how loose the knots were. Prick. So then I lured her into my room after the dog had gone to wipe the demon's butt. I had the dinner knife with me. I pierced her abdomen with it. I did justice to my Owens. She wouldn't get a better punishment even if the police catch her. I confess. I killed her and this is the truth. She's been dead for the past five minutes I'd gladly accept any number of punishments you'd give me for murdering her but this is the truth. I've done a grand bigger justice to this world than you'll ever do. Ugh-" They heard the opening of a door lock and Olenska became silent all of a sudden. They could only hear her breathing.

"You killed her?" said a male voice from a distance. Olenska didn't reply but her breathing was audible. *"If I wish, I can suck the little life out of you. You are poison. I know how you manipulate people to your interests. And I remember very well how you destroyed my family. I'd forgive you for all of that if you just beg me to let you live,"* said the male voice. *"Benjamin!"* Olenska said softly. *"Oh, you know my name! Just do what I say. Beg to me like you've never done and I may consider leaving you alive."* *"I always thought you weren't as dumb as your father. But it's true what they say, right? Like father, like son. You talk to an eighty year old woman on a wheelchair like she cares about her life. If you're going to kill me, if you got balls to do that, then do it already. But remember this. Your father was the sleaziest and dumbest man I ever saw and I spit on his grave."*

All they heard after that was Olenska gasping for breath, followed by constant silence. Right then they heard Benjamin cussing and a click sound when the tape ended. "Olenska betrayed Benjamin's father and there's been a big deal of family wars following that," Marlow shared his view. "It seems this is an extension of the feud that's got her killed. Anyway, lets focus on how the tape ended. Benjamin found out about the tape and took it with him. But he didn't destroy it. He kept it with himself and obviously he is the last one to die. Now this leads to an interesting point. I had the report on Benjamin's death pulled out of the doctor's hand first and something is unconvincing. This is when my first doubt on Benjamin's death turned into a suspicion. Did he really kill himself? With a tape evidence against him in his pocket. Not a likely spot to choose for a suicide, either. I learnt from the report that the bullet had pierced through his skull and the wooden door of Fred's room in front of which he was lying dead and the trajectory of the bullet inside his skull is a straight line perpendicular to his face. Which means he would have had to stick the muzzle of the rifle to his cheek, hold the rifle parallel to the ground and reach out to the trigger of a one metre long rifle to pull it. Seriously? Who wants to try

to die in such a complicated way? Could've just put a bullet beneath the chin. Don't even have to take the gun in the hand. So lets ask our survivors about it. If the old lady's right, one of them must have killed Benjamin."

And when Marlow and Julian had come to his cell inquire about Benjamin, Fred begged to them, "Just get me a tenth and I'll tell you whatever you need."

"Julian says you've been asking that since morning. Do we look like a bunch of dope selling junkies to you?" Marlow asked in anger.

"Do I look like a prince in his royal chamber to you? Do I look like I've found solace in this crappy cell? Can't you see I'm suffering? It's the withdrawal syndrome! I've been consuming cocaine for the past few months and suddenly I've stopped. You know how much painful that is. I'm in pain!" Fred broke down and his suffering was truly visible to everyone. He was literally shivering in a room with no sort of ventilation. "Either give me some to snort or provide medical assistance. 'Cause without any of them I might just kill myself."

"You'll get the required medications," Marlow said firmly, "If you tell us all that you know." He stared at Fred who became silent suddenly. He thought for a few seconds and said, "I'd say everything if you make my pain go away. But on one condition. Lawrence shouldn't know I told you this. Can I believe I have your word on this?"

"Sure. You have my word," Marlow said immediately and there was a mild, visible expression of happiness on his face. They recorded his statement in which he confessed everything he did. Had he done that earlier, a number of people would have been alive and the spiritual meeting would have been meaningful for once. After his confession, he told Marlow, "The scar on his forehead. Sam caused it. Lawrence knows that. And I have one more thing to tell. I don't think this is gonna be useful to you but I just wanna say this. The way Lawrence acted yesterday before you arrived, it seemed like he had lost his sanity. I mean, he himself said he developed a persona in his mind and talked with it all the time when he was alone in his house for like ten years or so. Also I think, he might've murdered someone before. Way before all of this. When I'm treated, I'll try to explain everything to you. Just, don't tell him I said these, please." And just as promised, he was given the treatment he yearned for and he certainly had an improvement on his mental state.

An hour later, Marlow and Julian met Lawrence in his cell where he was kept isolated since he arrived at Vancouver. "Who are you?" he asked Marlow who was just entering his cell. Marlow didn't reply to him until he had seated himself and Julian opposite to him on the other side of the table.

"I'm Inspector Marlow and this is my associate Julian. We have something to straighten out with you and be quick with it. We've got a lot of things to do," Marlow said without looking at him.

"So, you're the inspector. The half baked one. Do you have the slightest idea of what you're doing? You've kept me arrested for more than a day without any charges against me. You know what, I'm a lawyer myself. I can sue you for that."

"Enough said, smart guy. You're just under inquiry based on suspicions. You're not arrested. Not yet," Marlow replied calmly and continued, "But with the recent discoveries we've made, it seems you're actually guilty of a murder. We've got proof you murdered Benjamin. You confess?" Lawrence was utterly surprised as he thought it was a foolproof plan he made. But then, the worse part of his mind influenced his judgement and after a few seconds of thinking he asked, "Did Fred tell you something?"

"Hey, I asked you a question, buddy. What I expect is an answer not another question," Marlow didn't want to expose Fred's involvement in the fear it might turn the tide.

"I assure you I'll provide you what you need if you answer my question," Lawrence didn't sound honest to Marlow. He just kept looking at him wondering if it would work. "An yes would suffice me. From the looks of you coming over I'm sure you've got very close to tying up the loose ends. An yes is a small effort to achieve success in such a big deal," Lawrence added more words to his point. Marlow turned to Julian to learn his opinion. Lawrence was very keen on how they communicate. Julian gestured his reply in a subtle nod. Marlow couldn't believe Lawrence manipulated him into it and proceeded to say, "Yes, he-" but immediately stopped by Lawrence's lightning reply as soon as he heard the word 'yes' coming out of Marlow's mouth, "I killed Benjamin. With Lambard's rifle. But I do not confess to any crimes because I did none."

"Wait, what?" Marlow was confused by his reply. "Can I get to meet Fred? In his cell. In front of any number of you. At a distance. I assure you I won't harm him or do anything stupid," Lawrence said calmly and clearly.

"Lets make this clear first. Did you actually kill Benjamin? Do

you confess?" Marlow asked to clear things.

"Get me to his cell. You can have my hands in cuffs. I just wanna have a talk with him. And then I'll give you my statement that I killed Benjamin."

Marlow was truly infuriated by Lawrence's behaviour, he didn't want to do as he said but also he wanted to move things quickly. So he agreed. Later that evening, after Fred's primary treatment was over. As soon as Lawrence was brought inside his cell, Fred got panicked. He looked at Marlow whom he thought betrayed him. Marlow, unable to bear with his own conscience, walked over to Fred and whispered into his ears, "I tried but he found it out himself." He patted his back and came back to his position. "Mr. Lawrence here wants to speak with you momentarily," he told Fred loudly. Lawrence with his hands cuffed at his back, kept staring at Fred who was getting more and more scared each passing second. To his relief, Lawrence spoke first, "Are we still friends, Fred?"

Surprised by the question, Fred couldn't reply at once. He also wanted to give the best answer for it so he stayed silent, thinking up the answer. And when he thought he got to reply the best answer, "I know I've hurt you-" Lawrence asked his next question as if he didn't need an answer from Fred, "Do you know what we humans are?" and continued, "Pedantic bundles of flesh and bones tied together. Craving for all the puny things in this world. Love and time are the abstract spells that make us believe what we see and what we feel which are often untrue. I learnt this is the truth from your actions. I should thank you for that but I won't."

"Lawrence, stop this. I don't get your point," Fred felt the same way as before when Lawrence broke down the previous morning but Lawrence kept on saying what he was saying. "Because I know what you are. A worthless human who can't keep himself sane. The true existence of us human beings isn't in the physical form but the mental one. And someone such as you who is mentally insane doesn't even exist. You do not exist. You're nobody. Nothing. I'm right now losing my breath talking into the air. And why the hell do you believe the words of a nobody?" Lawrence turned to Marlow who was as puzzled as Fred.

"I'm done. Get me out of here," Lawrence said to Marlow immediately and continued, "I did kill Benjamin. But the way you see it as a crime is wrong. It's not true. Abstract, like I said. It's not justice that you think is. It's madness." Lawrence kept talking in the same way as they tried to get him out of the room. He kept on explaining them the way he saw things even when they didn't listen to him. They began to believe Fred was right about his mental health. Fred

saw him leaving the room in the accompaniment of the cops and realised he had truly lost a good friend. The image of Lawrence he thought was true until a couple days ago felt unreal and stupid to him now that Lawrence's way of understanding the world sounded insane to him. Apart from all of that, Fred still felt very bad about betraying Lawrence though he thought it was the right thing to do. He kept apologizing to him in his mind, fantasizing him to be the man he remembered from the first time he talked with him.

The safe obtained from the hidden cellar seemed to hold something suspicious within; when it was scanned with the help of some experts, they opened it forcefully as Owens didn't share the pin with them. When it was opened, they found a surprising amount of illegally smuggled diamonds and other precious stones inside which Owens confessed were bought from the black market. He also confessed to his various crimes he committed in the process of earning the stones which included a number of murders in which Bodholm took part too. One of Owens' closest friends who bought Owens' private island which was familiar to him, originally accepted to buy it only because of the precious stones Owens hid there. But Owens didn't expose this truth to the police just to prevent his friend from the trouble it could have caused him.

Marlow and his team finalized their report on the case as everything was finally made clear. Everyone who were assigned for the case were shown the report. Thus it reached the hands of Lopez and Bob too while they were in the canteen. Lucky for Lopez, Bob discussed everything related to the case with him but nothing else and not the way they used to. Bob read the report and told him, "So. People of the parliament, huh? Vengeful, squabbling, imbecile jerks. They just killed each other based on their own stupid prejudice and hatred. Like only what they believe is justice." At this point, Lopez began to wonder if he was actually talking about him and Bob's immediate silence proved his guess was right. He turned to Bob if he got anything to say.

Bob pouted his lips and said, "You won't get to see a better example in your life, dear friend." Lopez understood what he meant and said to him sarcastically, "So we're still friends, huh?"

"What did you think? Been feeling that way?" Bob mocked him and patted him. Lopez was relieved that finally Bob was speaking to him like before. A few minutes later, Bob asked, "Have you thought about it, Lopez? Your justice for Martin. How you feeling about it?"

"Yeah. I've made my share of thoughts. You know, I did it because I thought I can do that. I had the power to do that. I deceived myself to use my power to my interests. Now, that is wrong. If I'm

capable of bending the law to my will using my power, I don't deserve such a power. It is wrong. I want to right it and I've made my decision about it."

"I'll be glad to know what's that," Bob said with a smile. "You'll see. I'm gonna confess," Lopez smiled back and walked away. When he got to his house late in the evening, he felt he had made the decision. He talked to his wife about it and succeeded in convincing her he was right. He got to his room and since the incident at Chuck's cabin, he hadn't felt as relieved as he was now. He stayed up at night, sat in front of his computer, finished typing up his resignation letter and faxed it to everyone he knew in his department including Bob. He wrote down his verbal confession on a paper and practised on it for some time. When he was confident he was done, he lied down on his bed beside his wife who was already asleep. Reclining himself on his pillow, he peeped out through the window. He looked at the waning moon and the stars in the sky, listening to the cricket chirps and found peace in it. He wished his life was just as peaceful as this moment as anyone would and sensed he had a lot of hope left in his life and all he had to do was to be careful in making decisions and avoid the wrong ones.

***** THE END *****

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PROLOGUE

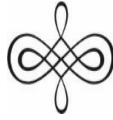
Dear Laurie

Remember when we had this spiritual gathering way back in '81? I've arranged a similar one in my private island this time with some other people and scheduled it for a whole week. Be at my beach house before 5 in the evening on 21st of this month, the boat leaves at 6. You know how much your presence would mean to me.

Frank Owens

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1. DIANA DIVES

Vancouver. Fall of 1990. Just after lunch, Lawrence got himself invested in packing his things in his olive green suitcase for quite an unusual journey. Among the things he packed, there was a letter which served as a proof of the invitation, which was from his long-time friend, Franklin Owens, who was a leading entrepreneur in the city.

Lawrence wasn't the type of person who would do well in crowds. He was a lawyer by profession and knew a lot of people of high standards as a result but still was socially inept. That would explain why even a man of high profile that Lawrence was, being profoundly tall with nice brown hair, remained unmarried even at the age of forty.

He lived in his humble house all alone in spite of which, he wasn't well interested in recreation, he was mostly focused on his job more than anything. So he thought it wouldn't be bad to take a break though a 'spiritual gathering' seemed pretty lame. There was one more reason for him to find it so lame - he had once been in such a meeting few years back. On top of all, he didn't want to disrespect Owens, his only true friend.

Eventually, he got himself in some sort of a dilemma, the usual case when he would hear the voice. The voice. The voice had been staying inside his mind since time immemorable, he didn't know what it was and he didn't do anything about it too. Maybe it wasn't even a voice, it could be just his inner thoughts, he wouldn't know for sure. Or could it be just him hallucinating that he was hearing a voice? He couldn't tell.

Do it, Laurie. Get out of here the voice said. Finally it was the voice he listened to, he left his house in a taxi adjourning all his deals for the next week. He convinced himself he wouldn't regret that in the future. Or it could be the voice that convinced him, he couldn't tell.

At the same while, Lawrence's friend Franklin Owens found himself in a tight corner in his mansion, unluckily on the morning of the said date. A distant cousin of him, Davis, who had been staying with him for quite a while, was found dead with a slit throat in his room. In no time, his house was swarmed by policemen and that was when he realised that the chances for him to attend the gathering were rather low. Owens responded as genuinely as he could when he was inquired by the police.

"Look, officer. He's a young fool. He has been searching a job for himself since forever. He always comes to me for help. Him being in my house is the most common thing you can find in this part of the city."

"Um... Lets get to the ground level. Can you explain to us who is he exactly? What is he to you? How are you both related?" one of the officers stacked a number of questions in front of him to Owens' dismay.

"Is the word 'complicated' not enough for you?" he replied sadly with a distinct amount of frustration.

When he arrived at the beach house, Lawrence got to know that Owens wasn't there. But Owens had already arranged one of his servants to escort Lawrence to one of his private yachts which he had arranged to bring the guests to his private island, so it wasn't big deal. Owens had originally named the boat 'Diana' in remembrance of his maternal grandmother but then changed it as 'Diana Dives' to give it a very lively feeling. Lawrence was in fact the last person to arrive at there, all the other invited guests were already on board. They were all dressed as fancifully as wealthy people would. He saw men everywhere inside the boat except an old woman on a wheelchair. While none of them seemed to notice his arrival, there was a familiar face amongst them who greeted him with a smile.

"Lawrence!" a middle aged man in a beach shirt and shorts, wearing a ten-gallon hat and smoking a cigar stood up and shook hands with him. He wore a huge ring that bore a distinct eagle crest with gems surrounding it.

"Mr. Benjamin!" Lawrence exclaimed a bit apathetically as he was not at all pleased to meet him.

Mr. Benjamin Lockwood, the plumpy guy looking distinctly shorter than Lawrence, had once met Lawrence when his cousin was convicted of a felony and luckily things ended favourably for him.

"I didn't know you knew Mr. Owens," Benjamin wondered.

"If a man is wealthy in this city then most likely I have met him on some occasion," Lawrence said casually.

"So how do you know him?"

"Since high school. How come you met him?"

"I'm warning you, it's not a pleasant story."

"Not half as unpleasant as the cases I deal with, I bet."

"Well, there you go." And so, Benjamin started to share his tiny hour-long history with Owens in the most unnecessarily elaborated manner, showing off all his talking skills. Eventually, the 'Benjamin-Owens' stories became 'only Benjamin' stories that made Lawrence regret why he met Benjamin in the first place. While everyone was minding their own business, chatting, drinking and smoking, Lawrence was very much displeased with Benjamin's awfully made up stories about his past. He couldn't even focus on his surrounding, who were there or how many were there.

After some of the very boring minutes in his life, Lawrence finally succeeded in gathering the courage to ask for an excuse and escaped to the lavatory. On his way, he shared a momentary eye contact out of nowhere with one of the guests, the only woman there apart from the old lady in the wheelchair. *She couldn't be older than thirty* he thought. Maybe it could be the voice in him, he wouldn't care. The woman unlike others was just wearing a black leather jacket and jeans from which he presumed she might actually not be as wealthy as the others.

On his way back, he stopped by the woman and introduced himself, "Excuse me, young lady," he bowed down a little so as to speak to her softly and no one would hear him talking. "I'm Lawrence Weinberg, Mr. Owens' friend and personal lawyer. May I get to know about you?"

With a little hesitation, she replied, "I'm Marcella. I... uh... I'm a friend of his."

"That's nice. May I ask a favour of you? I don't want to impose it on you but may I sit next to you so that I can be spared of Mr.

Benjamin's pathetically woven tall tales?"

"Well, of course," she chuckled on Lawrence's comment about Benjamin and let him.

Lawrence was wrong to think that no one saw him because an unfamiliar pair of eyes was fixed on him as soon as he began to talk to Marcella. And he didn't personally know the owner of those unfamiliar eyes or that he was staring at him. He stayed silent, reading magazines till sunset after which there was an announcement from the captain for the departure of the boat. It was said that by early morning the next day, the destination will be reached. Surprised, everyone raised their concern about Owens' absence to which, one of the servants provided the answer.

"Pardon me, gentlemen. Mr. Owens contacted us. He happened to come across an unexpected affair, one that requires his presence and he wouldn't be able to join us in this gathering. Also he insists everyone to carry on without him and sends his apologies."

"Did he just say that?" the man with a big moustache from the front seat stood up and approached the servant. It was the man who was staring at Lawrence and Marcella. "Yes, sir. We just received his call..." before the servant could finish his sentence, the man continued, "He spoke to you and not us? What was he thinking?" He kept frowning at the servant till he turned his eyes away from him.

"Easy, Mr. Lambard. What do you think the servant has got to do with it?" an old man threw himself into the scene trying to ease down the situation. Lawrence now got to know the man with the moustache was Lambard. Mr. Jeffrey Lambard, Former chief of police, was essentially hot-headed and sometimes treated others in a nihilistic way for which he was famously known. His rough voice, grey and black hair with a short beard and stiff face added to his intimidating presence. He was also less friendly, so how he ended up being friends with Owens and what was the business between them both always remained a mystery.

"You think that's fair of Owens, Priest?" Lambard responded to the old man with the same anger. Laughing, the old man replied, "What, I am a priest? I think you know exactly what I am."

"Then, why the hell are you wearing a white gown?"

"It isn't a gown, first thing. And the colour white is to enhance the spiritual feelings. It's really got something to do with psychology, superficially speaking."

"I'm not inclined to argue with you, pal. But what was Owens really thinking? I can't spend my time with a bunch of strangers and I don't think anyone here can. Is there anyone here who doesn't want to continue this journey? Any like-minded people here?" Everyone remained as calm as a tide-less sea to his question.

"Alright, people. You think you still want to continue this trip without Owens. So do continue your trip without him. I'm not going to bend any of you to my will," saying so, Lambard left the servant unharmed, untypical of his short temper, came back to his seat and continued his smoking. Everyone was anyway truly disappointed because of Owen's absence to an extent as it was Owens, the connecting link between all of them. Lawrence could see the disappointment in Marcella's face but he was just as surprised as everyone else as none of them wanted the journey to end after all the preparations they had made.

"Who is that old man supposed to be?" Lawrence asked Marcella about the man in the white tunic.

"That's Mr. Henderson. He's the spiritual counsellor for this trip," she replied without much interest.

"Really? That's new. Owens did the counselling part last time."

"He did? I never knew there was a last time. When was this?"

Suddenly, Lawrence felt someone grabbing his shoulder as Marcella gasped. Lawrence turned back to see who it was. "Do, by any chance, I know you, Mr..." Lambard who seemingly got himself teleported to the back of Lawrence, asked softly, contrary to his nature.

"Um... Lawrence. I don't think so, Mr. Lambard," he shook hands with Lambard who nodded once at his reply.

"Do you know each other?" Lambard asked them both with a smirk.

"No, we just met," Lawrence replied modestly. Lambard turned his attention towards Marcella, "Are you alright, Mrs. Paterson?"

"Yes," Marcella turned her head away from Lambard slowly with an awkward fading smile. Lambard felt the situation and left the place smiling. After he left, Lawrence asked her, "What's he doing, your husband?" as Lambard addressed her 'Paterson'.

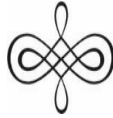
"I'm not really interested to talk about it. And I'm now divorced anyway," Marcella snapped at him. After a momentary silence,

Lawrence asked a bit more calmly, "So, what's that with Mr. Lambard?"

"What's what?"

"I mean, you actually, sort of, made him leave."

"If it's Mr. Benjamin for you, it's him for me. The only difference is this man demands my past stories," Marcella said in a hysterical tone that made Lawrence chuckle who had no idea of what to reply.



2. OWENS' PARADISE

Inspector Martin did not ever relish the idea of being harsh in handling the suspects or the convicts, a characteristic not every policemen shared with him. He was leading the investigation in Owens' house and before lunch, he got to meet Owens in person in his room. He stood slightly reclined onto the wall nearby and made his talk while Owens was comfortable on his sofa. "I heard he had been involved in frequent quarrels with a chief butler of your house, Edvin Bodholm last week."

"You don't know Davis. He quarrels with everybody. For everything. He will quarrel with a cook just because he cooks," Owens was very disinterested to even talk about Davis which Martin keen eyes noticed. He tried to shift the focus away from Davis for a while, "So what about this Edvin Bodholm? What kind of name is that anyway?"

"He's half Finnish. He's now in my private island, I've already explained that to you colleagues. About that spiritual gathering."

Martin slowly walked towards the sofa opposite to Owens, resting himself smoothly onto it, he pulled a cigar out of his pocket, "May I?" Owens nodded. Just as he lit the cigar he continued, "I'm sorry, Mr. Owens but I'd appreciate it if you would just say it again." Owens was starting to feel a bit uncomfortable as it seemed to him that Inspector Martin might suspect him.

The boat was surrounded by thick fog and it wasn't even dawn yet which added to the poor visibility of the vicinity. Lawrence was standing in the bow of the boat, covered himself with a blanket as it was too cold, helping himself with a cigar Benjamin lent him while others were still asleep. Lawrence was used to waking up before sunrise and if he didn't, the day wouldn't be normal for him. Out of

nowhere, he saw a light amidst the fog and that's where the boat was headed. When he asked the captain he cleared him that it could be a beacon on Owens' island as he was sure the island was close. The servants alarmed everyone they were close by waking them up so that they could ready themselves. Owens' island was one of the thousand isles scattered throughout that part of the ocean and was essentially the biggest of them all. The mansion was at the centre, surrounded by trees everywhere and a tiny rocky hill covered in green behind. A man covered all over with woollen garments holding a lantern invited them with the vital warmth at the entrance.

"I'm Edvin Bodholm. I'm the caretaker here," the man introduced himself to everyone. "Don't just stand there. The coldness is just a bit too harsh these days."

Bodholm was the chief butler in Owens' mansion, he took after his father who served Owens' family since several years ago, before Owens was even born. He was secured for the job as a gesture of appreciating his father's long years of servitude. Apart from his mansion in Vancouver, Bodholm was also well aware of the functioning of Owens' other mansions and beach houses in the city, his private island and his private docks. He also possessed the ability to command and lead the other servants and that was why Owens had high regards for him and chose him to take charge of the private island as long as the guests stayed there. But he wasn't well treated by anyone other than Owens. Everyone called him names both vulgar and foul. It wasn't because of anything he did but because he was black. Because of his skin colour for which he held no responsibility. Because they thought they could do it and no one would question it. That was the cruel situation Bodholm was in, serving those who hated him and those he hated all through the years with a smile on his face.

The sun was already rising, making it a beautiful scenery to watch. Bodholm led them through the stone path between the trees to the mansion. There was a wooden display board on which it was written in white paint 'Owen's Paradise', for which the old woman on the wheelchair chair being pushed along by the servant right behind Bodholm asked, "This board is new. Why is it misspelled though, mongrel?" That was the old woman's name for Bodholm and it was his responsibility to keep track of the names everyone had for him. "Everyone asks that, Ma'am. It isn't really a misnomer though. It is named after Mr. Owens' grandfather and also because he didn't like the presence of an apostrophe unfollowed by an 's'," he replied with a smile that he obviously faked. They all could sense how hurtful it must have been for Bodholm but they thought they couldn't and didn't do anything about it. That was how ignorant

and self-centred they all were even at the sight of what they knew was immoral.

"The name sucks anyway," the old woman whispered to herself. Lambard noticed something weird too and he asked Bodholm about it, "Where is the emergency boat, goat? I didn't see it at the wharf." Goat. That was Lambard's name for him. Bodholm didn't act like he was hurt and replied gently, "Captain Chuck is in the city, probably busy. I think that's why." Marcella gave a weird look at Bodholm that passed quickly. Noticing all that, Lawrence realised that at least some of them were familiar with the place as if they had been there before which made him wonder why hadn't Owens introduced him to it. Within minutes, the mansion appeared in their sight and as soon as Lawrence laid his eyes on the mansion, he was reminded of Owens' beach house. He also pondered if it was supposed to be a replica. But as he entered it, all his predictions were shattered.

There were several sets of furniture covered in plain silk cloth along the eastern wall of the hall; they were set aside obviously, considering that it was too much for the expected number of guests. The remaining wooden furnishings, few chairs and a couple rectangular tables, which were the best of them, were set neatly along the western wall. The hall was so big that it covered all the ground floor and it was decorated lavishly with golden lamps at every corner and the furniture; the walls that were painted yellow amplified the effect of the lamps sharply. It felt like the hall of fame with all those weird paintings bordered with dull golden frames with intricate designs and markings; the beautiful antiques of old ages, brightened with strange colours perched on the well furnished multi-legged wooden stands; the red curtains with markings of various colours that gave a medieval feeling, hanging over at the right spots; the black marble flooring that reflected all these in an epic, soothing manner.

The fresh herbal odour that filled the hall felt like being in an isolated place with no one around, left only with one's own feelings. There were wooden shelves carved beautifully with shapes of mythical creatures and were filled with books that preached how to get deep into oneself mentally. Lawrence at once realised that it was going to be better than the last time. The kitchen, dining hall and a number of bedrooms, all fitted with a rest room, were all upstairs. There was a doorway at the end of the hall that led to the backyard. There were wide, grilled, glass windows on both sides that were covered with red curtains marked with golden stripes. A stony path that continued from the doorway split the backyard into two portions: one with a swimming pool and the other with a tiny lawn, a

common lavatory and a generator room that served as the power source for the whole place. The stony path led to the woods behind the mansion and discontinued abruptly at nowhere. Admiring it all, Benjamin asked Bodholm wondering, "Whoa, it must need an enormous number of labours to maintain this, huh?"

"You may find it hard to believe but right now, it's just me and my wife, the labours here," Bodholm replied humbly, a characteristic trait of him. "Mr. Owens sent few of his servants with me two days ago, they helped me arrange everything here. When they were done, they left earlier yesterday."

"But what about the cooks?" Marcella intervened, this time, it was a characteristic trait of her. Bodholm stared at her at first as if she had asked something she shouldn't have but replied soon, "My wife cooks well."

"She can cook all by herself?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes. That's what Mr. Owens arranged for." Bodholm took his leave and went upstairs. As everyone were keen on setting their things in their corresponding rooms, they all left the grand hall pretty soon too. On his way upstairs, Lawrence ran into the nervous young fellow who was seemingly the most calm and silent character among the others.

"Can you please come with me for a moment?" he requested Lawrence but wasn't looking straight at him and was rather cautious if anyone saw him.

"May I set my baggage in my room before I join you?" Lawrence asked him gently as the man was someone he wasn't familiar with.

"No, no! It's pretty important," the young man was getting too anxious which Lawrence couldn't understand why. He led Lawrence to the back nearby the pool and spoke softly and quickly at the same time, "Something is really wrong, Mister. About this trip. About the priest man."

"Hey, are you all right? Why are you getting so excited? You can speak slowly," Lawrence noticed the restlessness in him.

"I am speaking slowly. Look, mister. Owens is a good friend of mine. But he says that I'm being paranoid these days. What kind of friend talks stuff like that?"

"I don't think he's wrong and after all, why are you telling me all this? I don't know why I'm being involved in your private affair. I

don't even know who you are."

"It concerns not only me, it involves everyone of us. I spoke to everyone before you came. They don't listen. It's the priest man. Mr. Henderson. It's him Owens brought me to. His ways are extremely weird. You get paranoid only after attending his sessions. He's cursed. He's damned. He's..." The young man started blabbering after delivering the long sentences in a rapid fashion. Lawrence grabbed his shoulders, bent himself a bit forward and looked him into his eyes. "Hey!" he called him out loud just to make him stop. "You need to calm yourselves, alright? You need to calm yourselves. You hear me?" The young man nodded, his eyes left tears as he closed them tight.

"I need you to freshen up yourselves. I'll meet you once you're all right. I'll listen to you then, alright? All right, so what's your name?"

"Fredrick."

"Right, Fred, now come on," Lawrence brought him to his room upstairs. "You can look after yourselves? You can do it or must you need me?" Fredrick didn't reply at all, he just entered the room and locked his door. He set his things in his room too like everyone else and took a little nap. Later when he met Marcella in her room to invite her for lunch, Lawrence asked her about Fredrick. "I don't know how he's connected to Owens but I heard from Lady Olenska that he was doing drugs for the past few months after he lost his daughter to hepatitis. Owens hooked him up with Henderson from whom he had been taking advice for years," words flowed from Marcella's as if she had been memorising them for days.

"Who's Olenska?" Lawrence asked just what he wanted to know.

"The dame-on-the-wheelchair. She's Owens' grandmother's sister but she's been close to him for so long. She knows everything, everybody. She's a living legend. Everybody calls her 'Lady' though she's not from a royal family or something." Lawrence noticed Marcella's excitement when she talked about Olenska but again, he didn't want too much details. "You heard anything odd about Mr. Henderson's spiritual sessions?" he finally got to the point of his talk with her. Marcella felt offended when he kept asking questions he wanted answers for rather than paying attention to the details she shared. She felt like she was using him but replied him however, "He hasn't started yet, right?"

"I meant when he got hooked up with Fredrick."

"You wanna talk about Fredrick or Henderson, you better go to Lady Olenska. I'm already pissed off with this trip so just spare me all the boring talks," Marcella snapped suddenly that Lawrence didn't see coming. He couldn't even sense what caused her to say that. With no choice other than to leave her alone, he didn't prolong the conversation. He thought she might be upset because of Owens' absence.

The breakfast wasn't well served, everyone was busy in settling themselves there, the purpose of their eating, for the moment, was just to hold their hunger. That was why they wanted a proper lunch for which they were quite ready, everyone was resolved and revived. Lambard went checking on every room to gather everyone at the dining hall. When he came across Henderson's room, he heard someone arguing. He wantedly opened the door without knocking so the argument would discontinue. Inside the room, he saw Henderson and Bodholm who were both standing still. The three looked at each other like in a Mexican standoff, speechless and confused, Henderson and Bodholm wondering if Lambard had heard them, Lambard wondering what they were arguing. It was finally Lambard who broke the silence, "Lunch is ready, comrades."

"Fine, Mr. Lambard. We're on our way," Henderson replied at once to break the tension and proceeded to close the door.

Lambard thought it wasn't his concern what they were arguing about, he didn't wish to ask. Soon, everyone gathered at the dining hall, Bodholm had been so keen on preparing dishes as simply as he could because Owens asked him to. He told him that the guests shouldn't be distracted by the foods in a spiritual gathering. Bodholm served the dishes in porcelain crockery on the round table which was more than enough for ten people to dine at a time. It was now that Lawrence realised that there were actually eight of them who had been invited by Owens as counting was easier now. There was a huge lofty bronze chandelier with a dozen candles placed majestically at the centre of the table. Around the base of the chandelier, there were ten tiny glass figurines of Christmas elves equally spaced with one another. "There are ten of them, huh? Just like the ten of us," Lambard commented on the elves. It was the tiny details that provoked the sensation of medieval age. In spite of all that, everyone was almost displeased with the lunch because it was mostly vegetarian, the ultimate consequence of Owens' good intention. But none of them spoke up about it. They looked at each other maintaining silence hoping someone would speak against it.

Once again the grumpy Lambard was the one to speak up. "Why don't I see no meat on the platters?"

"It's the wish of Mr. Owens. He wanted the dishes to be vegan. For everyone," Henderson explained.

"I don't see him either." Lambard snapped at him, making him feel helpless though he spoke the truth. Meanwhile, Bodholm played music on the tape deck that Olenska requested but all they heard was a seemingly unending buzzing noise. When Bodholm proceeded to analyse what was wrong with it, a gruff voice started to speak.

"Mr. Owens. You have got yourselves involved in a number of despicable dealings in your past life that degraded the livelihood of innocent people. It's too obscene to even call it a crime.

It caused a wave of murmurs among them, provoking a chain of questions, "What is that supposed to be?", "Why is it played?", "What does that mean?"

"Dr. Samwell. Not so honourable in business, eh? Scandals in buying accessories for medical equipments. As shameful as it gets.

Witnessing the commotion around the young man in glasses, Lawrence guessed that it must be Dr. Samwell and he wasn't wrong. Dr. Samwell wasn't particularly talkative with everyone, he only talked well with those whom he already knew and that was only Olenska among them.

"Dr. Henderson. Mad for money? Hurt lives just because you can't control yourselves? Still gotta learn more, it seems.

Henderson had lowered his level of sight, whispering to himself, "I've been fighting it."

"Mr. Lambard. Can someone be any less disgusting? Loathing for particular races. How deep has it

sunk you into committing sins!

Anyone could have said what was going to happen next. Lambard stood up from his seat as if he had sat on a porcupine. "What the hell was that about? Is that meant to disrespect us?" he was yelling while the tape was still playing. He proceeded to break the tape deck which provoked the others to stop him. Amidst the confusion, Lawrence spoke up, "Easy, Mr. Lambard. You don't want to know who did this? You want to, you stay calm." He said so because he thought they could find some clue about whose voice was it or who could possibly have done that and everyone was unanimous with his thought.

"Mrs. Paterson. Does the word evil need an explanation why you're still on our sight? You murdered an innocent kid, your kid, as a revenge on your husband. What's with motherly love these days?"

Marcella left tears as if she had been awaiting that moment for years, "It wasn't my fault, he was careless." She left the hall, striding towards her room. Benjamin wiped his mouth, leaving his lunch unfinished and walked away from there as soon as he heard his name. "It's ridiculous," he said as he began to leave.

"Mr. Benjamin. Attempted murder and ran dirty business. Could have caused innumerable number of deaths."

"Lady Downhart. The master manipulator. Sole cause of numerous fights in a great number of families."

"Not so sassy as I expected," good old Lady Olenska Downhart didn't seem to be mindful at all.

"Mr. Fredrick. Drugs and more drugs blinded you so much you couldn't even look after your wife and kids."

Fredrick was just as anxious as he was before, only he didn't freak out.

"Mr. Lawrence. As if being an immoral lawyer isn't a big sin, you murdered a man just to protect your puny reputation.

Lawrence didn't even show any sort of expression his face, he just kept staring at the deck without blinking.

"You all may think you can get away with it but you wouldn't think so if you had known the Doctrine Of Justice."

"Still can't see why this place is named paradise," Olenska said it rather loud so everyone could hear her. The content tape felt so out of the place and it definitely hurt their feelings as they were people of high social status - they cared about their dignity and reputation more than anything. They never got the feeling of a refreshing spiritual gathering and now it only got worse.

"It would be right only if we'd gathered everyone here to discuss on this matter," Henderson was quick to make his move on the account of the event. "It's crazy to say this but this event has helped us start our sessions," he chuckled as he said so. While it was a weird statement, it was also too out of place given the circumstances.

"Excuse me, Henderson. I think we can put off your sessions until we find who involved in this shameful activity during what is supposed to be a graceful trip," Lambard said as he had by now developed a theory as to what just happened. "I have something to say on this." he turned towards Bodholm who stood there seemingly blameless and slowly walked towards him, "You played that tape and you had no idea what you were just playing?"

"I don't know. It just said 'Body and Soul 1930'. You can see that on the tape. Lady Olenska gave me the tape," Bodholm quickly shifted the attention away from him.

"My, my. Now it's all come down to me, huh?" Olenska sounded concerned now. "Anyone here ever heard my voice, an eighty year old, wheel chair-ridden woman's voice that harsh? I'm a wheel chair bound old timer for god's sake. I don't know nothing about tapes or cassettes. My husband gifted it to me few years back."

"But you do know a lot of men. And you're rich enough to hire one," Lawrence out of nowhere got himself involved by sharing his view.

"Well, why couldn't it be you? You are always silent, lost in thoughts, maybe scheming about whatever only god knows. Your voice is not so sweet, either," Olenska showed she was good at giving comebacks. Suddenly, Dr. Samwell stood up, "I'm bringing down them both. We have to talk this out together." He took his excuse and went downstairs to calm down Benjamin and Marcella so that they could join them.

"I've not finished yet," Lambard turned away from Lawrence. "When I was inviting everyone for lunch, I happened to overhear an inaudible argument when I came across Mr. Henderson's room. I didn't hear anything unfortunately." While Lambard was explaining the situation, Lawrence looked at Henderson to see how he was reacting and managed to notice him eye signalling Bodholm which he couldn't percept.

"When I opened the door, I saw Henderson and Bodholm standing there silently looking at each other. And just then this happens. Now what was it you were arguing so silently?" Lambard looked into Bodholm's eyes who wouldn't look straight.

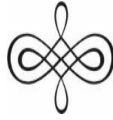
"It wasn't a big deal, my friend," Henderson tried to break the tension between them, speaking soothingly to Lambard.

"I'm not your friend," Lambard snapped at him once again, he wasn't going to fall for his coaxing. He opted offense as he would always.

"I talked to him about a book that's named 'The path of your mind'. It's downstairs. You can find it in one of the shelves," Henderson sounded sure.

"Mr. Henderson," Lawrence drew the attention immediately, "I saw the little eye gestures you shared with Bodholm, it isn't obscure for me that you're hiding something. I insist you better share it with all of us."

Henderson remained silent for a moment, Dr. Sam returned with Benjamin and Marcella who had still not recovered from the dismay. "Alright, I'll tell the truth," Henderson looked at Fredrick, "But I have one condition."



3. DOCTRINE OF JUSTICE

Owens was pretty much sure the police had now drawn his name under the list of suspects. He was basically under house arrest; he was not allowed to leave his mansion, nor could he send or receive any calls from anyone. In fact, none in his mansion was allowed to leave which included only his servants as he wasn't married and all his relatives were in other parts of the city. He was having a drink after lunch when Martin and other officers entered his room. They surrounded him, took their seats and made all the arrangements for recording the conversation they were about to involve him in. Martin sat opposite to him while others took their seats wherever they found pleasing.

"You're obliged to speak only the truth. It's important for us to record this. Hope you'll cooperate," Martin switched the tape recorder on. Owens just nodded. "Introduce yourselves."

"I'm Franklin Owens. CEO of the Teq Resources Ltd. I'm right now in my mansion under investigation by Inspector Martin regarding the murder of Melwin Davis, my cousin."

"I'm Inspector Martin. It's 11/21/90, 3 pm. So is it true Mr. Owens that you had a fight with your cousin last evening? Could you expand the view on this particular event?"

Owens started calmly, "Officer, I want to cooperate with you, to find the real murderer. I'm willing to expand the view on that account. Because what happened yesterday between me and him, it has happened over a million times. It was just him and me arguing. You don't know about Davis. He was born to argue with others. You must take my words seriously!" but at the end what he did wasn't too different from yelling.

"I told you we were gonna record this."

"I'm sorry, I..."

"You got yourselves involved in a quarrel yesterday late in the evening with Davis, right?" Martin seemed to have lost his cool that

gave Owens a shock, "Yes."

"What was it about?"

"He lost a sum of money I lent him to safekeep for a future purpose. But he lost it."

"How much was it?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Hence the quarrel. And you flung a hundred dollar flower vase at him?"

"I did."

"You missed anyway. But you were so angry at him, weren't you?"

"Only at the moment. I calmed myself immediately."

"And you were the last one to enter his room last night where he locked himself up after the fight, do you agree?"

"Yes."

"The next morning your maid Francesca entered his room to offer him coffee only to get scared by a dead Davis on the bed. Is this all true?"

"Yes."

"So, do you agree that you have involvement in Davis' murder?"

"I don't. I met him last night after calming myself, only to apologise to him. I mean, why should I murder my own cousin when I don't even have an iota of profit out of it? Being a businessman, I can tell you only profits keep me running." A police officer entered the room from nowhere without even knocking, thereby drawing everyone's attention, "Pardon me, but I think we may have got a major clue, sir."

Lawrence drew Fredrick upstairs with his arm over his shoulder. Fredrick was getting anxious again, he repeated the same question over and over again, "What did he say?"

"Calm down, Fred. He just wants you to take some rest," Lawrence said, balancing his whole weight on himself.

"He asked you to get rid of me, didn't he? He must've said that, I know. My absence was the condition he demanded."

"He said you do drugs and that you're always out of your mind."

"Pay no heed to his words. He's a two tongued snake. That's what he is."

"It's best if you stay calm, Fred. That pill you took will bring you the sleep you need so badly," Lawrence advised him as a caring friend. Surprisingly, Fred stopped talking to Lawrence's relief. He managed to bring him upstairs all by himself, rested him on his bed so that he could take rest. Fred spelled thank you which was only faintly audible and closed his eyes. It was a fact that Lawrence had developed a soft spot for Fred, knowingly or unknowingly.

When he made sure Fred was asleep, Lawrence rummaged into his baggage as per Henderson's wish and found tiny packs of white powder which he assumed was cocaine. Lawrence disliked drugs more than anyone there for he was pretty much aware of its consequences through his experience as a lawyer. But the devil began to sing in his heart too. He got curious about it, he had been curious about it for so long actually but this was the first time he got a chance to look at it this close. *Just once, Laurie. Would it hurt?* the voice poisoned his mind. He dumped them all in the lavatory but hid one in his pocket.

Meanwhile an argument already broke out downstairs, unsurprisingly invoked by the hard-to-satisfy Lambard. "What was that about?" he asked Henderson who gave his reply in his natural calm tone, "The pill I gave him was actually prescribed to him after lunch by a friend of mine, a doctor, who had examined his case. It would put him to sleep instantly which he assumed might help him in his recovery from drugs."

"What does this explanation of yours have to do with what I asked you?" But Lambard sounded like he was far from being calm.

"I had asked Bodholm to supply Fredrick the required medication before lunch but he forgot. Just like that. And that provoked the argument between us which you seem to overhear."

"And why is it that you tried to hide this from us?"

"That's what Fredrick wanted. He didn't want us to disclose this affair to anyone though he wasn't too careful not to let it out in the open."

"How did you manage to come up with this story in the mean time?" Lambard just couldn't believe it.

"Act accordingly to your age, Mr. Lambard. Where were you when the young man puked all over the boat's deck? Obviously he's sick," Olenska intervened in a precedent moment of her character, recalling an incident from the previous day when Lawrence hadn't yet got to the boat.

"I didn't know that. I don't observe what others drink in such a disgraceful manner," Lambard saw the worst in everything.

"Not when you whole-heartedly involve yourselves in things that are twice as disgraceful as this," Olenska secretly pinpointed to Lambard's hideous behaviour towards Marcella. Without doubt, Lambard was infuriated beyond all measures, only he couldn't express it as much, "That was too much, Lady. You don't want me to start thrashing women like I do with men."

Olenska could have talked back in a even harsher manner, only she was too wise to do that. Instead, she just turned away her head scoffing, she didn't want to waste her time on a lost cause such as trying to make someone like Lambard see reason. Lambard wasn't feeling satisfied with his temper, he grabbed the tape deck, hurled it forcefully at the wall, breaking it into pieces. He then left the place with a displeased mind while he was feeling bad about what happened. Given how crazy and controversial that move was, it wouldn't be a surprise if a big argument broke out. But surprisingly, it ended all the commotion the tape evoked. Though they felt it was a shame they lost it, it was also a major relief for them as something that caused trouble to their reputation now ceased to exist.

It was evidently the calm after the storm, they dispersed and got back to their respective rooms, minding their own business, while not even a single session of Henderson had been held yet. Smoking a cigar, Lambard was skimming about his possessions and it was when he saw the shadow of a man from behind. He swiftly turned back only to see Lawrence standing with his hands inside his pockets with a small smile drawn smoothly on his face. Lawrence was queer about what was he doing in the dark as he felt like Lambard was hiding something when he abruptly shoved his bag under the bed but he didn't express it in his face. He thought he had an idea of what was in the bag, if he was actually hiding. "Hello, Mr. Lambard," he said naturally.

"You're trying to scare me? Don't you knock?" Lambard replied with discomposure.

"The door was open, I thought you were in no need of assuming privacy. Anyway, I'm with you on this. I don't trust him, either," Lawrence displayed his contempt for Bodholm.

"What change does that make? He has his own story."

"It's true though."

"So why is it you've come to me?"

"To let you know you have company. See you later," Lawrence left abruptly, not even expecting a reply because his real intentions were different, he was just convinced otherwise when he met Lambard who invariably didn't sound hopeful. He wished to meet Olenska, the all-knowing creature there, as soon as he got the chance. For now, he just wanted to take a stroll in the hall just to keep his mind out of it. He went straight towards the paintings first which seemed to be the best part of the hall.

There were a lot of them but the first thing that drew his attention was a huge painting of a muscular bull with an unusually long tail. The thing he liked the most about it was that only one horn of the bull was visible in the painting. He could easily relate that to an inherent character of a typical human in the sense that everyone would just reveal only a part of them to others while hiding the other part, usually the despicable, vile part in themselves. There were paintings of various themes, a scenery, a woman, a horse and so on. Among them, his attention was drawn by a weird piece of literature, which he presumed so. It was an imperfect wooden slab hung over the wall with poor etchings on it in English but good enough for someone to read. Each letter embarked on it had its own shape, it wasn't Earthly possible for someone to figure out the handwriting on it. It seemed to be random sentences and thus it read:

*Beheaded, those who conduct faith with deceit should be.
For they need no heads in the pit whence they came.
Bewildered, the slandering mischieves have to be,
When their tungen are cut off for their thirst to defame.
Beatan to death, the frail couards deserve to be,
As hearts brittle as eggshells stay not long in the game.
Bourne of the abyss, the scornny haughts miht be,
Yet, fail not to scorch them til they feel shame.
Bestow those who pass injustice with the long lullaby,
Only when it balances the harmed's brame.*

- DOCTRINE OF JUSTICE

His eyes grew wide when he laid them on the words 'Doctrine Of Justice'. He knew he wanted to let everyone know about it. But just then, the voice inside of him said *This isn't the first time you come across these words, is it, Laurie?*

Since Olenska was rigorously wheel chair-bound, someone must be around her always. Bodholm was the righteous person for that, also he could leave his wife in charge of the not-so-precious kitchen but he also had to take care of other rooms and guests, so it might seem reckless of him to always stick to her. He, as a solution, decided to ask the help of someone among the guests to take after her. He approached Benjamin first who denied at once, calling Olenska 'as loathsome as an empty jewel box'. Luckily, the second person he approached didn't do so. It was Marcella. She had already spoken to Olenska and she respected since then as much as she respected Lawrence. She actually believed it would be great if she got to spend time with her because she might know a lot about Owens that she didn't know before and also she was the only other woman among the guests.

"Sick prick! Always dumb in making decisions!" Olenska was facing the wall, opposite to the entrance of her room, scolding someone severely. Chuckling softly, Marcella slowly stepped into the room.

"Excuse me, Bodholm sent me here," Marcella appeared before Olenska, just to get in her sight.

"Oh, thank god!" Olenska turned herself around steering her wheelchair. "I was horrified if it would be Henderson or Benjamin."

Marcella giggled and said, "So you've got a steering in your wheelchair and yet you let Bodholm drive you all the way here?"

"I like it when men work under me. Makes me feel I have control over them. Also, I wasn't going to get my hand tired steering myself down here."

"You're wicked," Marcella laughed, "You're just me in every way." Within a second, her smile faded. "Without the money," she scoffed.

"You know, I don't really like to spend time with people who aren't as wealthy or doesn't hold any authority or something. I actually built the courage in myself brick by brick to dislike people like

ly be of any use to my interests. But I'll tell you, I adore you. I simply can't get enough of you. I even thought of asking Bodholm to bring you but it only occurred to me after he left."

Marcella smiled, she was expressing her joy at what she said, "That's so nice of you. I'm so glad. I'm really glad, Olenska. Thank you so much."

"Oh, don't let your feelings out that easily, dear. I don't do that. It's never gonna help you." Marcella nodded at her with a smile and glanced around the room, "This room is better than mine. I hope you specifically asked for this."

"Better than yours? That is the stupidest thing I've heard in weeks. This room is so tiny, dear. Feels like I am already put in my coffin. Anyway, I wanted to ask you something, Marcella. Why is it you really accepted to join this lame gathering?" Marcella's sudden change of face clued it, yet Olenska waited for her reply to actually hear her say it.

"I don't know if it's appropriate to tell you this. Owens didn't ever mention you. I don't know how he would take it if I told you," there was a noticeable hesitation in Marcella's voice.

"No, no, no. I don't like this tone. I can obviously see what you're gonna say. I just wanted you to tell me the exact words. Not through some mean implications. I hate implications when they're not from my mouth." Marcella just stayed silent, being unable to reply. She was just so doubtful and hesitant.

"Come on! Owens knows he can't hide anything from me. Also, you know why am I here in this miserable floating piece of Earth? Owens told me it was really about something important which I think might just be you. There's no one else here who seems important. Just tell me already." That illuminated Marcella's face with happiness, "He said this meeting would mean a lot to me. He said it was arranged for me."

"What? Just like that?" Olenska looked quite disappointed.

"You know, we've actually met quite a few times before."

"Of what business?"

"Just hanging out, you know. He really liked to hang out with me. He bought me a hat, something called sombrero or something. Something Spanish."

Olenska impatiently yelled to stop her talking completely irrelevant things, "To hell with somberos and hats! You like him, he likes

you. End of story. Good god! Spare me!" Marcella inadvertently smiled though she was in a confused state as to how to react.

"I'm really satisfied he chose you. You could just be the perfect one. But right now, we're both incalculably aggravated by Owens' absence. I heard there's an emergency telephone somewhere here. We can call him, tell him we're done with this whole spiritual gathering deal and that we're gonna meet him at the earliest."

Olenska's idea put a big smile on her face, Marcella was now relieved that she was getting from that sick place.

An hour had passed after Lawrence saw what he saw, yet none other than him knew about it. The hall was all alone until Lambard arrived a few minutes later though he hadn't had any particular reason for his stroll across the hall. He wasn't sure if it would help him control his temper, he just wanted to give it a try. Lambard knew he wasn't being mean intentionally, he would just become a bull let out of the ring if he found anything wrong.

It took him no longer than a few minutes for Lawrence to show him the wooden slab with the words 'Doctrine Of Justice' engraved on it. Soon enough, Lambard gathered everyone of them in front of the paintings there except Olenska and Marcella who were currently missing in their rooms, while none wanted to disturb Fredrick who was sound asleep. Lawrence was among them, he stood still with no intent of expressing his ideas.

"Does it seem new to you, pal? 'Cause it doesn't for me," Lambard provoked Bodholm into a conversation. Lambard had always had a dislike towards Bodholm and now he thought he might have gotten the chance to express it.

"It has been there ever since I stepped into this mansion," Bodholm replied usually.

"What is that supposed to be? I mean what form of art is that?"

"I don't know. I didn't buy it," Bodholm's snap would have surely infuriated Lambard who slowly turned his head away from Bodholm towards others, without even a single expression of anger.

"See, I never wanted to be mean, gentlemen," Lambard sounded unearthly composed but expressed his usual flamboyance.

"You know me. I just express myself genuinely no matter what. I don't feel shy about it. But just look at it. Who keeps a worn out piece of wood amidst million dollar paintings? Looks like some angry drunk punk chiselled these words. I don't even understand certain words in it."

"You said it, Mr. Lambard," Lawrence deliberately joined the conversation. "Who would place such a piece of junk in here? Only a halfwit would. But everyone here knows Owens. And he placed it here, wouldn't something be special about it?"

"Your're getting me wrong, Mr. Lawrence. Those are the exact three words we heard in that stupid audio tape. I think we can all agree on the fact that it wouldn't take long for someone to prepare such a wooden piece of 'literature'. It could be the same one who did the audio tape thing. The tape and this, these are both threats. We can't just pass over it."

"Well, it surprises me none of you see it the way I do," Henderson made his say with a smile. "It's obviously some form of Old English. One does not simply come up with such words. It should either be from an old age or written by someone who had learnt the old form of English."

"I agree with Mr. Lambard, It looks more like a scribbling with spelling mistakes than Old English.," Benjamin showed his support for Lambard's explanation. Samwell nodded at him, "I don't see anything wrong in what Mr. Lambard said either."

"Thank you, gentlemen. Finally! Someone agrees with me," Lambard was rather expressive of his joy after all the frustration with the disagreements he previously suffered.

"Who do you think did that anyway?" Lawrence questioned him scoffingly, while both provoking his anger and disregarding the feelings he expressed. Lambard managed to stay calm however, he once again turned his attention towards Bodholm.

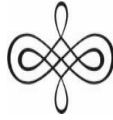
"I have a theory, gentlemen. None of us seems to notice this before. We don't have any testimony if it was really here since the beginning, not that I'm disrespecting the butler but words aren't enough. So, my theory is, the one who did the tape, was able to steal Lady Olenska's precious gift, scammed it, found a way to plant it back into her hands; etched something on a wet wooden slab - yes it is wet, maybe he found it by the shore - brought it into the hall, managed to hang it over here. Now, people. Open your eyes! Who you think could possibly do all this without anyone noticing? Who do you remember played that tape? Who do you think spends most of the time in the hall? Who do you think arranged these

paintings? Who knows well about this island? Come on, I don't want to spell this vicious, hideous victimizer's name myself."

There was dead silence in the hall except for Lambard's subtle and soft panting after his loud speech. Everyone knew whom he meant, he didn't seem to be incorrect. For Lambard, it was a win-win, he successfully sowed the seeds to disregard Bodholm in everyone's eyes. Bodholm was unexpectedly triggered by his words. He was clearly able to see the reason Lambard was trying to accuse him wasn't just that things were all against him but because he truly hated him for his descent. The past few days weren't exactly the best in his life either, he always seemed to look sad and stressful and now his discomfort reached its zenith. He wanted no more to be the victim of the grudge everyone held against him. He always wanted to strike back in such situations and now he was counting on its possibility.

With his fiery eyes, trying hard to control all his emotions, Bodholm stared into Lambard's eyes while everyone was looking at him. He knew everything was against him and that it wasn't wrong for them to be convinced of Lambard's theory. If Bodholm were an usual person, a man of his stature, strong and robust, wouldn't have thought twice to land a blow on someone who was smaller than him. That was how the situation was, Bodholm was a couple inches taller than six feet and with a stout arm like he had, he could just knock down Lambard with a single punch to his face. But he was the servant here and that was why he hesitated.

And so it was getting intense every second because it seemed like Bodholm was going to explode and given that the supposed-to-be-a-poem in the wooden slab was clearly a threat, a threat probably imposed by Bodholm, whom they believed was going to make a move. Amidst the prevailing tension, they heard a voice, "The emergency telephone is cut off!" Obviously, it drew everyone's attention, they turned back towards the direction of the voice. It was the voice of Marcella who came running down the staircase, "We're now practically estranged in this island!"



4. MR. HEARTS

Martin and few of his crew followed the colleague who claimed he might have found a major clue without the knowledge of where he was taking them to. "What's it about, Lopez?" Martin asked him on their way to the ground floor.

"It's one of the servants here, Martin. His name is Hank. I think it's him. I caught him hiding beneath a table in the wine cellar. He's afraid. Not gonna cost us a lot of time, I guess."

"Who's with him?"

"I've got Clark holding his bum."

"Who the hell keeps a wine cellar this secretly?" Martin wondered while walking all the way down there. When they entered the cellar, they saw a young man who was probably six feet tall at least, knelt besides Clark while few other servants stood around there, observing what was happening.

"What's he doing? Begging for mercy?" Martin asked Clark.

"He begged, yes. But that isn't why he's knelt down," Clark replied, giving a look at Martin so as to imply something. Martin was witty enough to understand what was his implication, he noticed young Hank whimpering and discerned that he might have tried to run away but was knocked down by his men probably by disabling his legs. The policemen gathered around him, insisting the other servants to leave. They meant to start the investigation right away because the cellar seemed quite right for the purpose.

"What do you got for us, Hank?" Martin proceeded to do the talking himself.

"Firstly, you must understand it's got nothing to do with me. I don't know what's happening with those who are above me," Hank was gushing out words both hesitantly and apprehensively.

"Okay, so what was that you were hiding for?"

"Secondly, I didn't steal the money. Someone else did it."

"Whoa. Come again. What is the money we're talking about here?"

"You don't know? The money that was lost?" Hank asked in surprise if he had told something he shouldn't have.

"I want you to be a little more explicit," Martin tried to hide his lack of knowledge about the money he was talking about.

"I don't know. I don't know the details. I heard that a big sum of money was lost. I don't know who lost it or how it happened."

"So, how did you know about this?"

"There's this man, all right? Name's Chuck. He's the captain of Mr. Owens' private yacht. The bullyragging one. He told me something about it. Gave me some to hide somewhere."

"How much?"

"Five bigs. Told me he'll bring five more."

Martin gave a look at his crew because this could be the ten thousand dollars Owens mentioned and from Hank's words, it was easy to discern that the money might not have been lost but instead could have been stolen. "Why did you take his money?" he asked Hank immediately.

"You don't know how he treats me. Threatening me is the biggest form of entertainment for him. He uses me for his own benefit and I can't do anything about it. He's got authority over me."

"You could've told your boss or approached the police."

"Neither of them can't watch over my back all the time. I mean, Chuck is more or less a gangster, only he doesn't do any criminal activities."

"You know where he could be now?"

None of them there was feeling good when they heard Marcella, they were really terrified in fact. Marcella's words inspired caution, that was true but in their perspective, her words were nothing other than the cherry on top, were the whole Doctrine-of-

justice situation a cake. Henderson asked her loudly as if the cherry wasn't enough as a topping, "Where is Lady Olenska?"

"She's right upstairs."

"You left her alone?" Benjamin asked with a little sense of caution and fear.

"I can't lift her by myself!" Marcella broke the truth in a harsh manner.

Again everyone was reminded of Bodholm who usually did that job for her. It was obvious that Bodholm was now emotionally fragile and that he was no different from a dynamite with a lit wick. He slowly approached Lambard who was momentarily distracted by Marcella and meanwhile, he took off the chef apron he was wearing. The apron had a huge pocket big enough to hold a butcher knife that he was actually carrying in that pocket. He swiftly grabbed Lambard by his arm and before he could get alarmed, he softly placed the meat cleaver over his shoulder, sticking the sharp edge to his neck.

This horrified everyone, they were expecting the unexpected but not exactly what Bodholm did. Marcella gasped in surprise, she didn't feel comfortable to just stand there, she couldn't help herself but come running down the stairs.

"Nobody makes a move," Bodholm cried and slowly forced Lambard to lie down on the floor on his stomach. "I want you to look at me, Lambard," he said quite calmly, "Fold your arms at your back and don't ever try to move them until I ask you to." Bodholm bent over to lay Lambard in his preferred position, he pressed his booted leg on Lambard's nape hard enough to prevent him from trying to escape. Henderson opened his mouth finally and said, "You know what you are doing?"

"No one talks," Bodholm yelled, frowning at Henderson. "No one tells me what to do."

Meanwhile, Lambard developed immeasurable hatred for him, he wouldn't be able to bear this even if it happened to someone else. But now, it is Lambard himself beneath the smelly, damp, old boot of a servant who was slightly crushing his neck that caused a difficulty in his breathing. Lambard was panting and sniffing both because of his anger and that he was choking a little. Bodholm now, standing upright, folded his arms still holding the cleaver in his right hand, lifted his head and closed his eyes to control his involuntary tears. He realised he finally broke down because of all the ill-treatment he suffered in the past but was also unsure what he was doing

at the moment. His actions just escalated the tension in everyone's mind, they thought Lambard was choking to death.

"Stop it. He's choking," Henderson was more concerned about Lambard's life than Bodholm's threat.

Bodholm opened his eyes, "He's not dying." He slowly lowered his head to level his line of sight with others.

"I feel pity for all of you miserable dastards," he spoke calmly but audibly, "I'm a dead man. You are not. None of you are. You don't know what pain in the butt is. Or how it feels. Just look at yourself. Look at where you all are now. You are under my jurisdiction here, in between my bare hands, don't think I'm not desperate to kill, I can crush you at will. You heard her, emergency telephone is no more. I cut the cord off myself with this very knife. And I can cut off any parts of you at anytime I want to with this very knife and your pathetic little screams won't reach anywhere but be wasted in the air. You're nothing to me. Just do what you're here to do for, you'll leave this place by next week; until then, keep your mouth shut."

Lambard was released from his awful situation as Bodholm started to walk away towards the kitchen saying, "Dinner's early today." At first, it seemed Bodholm taught Lambard a lesson but then by the way Lambard looked at Bodholm as Benjamin and Samwell helped him stand on his feet, it seemed nothing was going to stop Lambard from doing what he wanted to do. And anyone could guess what he would want to do. As far as Lambard could think, what Bodholm did was irreparable and he had to pay for it.

As things apparently cooled down, Lawrence and Samwell went upstairs after what happened with Bodholm because it was already time they brought Olenska downstairs.

"Did I miss something?" Olenska asked when they reached her.

"Everything," Lawrence replied promptly.

Samwell was strong enough to carry her through the stairs, so Lawrence carried the wheelchair. When she was brought downstairs, Marcella joined her, began explaining everything that happened. Lambard sought sometime alone which they felt was the best for him, they let him find recovery in his room. Henderson was organising a gathering both for discussing about their next move in the budding conflict and what to do with their spiritual sessions. Everyone was asked to bring with them their possessions which they considered important and brought for the spiritual meeting. Lawrence brought nothing that fell under both of the categories, he

didn't have to go upstairs so he sat next to Henderson who was staring at the painting of the bull there.

"Bodholm betrayed you?" Lawrence started the talking, subtly hinting that he was still feeling doubtful if Henderson and Bodholm were hiding something.

"I learnt long ago why artists are adored across the world when I saw a painting for the first time," Henderson began a talk about a seemingly unrelated topic which he tried to relate, "The painting was a woman wearing a straw hat, I can't remember the specifics of the painting but I can clearly remember the lesson I learnt. Artists trick us, they make people believe a lie. And god is the greatest artist of them all." Lawrence just couldn't make out what he meant, "Your point being?"

"We are all made more of lies than soil."

"I have something more important to talk about and this concerns you," Lawrence felt like he was wasting his time. "I need your opinion on something."

"Make it faster if you could," Henderson now turned his complete attention towards Lawrence.

"I don't know what exactly it is but I hear a voice inside my head. A consequence of being alone for like the past seven years in my house, I presume. Maybe, these sessions might help to get rid of the voice?"

"It depends. You know what this 'voice' wants?" Lawrence shook his head, he never knew what was the purpose of the voice. Henderson was silent for a moment, still staring at the bull but provided a reply before Lawrence asked for it.

"Everyone gets what they want eventually at some time, only they lack the knowledge of what they really want." Saying so, Henderson left without even asking for an excuse. Lawrence didn't take it personally but was still wondering if Henderson was trying to hide something. Soon, everyone gathered in the hall, including Fredrick, who was unaware of what happened. They sat around the round table which was set nearby the wall mounted with swords and axes of medieval ages.

"If one of you is wise enough, you must also be desperate enough to use one of these," Olenska made a comment with the intent of provoking a conversation, while also indirectly expressing her thought that she had already pictured a vengeful impostor among them whom she believed was even capable of killing.

"You think that is a wise counsel?" Lawrence summoned a question abruptly as he thought Olenska was thinking too much.

"Satirically, yes," Olenska expressed a smile that didn't stay longer than a second on her face.

"I informed Fredrick everything that's happened, Fredrick had known Bodholm for quite a while, he's more like his friend. It's unwise to disregard what he says," Lawrence began the talking seriously.

"And what does he say?" In response to Olenska's question, Lawrence signed Fredrick to proceed. Fredrick cleared his throat to have his say.

"Don't tell me he's not sober," Olenska told Lawrence, thereby abruptly shattering all the confidence Fredrick developed for the moment. Lawrence realised she said that by design as he got the subtle hint buried inside Olenska's words: she wasn't interested in involving Fredrick.

"I can tell you something else. The notion of using Fredrick is way lot better than that of using some old age weapons," Lawrence sounded like providing a humble statement. It took a few seconds for Olenska to realise that Lawrence had read her mind, only then she replied whimsically, "Didn't I use the word 'sarcastically'?"

"Did anyone get to see his wife?" Fredrick finally delivered his say though it wasn't what he wanted to talk about at first. No one seem to say yes because no one was mindful of Bodholm's wife, what she was doing, where was she or even if she existed.

"His wife is Clara. There is nothing he values more than her. Maybe we can talk to her," Fredrick suggested what he assumed was the best.

"If only had Lambard heard this, Clara's fate would have been like a deer in a lion's den," Benjamin made his first comment in a corny way.

"So, we shall not let him know about her," Fredrick stood protective of her.

"Or we shall use the bait to trap the beast," Olenska sounded like she had already made a plan.

All of a sudden, Henderson decided to break the silence he had been maintaining since the beginning of the talk. He pulled out of his pocket, a cut out from a newspaper.

"This is from the Evening Trumpet, yesterday's paper. It was among the papers we were given in the yacht yesterday which I'm afraid you are probably unaware of, Mr. Lawrence. This happened before you joined us. It's about a triple murder down in West End. I don't know if any of you have read it but I'll give you an insight into this matter. Three friends were murdered in an isolated alley in the middle of the night in a gory fashion. The killer is assumed to be some sort of a vigilante who killed them for their past crimes, unresolved crimes. The police have found some clues in the spot, more like a poem explaining how they were killed. The killer has named himself Mr. Hearts. And the most important fact, one that really matters to us is that the final clue the police deduced is a phrase of three words. Doctrine of Justice."

"Is that even real?" Marcella found it hard to believe it which was exactly how everyone felt about it. But Henderson was so sure about it, "Here's the paper. Check it out yourself." He lent it to Marcella who began to believe when she read about it.

"So, we're being suggested to believe that Bodholm is an outlaw who murders?" Olenska wanted to get it straight.

"Interpretations are welcomed," Henderson implied that he was done, it was the others who are required to share their views.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Henderson. But this is highly irrelevant and seems too much of a coincidence. What seems more relevant to me is that, I'm just assuming, you made the whole thing up with this wooden-slab-poem. And you got to plant the words you came across in the papers in it to make it believable. And that cheap tape was your creation for which you, presumably, received help from Bodholm," Lawrence tried to tighten his grip over Henderson.

"Why do you think I did all that? For what reason would I impart the idea that I'm mad for money, something that hurts my dignity?" Henderson sounded enthusiastic when he asked that question as if he was actually expecting an answer rather than proving his innocence.

"I barely know you. I just met you yesterday. How am I gonna predict your intentions?" Lawrence answer seemed to destroy his enthusiasm. Still, he replied with a strong point, "Exactly. You barely know me. How come you judge me to such a repulsive extent?"

"I don't know. You just didn't convince me otherwise," Lawrence was a bit confused as to why was he acting weird. He said something that sounded like him trying to defend himself but acted like he was ready to lose the argument. Lawrence even wond-

ered if it were a trick to get his sessions started or something but he didn't want to end the argument weak on his side.

"What should I do to convince you?" Henderson asked. Olenska, who sensed the talk was diverging too off road, intervened at the right moment, "Gentlemen! Please behave yourselves. I addressed you gentlemen, so please try to keep up to that."

"So, what do we do? Meet this Clara?" Benjamin questioned their next move.

Fred countered him, "Not with Bodholm in your way. I'll speak to him tomorrow. By sunrise."

"The meeting is over, then?" Olenska was tired already.

Marcella made her first comment, a question, "What about the spiritual sessions?"

"They have already been started," Henderson stood up, "I'm gonna go use the lavatory." Lawrence was now getting his suspicions over him as whenever Henderson said something, he always had some sinister meaning hidden in his words.

Olenska was feeling bad about Samwell, her personal doctor that he was silent all the while and turned over to him, "You have proved yourself you're useless. Good job, Sam."

"What do you want me to say? You all spoke well," Samwell replied, unable to realise he missed an opportunity to share his thoughts. In the while, Fred abruptly left his seat, pleading an excuse, thereby unintentionally provoking Lawrence to leave too because he noticed that Fred didn't look all right in his eyes. He followed him all the way to his room.

"Don't you think I must speak to that dog Bodholm personally? Remind him what he is. Hell, I am his employer! He is paid to serve me," Olenska asked for Marcella's opinion.

"If you were to threaten him, you'd be the first one he lays his finger on," Marcella replied. "Seems like your interest in having a control over him begins to backfire on you."

"Would he dare do that? I can erase him and his family from the world in a jiff. What the hell was he thinking?" Olenska was provoked instantly.

"Olenska, please. You're not that dumb. You may as well own the most powerful weapon in the world but he's already sticking a

pistol to your head. You're confined, you must abide to save your head."

"God forbid but that was rude, Marcella. The exact rudeness I expected in you. You do remind me myself," Olenska saw the good in it. Marcella smiled as she was a bit flattered by the compliment.

By this time, Lawrence had gotten upstairs and as soon as he entered Fred's room, he locked the door behind to enhance the privacy. "You don't look all right, Fred. What's wrong?" he asked to which Fred sighed and coughed, he could feel himself shivering and being tired.

"You didn't dump everyone of them, did you?" he asked Lawrence, looking him in the eyes as he grabbed a blanket to help with his shivering. Lawrence realised that Fred knew about the dope he hid in his pocket.

"I can't stop it abruptly. See what happened?" Fred was right about the recovery from addiction - it isn't adversary to discontinue abruptly - but was wrong to think he should continue.

"I was sober this morning. It was because I stopped abruptly and it gave me the hallucinations today. Now, please be nice and return it to me. You don't wish to do otherwise, I'll make sure you'll regret for that."

Lawrence knew he said that because he couldn't overcome the sharp depression he encountered but Fred looked serious, "I won't use it all at once, that won't help me. I'll prolong it for this whole week. That's safe."

Not going to fall for it, are you? The voice was back. He had had many chances. But this is the first for you.

"What are you gonna say? I can't wait too long," Fred was not feeling comfortable either with his body or Lawrence's untimely reluctance. "I'm not willing to ask again, I want you to make a move quickly." Lawrence just stood still as if he was thinking with his eyes fixed on the floor away from Fred. Growing impatient every passing second, Fred got up swiftly to snatch it from him.

"Hold it," Lawrence looked at him, "I'm not gonna lie to you, Fred. Also, I don't want things to end up badly for you."

"Don't think you can talk me out of it. I've made up my mind, all I expect you to do is hand over to me what is rightfully mine!" Fred yelled, not even trying to hide his anger anymore.

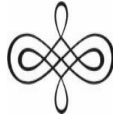
"I've made up mind too. What's in my pocket, that's mine. I'm not going to give that to anyone unless I want to," Lawrence displayed his arrogance wantonly, only to win the conversation. Fred was indefinitely triggered, he proceeded to spring upon him and suddenly he realised something was odd, he couldn't feel his legs and stumbled over, falling onto his face. He was feeling dizzy, he couldn't force himself to get up.

"I feel like I'm paralysed," he grunted.

"Paralysed is when you don't feel anything," Lawrence replied calmly, "Henderson says all you need is a little sleep. He cares about you."

"Henderson! He's the reason why I suffer!" Fred yelled, still lying helpless on the floor.

"Just try to grab some sleep, Fred. It's only for your own good," Lawrence wasn't going to stay there a second more. He swiftly got out of the room and shut the door. Unusually, he felt sympathetic towards Fred - he was caring about him since the beginning - but Lawrence being sympathetic to anyone was an unusual thing and more over sympathy towards a stranger he just met the very day, that was more than unusual even for his own standards. It might just be because he wanted to help him fight his drug addiction.



5. THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Few police men stayed at Owens' mansion, they now allowed important calls, business related or urgent calls but overheard every single one of them. Owens was allowed anywhere in his mansion with an officer always accompanying him while the investigation was still ongoing. Before sunset, Martin and two of his men were able to reach Owens' private dock where Captain Chuck was assumed to be present.

"Owens currently uses two captains for his yachts. Chuck's the worst one. Hank used the word 'bullyragging', right?" Lopez told Martin while the three of them strode down the backyard of Owens' beach house towards the dock. Martin nodded as a reply. Lopez continued, "There's another one too. Bernie. He's taking the guests Owens mentioned to his private island. They've probably left already."

"You sure it's not Chuck who's left?" Martin questioned Lopez who stood still for a second, doubtfully thinking if the information he collected was actually true.

"That's what one of the servants told me but I ain't sure," Lopez was rather doubtful.

Chuck's cabin resembled a small wooden hut and was a few hundred yards away from the dock. With curiosity steepening every second, they started to run towards the cabin. Were Chuck not there, they've come all the way to Owens' beach house for nothing. Climbing the wooden stairs of the cabin, Martin went for the door while the other officers chose a window each. Martin knocked the door calling out for Chuck but there was no reply.

The windows were shut from inside, the interior wasn't visible through the thick glass of the window panes. It confused Lopez as to why would anyone need a window with such a thick glass pane for a wooden hut by the beach. *Peabrain* he thought, assuming an undoubtedly bad first impression of Captain Chuck whom he hadn't even met yet.

Martin pulled out his gun, signalling his men that he was about to break in. *That's probably not a good idea* Lopez thought, he didn't signal him back to show his disagreement because before he could think of doing anything, Martin had broken down the door which shattered into more than five pieces because he used a force much stronger than needed or because the door was too weak for the force with which he kicked, because of which he slumped over a little but managed to prevent himself from falling.

"He didn't fall, right?" Lopez asked the other guy Bob as he didn't get a clear view of what happened exactly, also the sun was half below the horizon and it was pretty dark there. Bob shrugged at once, pulled his gun and signalled Lopez to follow his lead. Lopez drew his gun too and slowly followed him with quiet steps.

Bob could only view Martin's back, who stood in the doorway, covering as many space as he could or it could be because the door was too narrow. Suspecting it could be something bad, taking into account the fact that Martin was still and not moving, he signalled Lopez to stop and go around to the back. Believing Bob saw something worse, Lopez gathered all the courage in him, slowly started to walk towards the back of the cabin. Fantasizing how to perfectly execute his hard learnt weaver stance, Lopez climbed onto the veranda in a visually ungainly manner.

Taking a deep breath, Lopez kicked down the backdoor, held out his gun in weaver stance exactly as he wanted to. Looking at the prevailing situation, Lopez gasped in surprise and said softly and scoffingly, "Seriously?"

The dinner at the private island was awkwardly silent with Bodholm himself serving everyone. It went like passing clouds, nothing remarkable happened - Lambard's absence was an evident enough reason of that. After all, that was what they felt, just like any human being would - wanting something interesting to happen. They knew Lambard's character, they were sick of him when he was annoyed with the events happening around him even if he was right. But when he tried to face it off by starting an argument or getting into a quarrel, they found pleasure to watch it silently just because they found it way more interesting than a silent dinner such as the one they were having.

Apart from all his pomposity, egotism, racist ideologies - there was a considerable degree of veracity in that claim, pride and arrogance, Lambard was also very guiding, self-aware, social and uplifting. But those weren't visible in their eyes. They were expecting a conflict, a quarrel, a fight, any incident that inspired tension or excitement, something that would happen easily if Lambard was present. That was how much they valued him. As a balloon filled with arrogance that looked funny when exploded. Now that he was absent, they couldn't witness the funny explosion which made them yearn for him for all the bad reasons.

Lambard was fortunate anyway, he could see right through them and read their intentions though he was feeling sad about how everyone looked at him. He was even more worried after what Bodholm did to him. That was why he didn't join the dinner with them. Also the dishes were vegetarian which he wasn't very fond of. There was no supportive reason for him to attend the dinner other than that he was quite hungry, a reason he wasn't ready to sacrifice his pride for. He spent the time in his room, alone, with no lights, sitting on the bed doing nothing but staring into the darkness, embracing his thoughts. Not long after, he heard a knock on his door which when answered opened creaking and light broke into the room, piercing through the darkness, followed by the shadow of a man.

He saw Lawrence at the door who told him softly, "I know what you are hiding. I advise you to tread lightly. I respect you and that's why I'm expecting you to consider my advice."

"No one respects me," Lambard replied with not even a slightest sense of pride with which he usually spoke.

"And no one sees what I see. Except you." Lambard scoffed at him instead of a reply though he felt a little better deep down that someone shared his view.

"I know you won't do it. Good night," Lawrence left the room, closing the door behind him, leaving the room in darkness again. It was now the darkness bothered Lambard after the light departed. He turned the table lamp on just so the room wouldn't be dark.

Nothing ever happened as he wished and there was nothing that he ever wished to happen. That was the easiest description of

the enormously naturalistic Dr. Samwell. For the past few nights, he had been sleepless and the streak continued that night too. He was trying to recline in various positions, turning and rolling, continuously switching for the colder side of the pillow eventually warming both the sides and none worked. Bored, he just kept staring into the ceiling, plunging into an array of thoughts.

Suddenly, he heard someone trying to unlock his door without knocking. Scared, he proceeded to turn the lamp on but enough light breached into the room from outside which caused the shadow of a man entering. The man charged at him, placed a meat cleaver right over his neck before he could make his move. Sam was wise enough to realise it was Bodholm who shushed him, "Don't make a sound. You're gonna be safe. Safer than before, in fact."

Bodholm slowly guided him past the bedrooms, still sticking the knife to his neck. No one was around so Sam was naturally scared also because of the fact that he could be dorky sometimes which was why he could be easily intimidated too. He was brought to the kitchen, the first time anyone other than Bodholm or his wife entered there. The kitchen was a completely different environment with anything there was either black or white, be the crockery, the floor tiles, the walls, the ceiling, everything. The whole room was well lit with various candle lamps which imparted a divine impression. There were a couple couches close to one of the walls, away from the cooking accessories, on one of which, there was a woman reclining and staring at them. He was sure it was Bodholm's wife and that was why he was afraid that she might be angry at him after all the worst things that had happened to Bodholm. But the more he observed her, he sensed something was wrong with her, she was wheezing at a horrifyingly slow rate.

Letting Sam free from the knife, Bodholm spoke to him, he was in tears, "She is dying. Help me save her. You know what my reputation is out there. I'm not very rich either. She's all I've got. But don't worry about your fees. I'm capable of settling it. Just make her better. She must be fully revived." Sam was bemused of how was he going to react as it was a sharp change of emotions the situation imparted to him. But he proceeded with a simple question, "What's the problem with her?"

"She's been fighting bronchitis for a long time and it just keeps increasing every time, tightens the grip over her. It's the case for a very long time, so long it feels like she's been sick since forever and I don't anymore remember the time when she wasn't. It's the pain she's in that agonizes me," Bodholm began to weep. Taking things into his own hands, Sam checked her pulse and analyzed how bad

her condition was. Within a few moments, he realised what was going to happen to her and what they had to do.

Just as Bodholm said, the fog was dense, especially at night. It waded through the trees and the rock mounds of the island, tremendously blurring the visibility. Amidst the fog, there emerged a fuzzy stream of light. It was from the gas lantern Bodholm was holding in his hand, while with the other hand he was dragging something along with him. There was a human figure visible beside him, it was Samwell in his pajamas, unaware of the prevailing fog. What Bodholm was dragging behind was a hearse made of long sticks tied together on which a corpse covered in a white palanquin was rested.

Bodholm couldn't bear that it was his lovely Clara who had now left him in the pitiful world alone. He was even more disappointed that he had to bury her in this island out of all places. He dug her grave himself while Sam held the lantern for him. Softly, he placed her inside, gave her one last kiss on the palanquin, presented her the tulip flowers from the kitchen garden which were the very last flowers she smelled. Pulling himself together as much as he could, he got out of the grave and began to shovel the sand back.

Once done, he intimidated Sam, "No one knows about this. My wife is too sick to meet anyone and the story ends right there. Remember, the knife hangs straight above your neck. And it is me and only me who has a hand on the rope." Sam nodded forthwith, the best thing for him to do at the moment.

Just like that, something came across his mind, so he asked Bodholm, "You think someone would have noticed us? I got a feeling that someone followed us."

"No. That's very unlikely. I've locked all their doors from outside," Bodholm replied staring at the grave for which he decided not to place a headstone until the so-called spiritual trip was over. They both headed back to their rooms as if nothing happened.

For Sam, it didn't mean anything, normally he would feel bad when he failed to cure his patient to an extent. But now he didn't feel like he was even attending a funeral. He never knew her but still, he got to know she was in great pain, which he witnessed himself. He knew he couldn't save her but watching someone die right

in front of him didn't make him feel anything for the first time. He had never felt that before and he wondered if he was still him. Now, that was what kept him awake that night.

He didn't fall asleep until it was very late or in other words, very early the next day, probably around three in the morning. When he woke up, it was past eight and he felt unusual as he heard indistinct voices from the nearby room. He stepped down from his bed and realised he might have got mild cold, probably from staying out in the night in the cold, watching an unceremonious funeral. He walked out of the room to see what was happening outside. Everyone had gathered at the doorstep of one of the rooms and they looked sad as if something bad had happened.

Earlier that morning, Marcella, who woke first, took a walk outside the mansion to grab some fresh air. When she came back, Bodholm, who hadn't slept all night, with very tired eyes, met her in the hall which was all alone. He had a cup of black coffee in his hand and kept staring at her with his drowsy eyes. Marcella was truly scared inside but she just stared back at him. There they both stood alone in one of the biggest of the halls, only staring at each other with no wordplay. Yet, they both had a little conversation in the while as they both understood the meaning behind the staring of the other. Bodholm left the coffee on the table, said, "It's for you" and left upstairs.

Soon, one by one, everyone came downstairs, Lambard, Benjamin and Lawrence, expecting the sessions would start finally. Olenska was awake but felt rather lazy to go to the hall as she was never interested in the journey in the first place. But time went by and Henderson didn't join them, They knew Sam would wake up late and Fredrick was a lost cause but Henderson was usually the earliest.

"Is it all right for me to ask where's the rest of us? I ask because the better half of us are here, which I'm quite content with and also I don't wish to mix the better part with the worse one," these were the first words Lambard spoke publicly after a long time, with a little hint that he was still the Lambard he used to be.

"I'm gonna go get Fred," Lawrence replied.

"I'll go for Lady Olenska," Marcella volunteered.

"You grew lotta muscles overnight, dear?" Lambard commented, reminding her how she made a harsh remark the last time when she said she couldn't lift her herself.

"I believe you've grown enough," Marcella snapped and headed towards the stairs, followed by Lawrence.

"It's unfair if I were not to join you," Lambard followed them upstairs with a sinister thought in his mind.

Benjamin was now alone, knowing it wouldn't do any good to him if he was to stay there, he chose to follow them. He gasped even thinking about the number of stairs he had to climb again.

Though they shared the staircase when they went upstairs, Lawrence and Marcella hadn't had a talk. *Wouldn't you wanna talk to her?* Lawrence thought to himself. But he didn't do anything about it. Marcella headed towards Olenska's while he went for Fredrick's where he got confused as the door was locked from outside. Quickly, he undid the latch, opened the door and just as he stepped his foot inside the room, Fredrick charged at him. He grabbed Lawrence by his shirt collar and yelled at him, "You locked me inside?". Lawrence hadn't even decided what to reply and Fredrick pushed him out. Luckily, Lawrence's fall didn't injure him.

"I didn't," Lawrence slowly stood up as Marcella came out of Olenska's room, "What happened?"

"Nothing, Marcella," Lawrence replied at once.

"He's lying. Just because Henderson wanted me to take some rest, he locked me up inside my room all night," Fredrick shouted. "All because he won't believe me even when I've told and told him Henderson is not a good man, not even close to being one."

"Fred, you don't look well. Did you sleep?" Marcella asked him softly.

"How could I? After all the things Henderson did to me? I won't stop until I've put a bullet in his head." Saying so, Fredrick limped towards Henderson's room, pushing Marcella down as she was hindering his way. Lawrence bent down to Marcella to lift her, "You all right?"

"Stop him," she whimpered.

Fredrick was trying to open the door by turning the knob in the wrong way, implying that he was way out of his mind and he might even succeed in killing Henderson if unstopped.

As he thought the door was locked just because he wasn't able to open it, he began to kick down the door with his other leg and that was when Lawrence proceeded to stop him.

With two kicks, he knocked the door down and forthwith, Lawrence got to him before he made his next move. Lawrence embraced him tightly so he couldn't move but Fredrick wasn't fighting to relieve himself from Lawrence's grip. He was staring inside the room and was so still which made Lawrence confused. One minute he was roaring to kill Henderson in anger, next minute he was all calm and still. Curious as to what made him stop, Lawrence took a look inside and his grip over him loosened. Marcella was even more perplexed about what they both saw in there.

"What are you looking at?" she walked towards them.

Lawrence turned towards her and gave her a fair warning, "You might not wanna look at this."

As of Marcella, curiosity overtook his words, she slowly walked down to the room to take a peep inside. Lawrence was immensely right, Marcella was, for a moment, stunned beyond measure as she laid her eyes on the gory picture of Henderson's torso hanging a little over the edge of the bed with his bloody right arm touching the floor and his head was placed not far from three feet from the doorsill facing them; the floor and the bed were drenched in blood.

Marcella moved away from there, took a deep breath, she was still shocked and the sight wasn't out of her mind yet. She couldn't gather any words in her mouth nor could she scream. She stumbled a bit on the floor and rested herself right there. She was so shocked that even Olenska's loud words, "What's happened?" weren't audible for her.



6. ONE AMONG US

Lopez was half right but was half wrong too. His expectations of a mature, vicious criminal pointing a gun at his colleague Martin felt ridiculously too much when he saw Captain Chuck with his own eyes. A fat guy with rugged brown hair intertwined with grey locks, wearing a beach shirt with monkey printings and cotton shorts was reclined on an armchair, fast asleep. The right part of his mouth and cheek were covered with crumbles of cheese puffs and he was snoring like a grunting pig. The whole place was a mess, nothing was in place, with beer bottles, wrappers and clothes scattered everywhere that even the floor wasn't visible.

In one of the corners, amidst a heap of clothes, there was a face visible. When Martin cleared off the surface, he found it was a woman in awkward dressing, who woke up when he did so. As an exaggerated reflex of cautious instinct, she started screaming, awakening Chuck. Once she realised it was the police, she calmed herself and to cover her body, she grabbed a bunch of clothes within which she had a gun hidden. Chuck knew about it, he noticed that.

Martin made them sit on the chairs that were facing away from each other so that they wouldn't be able to converse within themselves and let Bob stand in between.

"Our concern is Chuck. Why don't we stuck with him?" Lopez whispered into Martin's ears, perceiving from the way he set things that Martin was not just going to stop with the money issue.

"I think a little misdemeanour could have happened here," Martin expressed his thought.

"I say we stick to what we came for," Lopez was pretty much firm in his decision.

Suddenly, Chuck poked himself into the conversation, drawing their attention, "Hey, officers! That's my fiancée. I request you to be gentle with her."

Martin walked down to him with an awkwardly deriding smile drawn subtly over his face. "You say that thing is your fiancée?" he mocked, invoking a couple of chuckles from his men.

"Officer, please. Don't disrespect her. You'll end up earning yourself a lot," Chuck replied using his characteristic poor choice of words.

"So you're threatening me?"

"Of course not," he began to stammer. "I didn't mean that. You're getting me completely wrong."

"I think I got it completely right. You wanna show you're a tough boy? You think that might help you somehow?"

"Of course not! Why would I? You're misinterpreting my intentions because of some obvious prejudice. That's genuinely unfair."

Martin irrevocably lost his temper, "You think that's because of prejudice? You think that's unfair? You think I should care about what a miserable women-hustling twat like you think? You know what I think? I think you've not only involved in a misdemeanour which is obvious but also you've got yourself involved in a murder."

"What? Of course not! How could you possibly think that?" Chuck didn't sound sure at all.

"What's with you and 'of course not'? You're trying to play some tricks with me? You don't know how big a player I am," Martin tried to see it all in the worst way imaginable to strike fear into him which he thought might help in his investigation henceforth.

Lopez and Bob seemed utterly underwhelmed by Martin's untimely expression of anger but because he was their leading man and as he had already ignored Lopez's sound advice, they stayed calm.

Martin abruptly took a step forward to get close to Chuck but unknowingly stomped on a tiny glass bottle which cracked at once. Martin stopped and gasped as if it hurt him, raised his foot only to see a piece of glass stuck into the sole of his shoe. From his facial expression, it was clear that it had gone deep enough to hurt his heel. Bob proceeded to help him but Martin gestured him he could handle it himself. Now Martin's unnecessary anger was actually turning into a serious one.

Chuck used that momentary distraction of Bob to talk to his so-called fiancée, he turned inconspicuously towards her and whisp-

ered, "As soon as I tell you..."

She couldn't perceive the words but realised he was whispering, so she turned attention towards him.

"...shoot him in the head!" he whispered but he stressed the words enough to impart enthusiasm.

Unfortunately those were the only words she could make out, so she immediately stood up, pulled out the gun and shot at Martin, screaming while she did so. Chuck yelled "No!" a bit too loud as he realised she didn't hear him well. Alarmed beyond measure, Bob pulled his gun and shot her at once in her face before she could pull the trigger again. She collapsed on the chair, one of whose legs got dislocated due to the impact of her fall, thus deforming it. She was now lying on the floor dead, along with the breakage of wood, flooding the floor with blood.

When Bob saw Chuck going for the gun she shot Martin with, he shot at his arm while he reached out to grab the gun. He was hit in his wrist and was bleeding out. Due to the shock he encountered on looking at the blood, he stumbled over and cried out in fear of losing his hand. Slowly, he lied down on the floor, catching his breath. Bob took away the gun from the hand of the dead woman who died holding it firmly. When he checked on Martin, he saw he was shot a little beneath his neck and had died at once. Lopez held him firm, applied pressure on the wound so the bleeding could be stopped, if it were anyhow useful and the place wouldn't get any more messy.

Sam guessed right. It was very unusual, all of them gathering at one of the rooms. And when he laid eyes on the horror of a be-headed Henderson himself, he was just as terrified as everyone else.

"From the very beginning, I've been telling you," Lambard began his oration. "Only you've not been paying enough heed to my words. You thought it was my prejudice over him. But now, look. How far he's come!" Again, he blamed it all on Bodholm.

Bodholm came out of the room silently with no noticeable expression in his face, after glancing the crime spot.

"It wasn't me," he sniffed and said softly, looking at his feet.

"I'm afraid that's not enough words from your mouth, amigo. Last time I heard from you, you said you had complete control over this place and you said you were desperate to kill. There's no bigger suspect here than you," Lambard spoke cunningly in an anger invoking manner which could yield a positive output for Lambard that if Bodholm lost his temper and tried to do something terrible, Lambard would be proven right and he could get a chance to take revenge on Bodholm.

Bodholm gently lifted his head and looked at Lambard in his eyes, "I didn't do this. If I were to, I would've done it in front of everyone and it would have been you, not Henderson."

Lambard tried his best to not show his discomfort in his face but failed to do so.

"But we know you and him had a history. He talks to you the most. So it is highly likely that you might know why this happened," Marcella told Bodholm.

"I'm tired already, just leave me alone," Bodholm tried to slip away as he was already devastated by the loss of his wife and felt uncomfortable at the moment.

"Don't try to act brilliant, you filth. You stay right here. You're my servant. You answer to me, dog!" Olenska completely broke down as she had been yearning for this moment for quite sometime.

Bodholm scoffed, he felt really pushed to the edge. He knew his mind was at its least stable state, so tried his best to not break out his emotions.

"Take it easy, Lady Olenska," Lawrence intervened to stop Bodholm from acting in any unwelcome way. "Let me ask you this, Edwin. Fred's door had been locked from outside last night. It is possible that the killer might have done that. So it's possible you could have noticed that."

"Yes, I did it!" Bodholm finally broke the truth, much to Lambard's jubilation, who thought he was close to having his revenge. "It was me. I was the one who locked your rooms from outside. Samwell was with me."

Everyone turned their attention to Sam, wondering if he assisted Bodholm in the murder.

"I lost my wife last night! And the last thing she ever did was cooking dinner for some squabbling gang of cowards like youse. How do you think I'm going to bear with it? You live, die, I don't

care. Just leave me out of the picture. You come to me with such an intent of proving me guilty of some stupid accusations, you won't leave alive." He left the place in anger and disappointment, almost felt like weeping but just didn't.

"So, we can all agree upon who did this?" Lambard asked them.

"But who'll bell the cat?" Olenska took things to the next level.

"Oh, don't worry about that. There's someone here who'd do it for free," Lambard tried to put on airs.

"Talk sense, please. You think killing him is the only way?" Lawrence didn't find reason in their intention.

"We had a leverage yesterday. Now we don't. What else do you think we can do?" Benjamin talked something that made sense for the first time.

Lawrence told them his plan, "Maybe we can collect clues against him. Preserve them and stay silent till we get off from this island, then we have complete leverage over him. We could even get him arrested for what he did. All we need is patience."

"You are complicating things. Killing him doesn't complicate," Lambard said loudly but suddenly lowered his voice, "There's not a single soul in this world to care about him now. It'll be like a fart in the wind. He can die peacefully where his wife died. Not many are blessed with such an opportunity."

"Let's think about what can we do about Henderson first," Marcella grumbled in a dissatisfying manner. But her intention was good and it worked. They began cleaning the room before they assembled Henderson's corpse in the hall after bathing it. Interestingly, Bodholm helped them to do so, which they assumed as a cheap move by him to convince them that he was innocent.

But Lawrence thought otherwise, so did Fredrick, because he knew about him. On the other hand, Lawrence tried to find reason and he believed Bodholm helped them because he lost his wife just the previous night and he must have known the pain of death.

Benjamin imitated the priest at the funeral and did justice to that role. But he felt a little bad that none appreciated him for that as he was the type of person who could be seduced by praises which he was starving for. He was wrong anyway, none at a funeral would likely do such a thing especially when the death was a tragic one. Henderson wasn't exactly a bad person in their eyes though few of them saw him suspicious of the person behind that hideous

tape. But there wasn't any proof for accusing him of any wrongdoings.

None of them knew about his family, even if they did, they could do nothing about it but bury his body in the island itself. Also there wasn't any facility in the island to preserve the body for as long as seven days. Samwell showed them where Clara was buried, which was quite a nice spot beneath a young oak tree, probably planted by Owens. Bodholm joined Fredrick and Sam to help them dig the grave beside that of Clara. They decided to place a headstone for both the graves but couldn't get any equivalent for it in the island, not a single piece of rock with a flat surface or even something wooden.

Bodholm assured he would find one for each of them as soon as he got the chance. They stopped searching, not that they believed his assurance but because they could get it off their minds. Back in the hall, they gathered around the rectangular table for some chats about Henderson which gradually evolved into an argument that provoked them to find the killer.

"We didn't want to disturb anyone. I didn't want to disturb anyone. I didn't want anyone to get to know about the tragedy I endured. That's why I locked the doors. Maybe... maybe I could've forgotten to unlock Fred's door when I got back," Bodholm tried to explain the situation to everyone.

"Are you sure you just forgot to?" Lawrence asked him.

"Probably, yes," Sam intervened abruptly. "I'm almost sure. He forgot. I watched him unlock the doors through the key hole of my door when I got back after burying Clara. I couldn't see everything but I saw him walk past Fred's door without stopping by. Only I didn't think it was a big deal."

"I'm sorry, Sam. I don't have even a little amount of courage to trust your words," Olenska rebuked Sam as passionately as ever.

Offended immediately, Sam confronted her for the first time believing he wouldn't get another chance, "Why is it you always love to hurt me? What did I ever do to you something that hurt you?"

Olenska was confounded by the reply which she was not expecting as Sam had never responded to Olenska's rebuke with words. She had no idea of how to reply so she just raised her brows sceptically at him.

"It is better if you carry on with your conversation with Lady Olenska at some other time privately," Marcella tried to smooth him

down in a way that both of them wouldn't feel disregarded.

Sam initially had no intent of preventing the argument he was about to invoke but changed his mind abruptly for the sake of their important discussion about the killer. He nodded to Marcella but Olenska sighed.

Lawrence described his new point of view, "Or maybe it was the killer who locked Fred from outside. Last time I saw Fred, he was in a state of immense exasperation when I asked him to take a nap. I presume, he, most likely, was awake the entire night which could be why the killer locked only his door when he sensed Fred was awake."

Fred was silent but didn't oppose.

"I believe you're overthinking, Lawrence. I'm now pretty sure I forgot to unlock the door. Plus, we have an eye witness in that case. Sam's got no reason to lie," Bodholm spoke clearly.

"I still can't get over the fact that you act too suspiciously heartwarming in this instance. You're acting too differently after what happened to Henderson. Can you please elucidate on this account?" Marcella conspicuously revealed she was still suspecting Bodholm to be guilty.

Bodholm opened up softly and lovably, "After what happened to Clara, I lost hope. When I saw what happened to Henderson, I was stirred even more. But my grievance for Clara vanished suddenly. I couldn't understand why things happened in such a way at first but something was clear to me. I felt I should be the one to lead the funeral ceremonies for Henderson myself because I just got involved in such a situation. When I wondered why I lost my grief, I realised I was trying to get over with it already. That's the right thing to do. That's how we should express our love to our loved ones even when they've left us. That we still remember them. That's probably the exact thing they expect from us, something that make the love between us true."

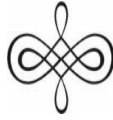
The speech really won Marcella's heart, she was suddenly speechless and began to stammer but Olenska overshadowed her stammering with her question, "It was Clara you loved, not Henderson, right?"

"I'm afraid none of you are aware of the friendship between Henderson and me. He had a lot of trust on me. He was surprisingly very open-hearted with me. I'm obliged to revere him and his friendship with me. And I'm sure I'll take care of it. Maybe he was

right. The killer could be the one he saw in the papers. And he could be here with us," Bodholm slowly shifted the topic of focus.

"But there's no one other than us here. How could he be here?" Benjamin asked in the weird tone he used to ask questions.

Bodholm said something that finally shut all their mouths, "Didn't anyone realise Henderson's murder is somewhat similar to a certain phrase mentioned in the supposed-to-be-a-pamphlet? He delivered the message. He made sure we got it. Now he'd made his move. Maybe he is true. Maybe he's a she. Maybe it could be one among us."



7. CONFESSIONS AND COMMOTIONS

There was no way Chuck could stop them take their rage out on him. They grabbed him red-handed, the red being the blood he lost from the gunshot to his wrist. They flogged him once or twice with their batons and forthwith he admitted to tell the truth. But that wasn't why they wanted to thrash him. They witnessed the murder of their colleague, a really responsible officer and friend and they weren't able to do anything. That was what fuelled their anger. For a minute or two, they weren't themselves. Anger disillusioned them and they were no different from an angry bull who would stop raging for nothing. And yet they had a momentary consideration that baton flogs could kill him and because of the feeling that the thrashing must feel like it came from them personally, they started laying heavy blows on him with their fists. First his face began to deform as it was laden with welts and weals, all the while he was crying, "It wasn't me! She did it!" Only after they found their fists to be hurt, they stopped.

Chuck could no longer sit upright, he laid down on the floor like a bloody mess that he was, gasping for breath. Bob stood up on his feet and stared at Chuck writhing in agony. He stomped on his foot and asked, "Do you confess?"

Screaming in pain, Chuck replied yes. He could barely see anything as the welts around his eyes narrowed the range of his visibility. Lopez informed the other cops in Owens' mansion about what happened to Martin. Right after that, they made Chuck sit on the chair, bound his hand to the table and set up the tape recorder they brought in their car on it and recorded Chuck's confession.

"My name is Charles Brendan. I'm known as Chuck in my workplace and around. I work for Mr. Franklin Owens as a part-time captain of his yachts and my working hours vary from time to time."

"That's enough for the introductory part," Lopez wanted things to be done quick. "Now get to the point. Do you know anything about the murder in Mr. Owens' mansion?"

"No," Chuck groaned.

"But you are the one to actually steal the money, aren't you?"

"Money? What money? Is this some sort of euphemism?"

Bob turned the recorder off as he felt Chuck was playing with them. "Tell me one good reason you have got to believe that you're gonna walk out of this. This is endgame for you. You're done. All you can do is confessing your crimes as early as possible. So, get on with it already."

Surprisingly, Chuck opened his eyes as wide as he could to get a clear look at them and scoffed, "What? Seriously? You guys call yourselves cops? Don't I know cops have at least a scrap of the thing called brain? But I'd like to be honest with you, I don't happen to sense that in you. You break into my property without my consent, use me like some lifeless punching bag and having beaten me to a pulp, you force me to confess something I don't even understand? That constitutes a number of crimes including extortion which is a serious felony, I presume. What did you both had in your mind? You planned to break as many rules as you can in one day? You've won if you did."

More than surprise, Bob and Lopez sustained exasperation and anger after Chuck's reply. Sighing, Lopez looked at Bob with disappointed eyes, hoping he might have a suggestion. Bob gestured him to come outside to have a little talk. Standing on the narrow porch, they both conversed silently in a hushing voice.

"He's an absolute jerk. He didn't answer the door first of all," Bob said.

"And yet he's right. At least to an extent. We shouldn't have thrashed him," Lopez worried about their situation.

"Hey, you know what kind of person talks like this. A guilty person. A true twit. We know he's gonna walk the plank anyway," Bob said hopefully.

"I think we did too much, Bob. We shouldn't have beat him like that."

"What? You forgot what he just did? He let some cocotte murder our Martin right in front of us. What do you call that?"

"But we did break and enter."

"What's wrong with you? You're not thinking right. I just told you he didn't answer. He didn't respond to us, remember? That's why we broke in. I mean, what happened to you? You got scared by the lies from his wormhole? Come on, you're not Lopez. Lopez is braver than that."

"I don't know, Bob. But we really shouldn't have beat him like that."

"Oh, God! Then why did you beat him in the first place, huh? He tried to pull a gun on us. We stopped him, that's it. You know what? Just forget about it. You're unnecessarily confused. Get in the car. Close your eyes and stretch yourself. Just take some time to relieve from these stupid thoughts. I'll carry on with him."

Bob went back in after patting him on the shoulder. Lopez couldn't reply, he was both shocked and felt guilty which he didn't fully understand why. He looked at Martin's corpse which they left undisturbed as it was now a crime spot. He reminisced about all the good moments he shared with Martin, how good a man he was and juxtaposed the imagery with that of what he was now. The prospect of death hit him hard for the first time and he wondered how justice would be done in this case.

Bob sat in front of Chuck to begin his way of treating him to extract the truth. "This is gonna be real bad for you," he told Chuck. Suddenly, he heard the sound of approaching footsteps behind him and the cocking of a gun. When he turned back forthwith, he saw Lopez pointing the gun at his side and before he could react, he pulled the trigger.

Shot in the forehead, Chuck slumped a little backwards but due to his weight, the chair leant back a bit too much and fell down along with Chuck, the back of whose head slammed on the edge of the table behind him, immediately snapping his neck. For a moment, Bob was stupefied as he thought for a fraction of a second Lopez shot him. Only when he saw Chuck lying lifelessly on the floor, he got relieved from the shock. When he realised what had happened at the intricate moment, he stood up in both astonishment and anger and turned to Lopez. "Wha-What did you just do? What is really wrong with you?"

Closing the door behind him, Lopez said rapidly, "This is what happened. We requested to open the door, there was no response. We broke in. Woke up sleeping beauty and the prince from their precious slumber. The prince let the beauty kill Martin with a hidden gun. We shot back. Beauty died on spot. Shot Chuck at his

wrist when he tried to grab the gun. Gave a good thrashing for what he did. Bound him in his chair. We opted for isolation to discuss how to proceed and that's when he tried to escape. I shot him in the head. End of story. You got it?"

"What do you think you are? Do you even know what you just did? You killed the prominent suspect, possibly the convict of a murder case before he told anything. Are you really nuts?" Bob seemed to not have heard anything he said.

"Possible convict? God! I saw him whisper to her before she shot Martin. Only it was too late for me to notice. He is the killer! And I passed judgement on him," Lopez had convinced himself.

"And who do you think you are to do that? You broke the law right in front of me and you want me to help you cover your tracks. Just what did you have in your mind?"

"I did justice! You saw Martin get shot in front of you and what were you able to do? You may think I did it in anger but I see that's the way of justice."

"God Almighty!"

"You know the way he talked. He was never gonna confess. He was the type of stinkers who'd hire a lawyer after murdering the judge himself. Martin's death would've never got justice if things had gone otherwise," Lopez shed a few tears unknowingly while he broke down. "If this is how justice can be done then nothing will stop me from doing it. I just want you to back me, that's it."

"You can't be serious," Bob shook his head, looking away from him.

"I know, Bob, deep down you'd want to do the same. Only the way you've seen justice all these years hinders you to do so. Just let it out, I'm not forcing you here. But remember, it's our Martin who's dead," Lopez looked him in the eyes. Bob sighed and gasped. He was indefinite about his decision and stood still with his hands on his hip. Lopez let him take his own time and prepared the scene for the inspection. Bob was still confused, he sat down on the floor, reclining on the wall with his eyes closed. Few minutes later, they heard a knock at the door surprisingly and it was when he opened his eyes. They didn't hear anyone coming. There wasn't a car or any sort of vehicle that they heard, so they could be very sure it wasn't their colleagues. Pulling out their guns, they readied themselves to open the door because it could be anyone undesirable at the moment for which they had to be very cautious.

None of them had spoken with each other since they heard Bodholm's unfathomable words. They didn't believe him straight away but were cautious enough to regard it as a possibility. Were his words any true, they must abstain from interacting with each other until they knew who among them was the liar. And that was what they did for the whole day. They didn't even gather together except when they had food. There wasn't Henderson too now to gather them for any sessions, so they found comfort with themselves, alone in their rooms, doing whatever they wished to. Thus the day ended less problematic and more peaceful than the previous one. Lambard however found no credence in that possibility not just because of his hatred for Bodholm, he didn't also actually sense credibility in it.

Lawrence too wasn't convinced of Bodholm's words because he wouldn't believe things that easily. He needed time to think and he would stop thinking only when he had become sure. And thus he spent the whole day, thinking and enjoying his own company in his room. The next day, he was very eager to spy on Bodholm, hoping that would do any good on this account, now that he had spent enough time on thinking. Moreover, he had always been very curious about what was Bodholm doing every time he was alone. It seemed mysterious to him as Bodholm usually would show up only when he was absolutely needed. The breakfast was just as silent as when they were in their rooms, even when they all had gathered at the same place. When it was over, everyone fled back to their rooms or wherever they found pleasing but stayed alone as for them, nothing felt more spiritual than being alone. Lawrence, however, was still in the dining hall, pondering about the mystery of Bodholm.

Taking a sip of water from the glass, he left the dining hall last, heading for the kitchen where, he assumed, Bodholm must be present. He tiptoed slowly to the entrance of the kitchen from where he quietly peeped in. Just as he expected, Bodholm was there on the couch but there was something he didn't expect too. Beside Bodholm, there was someone sitting whom wasn't visible from the place he stood. Lawrence first didn't find it weird but just then wondered none of them were ready to talk with each other and who could that be. Withdrawing himself, he took a deep breath and disturbed his kempt hair just to make it look like he wasn't feeling really well. Drawing all his confidence he proceeded to enter the

kitchen as he was going to pull an act in front of them. It was what he would do whenever he entered the court room for his client. He found it was Fred sitting next to Bodholm but he pretended to not notice him. "Hey, would it be okay if I make some coffee for me? Headache's killing me," he said casually to Bodholm.

"Could've asked me," Bodholm replied modestly.

"It's just, you know, a bit special. It involves a detailed process and it's hard to elucidate the specifics. Now, may I?"

Bodholm nodded once as a sign of approval though he was uncertain what Lawrence was going to do.

"You got any lemons here?" Lawrence asked while rummaging through the refrigerator.

"Is it lemon tea that you're making?" Bodholm asked in a hysterical tone.

"In truth, I haven't decided a name for it yet," Lawrence replied while still gathering the required ingredients.

Fred turned to Bodholm to ask something he had been trying to ask for a few moments but just didn't get the chance until Lawrence got in. "I know you're not a killer, Ed. It just doesn't sit right to view you as one," he finally told him about which he felt bad in a whispering tone so that Lawrence wouldn't be able to hear them.

"All I can tell you is convince yourself otherwise," Bodholm replied politely.

"But why? You don't deserve to be viewed like that. I mean, what good does it do to you? I need you to tell me why you did that."

"To be honest, you won't believe if I tell you the truth and I believe it is the best if the truth remains hidden." That reply ended the conversation at once. Fred thought he was done there and stood up when Bodholm said something loudly that made him turn back, "You're the killer." Fred quickly turned to him with a confused expression on his face.

"I'm the killer," Bodholm continued. "He's the killer," he pointed at Lawrence which drew his attention too. "What difference that's gonna make anyway, huh? There was a man with good heart here and now he's dead. Everyone left here now is either a narcissism radiating scum or an absolute coward. But I know you're neither,

Fred. I know what you are. You're the cherry on top of a chicken barbecue. You are where you don't belong."

Bodholm left the kitchen before anyone else surprisingly but it wasn't surprise that made Fred stand still. He knew Bodholm was always right about him, so he had to think about it. He looked back at Lawrence but didn't say anything and left the place to show his contempt for Lawrence's act in his room one night ago. Lawrence felt bad about it but he saw himself pitiable because of something else - what Bodholm told about the people there. According to Bodholm, Lawrence must either be very arrogant or a coward. He knew he wasn't a coward. Or at least that was what he believed. But in his life, more than once, people had called him arrogant and so far he hadn't done anything about it. Maybe that was one of the reasons behind his marital status which he was often ashamed of. And again, he hadn't done anything about it either.

Doesn't that hurt you, Laurie? Or are you just pretending to be deaf? the voice said. Lawrence now wanted to do something about his marital status rather than his arrogance. *Wise choice, Laurie. It is long past since you talked to Marcella.* Lawrence dumped the beverage for which he hadn't yet decided a name and headed for Marcella's room.

In the meantime, Sam finally got to meet Olenska in her room as he so badly wanted to talk to her. She was comfortable in her wheelchair but Sam refused to take a seat and just stood. "What happened to you? You've become suddenly all too sensitive?" Olenska asked reminding Sam's behaviour the previous day.

"Will you for once just stop talking and listen to me?" Sam sounded like he was hurt.

"Who are you to insist me to stop talking?"

"Just listen! I ask you to listen for once. Being such an intelligent woman, can't you just control your own mouth for once?" That made Olenska shut her mouth. "I'm a human being. I'm sure your eyes see that but I wonder if your heart does. All I ever did was take good care of you, wouldn't you agree that much? So, what is it really that motivates you to hurt me noticeably every chance you get? What makes you like it? Now you either answer me or fire me, I'm content with both."

"Oh, boy. You want to know the truth? Okay, so here I quote. I know it is you. I really do." Perplexed, Sam wondered what to reply.

"You there, Sam?" Olenska asked hysterically.

"What? What're you talking about?"

"I said I know it is you. You killed Henderson."

"What? Oh, god!" Sam stammered as awkwardly as possible. "After all I've done for you, this is how you treat me? Accusing me for something I didn't do? I mean why would I even dare to think of murdering someone, especially someone I barely knew? All this being a doctor? How can you be so crooked as that? Is there even an iota of humanity left in you?"

"Boy, boy! Stop it, kid," Olenska laughed heartily for a few seconds. "You should've looked at your face. Darn, that face!" Olenska continued laughing.

"What, you think I'm funny too? You're so evil!" Sam was evidently running short of words.

"Enough, boy. I was messing around with you. I damn well know you're not a murderer. You're not even close to being one. But even when I accused you falsely, you got scared like a gal. That's what wrong with you. You know you didn't do it. Yet when I said so, you started to piss your pants. Be bold, boy! You have to be strong, be one of the fighting back kind. If you don't fight back, dead meat is all you are, boy. You are a good lad, Sam. I like you very much. But seeing you as a coward makes me so sick. You've got to be better than that. That's why I seemed to dislike you. It took you this long to even talk back, huh? But I'm still glad you've finally did it, boy. You'll be a better man."

Sam couldn't straight away believe what she said, "So, that's it? This is how you explain yourself?"

"Don't try to bring out the worst in me, boy. Just try to think why I said what I said. I hope you'll understand."

Sam left the room at once, he had to take his time to make out what Olenska's real intentions were. However, he was a bit happy that Olenska really cared for him, hoping it was true. After all the bad thoughts he had about Olenska, Sam was quick to remould them into good ones. He even reckoned it was his cowardice and irrational fear for things that made him the failure he was in his life. He now had to embrace his fears and find a way to evade them all. With positive thoughts suddenly overflowing in his mind, Sam walked down the stairs slowly and relaxed as opposed to his usual fast and miscalculated steps. Meanwhile, he heard a distant rumble and a buzzing sound that echoed through the staircase which made him stop and listen.

"Hey, Sam." said a gruff voice. Sam sensed the sound was probably from upstairs. *"I believe you know me. At least what I do."* Sam immediately recognized it was the same voice he heard in that tape recorder.

"I hope it's time for justice to be done." He climbed up back in the direction of the voice. *"And I will make sure justice will be done for all the crimes you've done. I will also make sure that you suffer a horrible death when comeuppance strikes you. Till then, let's hope you do no more sins."* The voice stopped but he continued to look for it until he reached the entrance of the dining hall where there was a tape recorder mounted on a four-legged stool with no one around. When he checked it, there wasn't any tape inside. Right when he decided to fight his fears, he came across such a haunting incident which only reignited his sense of fear.

As Marcella was not to be found in her room at the moment, Lawrence had no other choice than to ask others about her whereabouts which he was so reluctant to do so. And while he was thinking about it, standing in the corridor in front of her room, Lambard seemingly ran into him. "What, may I ask, you're supposed to be doing here in front of Ms. Marcella's room?" he asked rather blatantly.

"I'm afraid I don't want to disclose it to you," Lawrence replied indignantly without even looking at him.

"Let's be cooperative, here. I just want an honest-to-god answer from you and not any poor attempts to conceal the truth."

"What is the point of this infatuation you've grown for Marcella? A reputable man like you shall not do such a thing," Lawrence said only with the intent of hurting him.

"I don't know what makes you accuse me of such a pitiable indictment. I hope it is not your intention to mutilate my dignity," Lambard tried his best to stay cool.

"It would not be possible for me to do that when there's none left, would it?" Lawrence at once walked away from him, leaving him affronted. Having provoked my Lawrence's hurting words, Lambard exploded, "You've got in you nothing that I can even think of begrudging. That much shabby you are; who are you to lambast my reputation?" Lawrence replied while walking down the stairs swiftly, "You know what? I have a leverage over you. I am the only one who knows your dark secret. If used right, it can very well be the bane of your life and I can seal your fate with my mere tongue. Only I can! I am your god now! You live at my mercy!"

Never had Lawrence been so dramatic in expressing his feelings and when he realised that, he slowed down. He sat down on the last step when he reached it to give himself time to reflect his thoughts. He just now realised, he rendered Lambard desperate enough to make a move against him that could even be lethal. He could just not imagine why he crumbled emotionally all of a sudden. But then he just realised he might have actually developed something beyond just an infatuation for Marcella. *This just might be your last chance for establishing a family, Laurie.* The voice said. *Confess your feelings.*

The ever-haunted Sam was now even more haunted by the tape he believed he heard. Everyone thought it was all over that for some time, they felt free. But now it began to feel otherwise as Sam had gathered everyone on the spot and demanded a decision to be made on the account of the tape recorder, placed suspiciously in an odd place. Lawrence saw Lambard there, he was staring at Lawrence without blinking which not only made him uncomfortable but also reminded him that this event did only delay Lambard from making his move, not prevent it.

"Why don't anyone just pass the news? It's exceedingly exasperating to arrive at the scene personally every time, especially knowing it's not going to end up well for anyone," Olenska spit the truth about them gathering together when she was brought there. Sam explained what he experienced but there really weren't any proof for his claim. The tape deck was empty, no one was around and no one was reportedly anywhere near the place. "Sam, don't you stress yourself because of some sick thoughts. It'll be all right," Olenska encouraged him publicly for the first time, while subtly recalling the conversation they just had.

"You don't know, Lady. It was a threat. I'm the next target it seems, from what he says. I-I am just... I don't know what to do. We know what he did with Henderson. I can't help but imagine if he'd do the same for me," Sam was scared to death, his voice and face both revealed so. He then turned at Bodholm, walked to him and grabbed his hands, "Just tell us if you're the one, pal. I won't harm you. I won't let anyone harm you. Just confess you did that and we'll forget it ever happened. Your system of punishment isn't really sound, man."

"Whoa, whoa, Sam. Hold it. You're treating me as if I'm guilty, that's not right. I've told y'all already. Were I to kill anyone of you, it's best for me to do it in front of everyone. Just like that," Bodholm grasped Sam's shoulders with his hands tightly. "If I want to kill you so badly, just imagine how far your neck is from my hands." Sam immediately withdrew, pushing Bodholm back in the fear that he might just do what he told he would do. "To hell with you, devil! Why is it you prickheads always show your insolence towards the weak? To show you're the filthiest piece of scum in the world?" Olenska rebuked him severely in an old-fashioned manner but it was more than enough to hurt Bodholm's feelings.

"Unity, people!" Lambard invoked his speech in a pompous way he was well used to. "The only thing I ever wanted from you. Show me you've got that and together we can drive him away!" Much to Lambard's surprise and despair, no one replied to his stirring brief oration. Lambard took offense at once, more than he had ever taken before and stood still. Out of nowhere, Fred happened to share a word with them, "Let's assume Sam's right. Just as a precautionary move, what would we do?"

Lawrence involuntarily backed him, "That's it, it's better if we think of our next move." Without saying anything, Lambard walked away from there silently. No one dared to stop him or ask him why he was leaving because they knew why he left and there was nothing to tell that might change things. As if blazing up the tension, Bodholm unexpectedly taunted him, "There goes Mr. Orator! The round of applause wasn't enough, I guess." That just shook everyone. Things seemed fine for once and now it felt like things were going to go worse. Olenska prayed inaudibly, "Secure me from the darkness, Lord. And give these young fools wisdom and light to find the right path in the darkness they lurk." Just as feared, Bodholm's words made Lambard stop. He was just a few steps away from his room and yet he stopped and turned back.

"Says who? The true husband of a hundred dollar hustling bitch? No wonder!" And thus, Lambard sealed the fate of his ongoing feud with Bodholm who was infuriated beyond measure. He tried to charge at him but others grabbed him to prevent a fight.

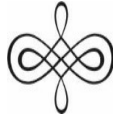
"Don't do this!" said Marcella. "You're better than that, Ed!" said Fred. "You're letting him win, Bodholm," said Lawrence. "Think before you do," said Benjamin. Above all of that, Bodholm yelled at the top of his voice, not being mindful of their words, "You're a dead goose in my hand, you lousy son of a bitch! I'm gonna make you wish you were never born in a world where I was. I'll cut your tongue, slit your throat and carve you up, pig!" They were shouting

all at once and it looked as awkward as Bodholm's rivalry with Lambard.

Sam was very confused by this commotion that spawned right in front of him in no time for potentially no rational reasons. Being a bold woman with great wit and a sharp tongue that she was, Olenska couldn't bear to watch their stupid fights and the level of its absurdity even made her shed tears. She almost forced her eyes to close, only she couldn't as given the circumstances, anything could happen. With all those rude words Bodholm used at him, Lambard would've easily offended at any usual instance. But this time, there wasn't even a slightest form of disappointment visible in his face. He looked at Bodholm with an awkward grin that not only made Bodholm uncomfortable but also added to his rage. Slowly, Lambard walked down to his room, locked it after entering. Bodholm quit moving at once, thereby letting others relieve.

"This is the first time you people show humanity, I appreciate that," Bodholm said panting. For a second, when Bodholm slowed down and spoke clearly, they thought they had pacified him and their momentary loss of grip over him changed the course of actions. "But I haven't shown mine yet," saying so, he rushed towards Lambard's room, pushing away those who tried to stop him. He hurried to Lambard's room and found out the door was locked from inside. Unfortunately, that was not enough to put out his rage but instead made him more angry. He took the liberty of knocking down the door which he eventually did with his second dash. That was when they thought things had gone too bad, that they might have to witness a murder itself. Lawrence thought that their next move shouldn't be stopping Bodholm from killing Lambard but to protect themselves. And that was why he stopped Fred who tried to run after Bodholm. He whispered slowly into Fred's ears, "Sometimes offense is the best defense."

Fred disagreed Lawrence's subtle idea of killing Bodholm but it could do nothing to change Lawrence otherwise. But surprisingly, Bodholm didn't enter the room, he stood still in the corridor staring into the room as if looking at death right in its eyes. Confused by the looks of a surprised Bodholm, Marcella asked just what anyone would ask, without expecting any reply from them, "Why did he stop?"



8. TRANSGRESSIONS OVERLOAD

The whole day was lost for Owens which personally made him worry. He lost his cousin; lost the chance to partake in the spiritual gathering which was arranged by him in the first place; missed an important meeting with a respectable co-businessman, all the while being locked in his room doing nothing but staring at the walls. Not being allowed to use the telephones was the cherry on top. At least he was able to watch the sunset through the window. He spent hours only thinking about the events that happened the past few days, stretching himself idly in his office chair, swinging his leg to and fro. Suddenly, something odd struck his mind and the swinging of his leg stopped at once. He realised it could be a serious problem and wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.

He knocked the door of his room hoping there was an officer outside, he wasn't unfortunate. "Officer, I have something to say that might help the case," he said politely. The door was opened and the officer asked, "Is it a confession, sir?"

"No. But I think it might lead us to the murderer," Owens replied with great confidence. The officer thought for a few seconds which seemed like long minutes for Owens but agreed as he had to. "Wait here, I'll bring others," he said and locked the door. The officer went downstairs to inform his colleagues what he had to tell but when he got there, he sensed everyone was rather indulged in something else. The whole room was silent while being studded with cops at every corner. Amidst all of them, there stood the man-in-charge-for-now, who was on a telephone call.

"What's the matter?" he whispered to one of them. "Inspector Martin was shot. Can you believe that?" he replied in an even hushier tone.

"Whoa, what happened? Elucidate, please."

"Why are you here, Dan? You should be looking after Mr. Owens," he asked reasonably.

"Speaking of Mr. Owens, I have something to tell, Morrie. He's gonna make a statement which he assures to be useful for our investigation. But please tell me what happened with Martin?"

"Things are getting too bad with what's going on with Martin. You better stick to looking after Owens."

"Why're you not telling me about Martin, Morrie? What's up with you?"

"Because I don't know yet!" Morris cried a bit too loud that broke the prevailing silence, thereby drawing everyone's attention. Without waiting, Morris blamed Danny with his gestures when they looked at them. It drew the attention of young Hank too. Though he didn't know why they all had gathered there or what the telephone call was about, he made sure no one was mindful about him and slowly slipped into the cellar where he was found. The policemen were inappropriately distracted by the telephone call, they were, however, sure that no one in the building could get to the exit without crossing them at some point.

There was a large hidden vent in the cellar that continued as an unusually wide, sloping tunnel which led to the backyard. Not many knew about it, only a few servants knew that such a thing even existed. Even among them, the reason of its existence varied. It was an engineering miscalculation to many though it was originally built for a dirty purpose only Owens knew. Soon enough, it was proved to be ineffective and dysfunctional and so eventually it went out of use and was forgotten. Only a few disloyal servants still used it for stealing tiny articles like silverware, utensils, fabrics and many others from the mansion. It was this vent Hank chose to use when he heard the police arrived, only it was too late to unscrew the lid completely. That was why he hid himself under the table which was initially out of the policemen's sight. Now that he was very lucky that he was unnoticed, he could unbind the remaining screws.

Once the telephone call was over, the man-in-charge informed the others what happened in Chuck's cabin and arranged a crew to go there and collect information. Another team was arranged for handling Owens while the case was going to be handed over to someone else from the department. It was only now Hank's guard realised the mistake he made. All they were able to find at last was an open vent behind the curtain with its grill lid and screws lying on the floor. Now they had to find where the tunnel led to as early as possible. Hank was out in the backyard within seconds from where

he got into the streets, hired a cab at once and left the place before the police even realised his absence.

In spite of all that anger he garnered, Bodholm didn't move at all. It was a wonder for them to see. Only their curiosity was peaking every moment. Soon they heard Lambard's voice, "Move back!" Bodholm took a few steps back away from the door and then came another order, "Turn away and stand still." Bodholm did so, he was now facing them with an inexpressive face though he realised he did a bit too much. Slowly from the mouth of the room appeared the muzzle of a rifle, being pointed at Bodholm, which was both surprising and satisfying for them in the sense their curiosity came to an end. But for Lawrence it didn't. He knew it was this rifle he had been hiding. Lambard stepped out, holding a meter long wooden rifle at Bodholm, still with the same grin on his face.

Indifferently, Lambard decided to deliver a speech before taking any action to express how much he was hurt by them, "I'm not inclined to address anyone of you 'gentlemen' anymore but look at this. Can you even see this? I don't know. But I can. I see a raging man at his least human state, craving to kill me which makes me feel wrong to call him man. In fact, I don't see a man here. If I did, I would've not been forced to talk all this. I see an animal. And as a human, I chose to pull a gun on this animal. Now, I've brought this animal before you for judgement. Not because I respect anyone of you but because I've been cursed to spend a few more horrible days with ugly people like you. So tell me what can we do with this animal or leave the decision making part to me."

Lawrence was the earliest one to respond, "Kill him." His response invariably surprised the others. "I was wrong to not expect an answer from a lousy pig. I forgot for a moment I slipped into a pigsty. Anyway, I hope I'm not wrong to expect unanimity here. At least." Lambard now felt bit jubilant about his comeback with his words which served pretty well for him as a revenge. It was hurtful for both Lawrence and others, yet they had to answer him. "Maybe we can lock him away," Marcella said hastily in a trembling voice. "That's too fair, my lady. Yet acceptable. What do the others say?" Lambard looked at others.

"Excuse me, Mr. Lambard. I have a question. You brought a gun for a spiritual gathering?" Olenska yet again proved she

couldn't be easily compromised.

"With all due respect, we're dealing with a much serious matter now, I'd appreciate if you really focus on this," Lambard said in a seemingly humble manner.

"You would appreciate? Really? Right after you referred us a bunch of pigs?" Olenska replied with a provoking question.

"If you can see, it's because of this gun I'm alive now. I'm grateful for that. Now, be wise and give me an answer."

Bodholm finally spoke, "I confess." He knelt down sobbing softly and immediately gained the spotlight. "I confess all my crimes. I confess every single one of them, right here. In front of you all."

"Enough of your acts and nonsense," Marcella interrupted. "Get up. You're going to be locked up in a deserted room and that's the best for everyone."

"Calm down, dear. I think we may have to hear this one out," Olenska said immediately to see what was he going to do.

"I'm not going to judge any of you. I take back all of my judgments on you. Just let me say this. I'm not a good man. I've never been. But Clara always wanted me to be, she tried so hard to change me. Only I was too stupid to realise," there was visible sadness on his face.

"I killed many men in my life. For money and respect. Mostly I did for Owens. I won't tell why I did it for him because that's Owens' business. He is the one who has to confess for his crimes not me. I killed and never looked back. Until Clara made me to. I promised to stop everything and I did plan to stop, after one last time. I was supposed to arrive at this island two days before all of you but I didn't. I only came here the day before. It was because I was involved in a dirty business of running a scam and I killed Owens' cousin Davis for that."

It definitely shocked Olenska, who knew Davis very well though she didn't care much for him. "Oh, lord! Why did you do that?"

"Lady, do you even believe him? He has a gun to his head, he'd even say he killed Lincoln. And you'll believe that?" Marcella interrupted again with a sense of anger and shock. Olenska immediately sensed something was wrong with Marcella because not long before she had advised her to not express her emotions so easily.

"You might not wanna make me say this again, Marcella. Be quiet!" she said in a calm and commanding tone. Then she looked

at Bodholm who continued, "You might wonder why Marcella sounds so anxious and there's a reason behind it. It involves the crimes she did, do you want to me to say it?"

It surprised not only Olenska but everyone. Though, Olenska was the one to be surprised the most. "You don't have to say crap about her, boy. I know her better than most," she replied with pride.

"I'll stick to confessing my crimes alone then," Bodholm took a deep breath. "I convinced myself to stop all of it after one last time. Also, I wanted to make as much money as possible out of it, being the last time and all. I got the right chance too. Marcella approached me to make a deal with me and offered a hefty sum of money for it. I was delighted there couldn't be a better chance for me." There was a distinct sense of fear visible in Marcella's face, only she couldn't do anything about it. Everyone other than Olenska noticed that, who was rather immensely focused on Bodholm and said sadly, "You said you'll stick your crimes alone." Bodholm didn't respond to her.

"I did everything as planned. Stole Davis' leather bag. It had cash and cards. Davis had a lot of money in the bank. Owens' money. But he lacked access to it. Only Owens knew the passwords and the signature was his. Marcella learnt the password somehow and the signature wasn't a big deal either. The account is now a clean slate. I got my share only a day before I came here. A hundred thousand dollars. Davis realised it was me. Only he wasn't wise enough to play things well. He blackmailed me to give him the money. He gave me no other option."

Olenska scoffed, "That's one hell of a story you got there. Tell me that's not true, dear." She looked at Marcella who was pretty much shook up and couldn't hide it from her face. She also hesitated a bit to reply Olenska, who was terrified at Marcella's strange behaviour.

"Yeah. He's lying, Lady. W-We better lock him up," Marcella stammered a little, contributing to Olenska's horror. Marcella couldn't even look at her in her eyes, the one whom she respected more than anyone. It took Olenska a moment to convince herself she was betrayed. She got mentally disturbed by it because never had betrayal hurt her as much as this. Her hands trembled without her knowledge, with tear filled eyes, she looked at Marcella. "Tell me that's not true," she said again but her voice had weakened too much. Marcella couldn't control making weird expressions in her face as she was rendered indecisive by her garbling emotions.

Olenska closed her eyes to control herself but only ended up shedding tears.

Bodholm continued no matter what, "I did something unforgivable. I let my anger take hold over me. I wanted to kill Lambard. I was about to kill him. But I confess I was wrong. I don't want to believe I can still be forgiven but I do plead for forgiveness for the sake of it. I'll gladly accept any punishment I'm given if, only if all of you confess your sins as I did. I damn well know one among you is responsible for Henderson's murder. Believe me, that's not how justice must be done. I didn't know it as well. It was Clara who taught me. That's what her death taught me. After all the murders I committed, I never really understood the true pain of death until that. I don't have any upper hand over you but I insist that everyone of you confess your sins in front of others. That's what Henderson really wanted from everyone of us."

No one really responded to him. It was because confessing sins couldn't really improve one's image in others' eyes. Moreover, their stern inclination towards self respect wouldn't let them do it. Lambard wanted things to proceed, he made Bodholm stand up on his feet. "You're going to be locked up in the store room with hands and legs bound. That way, we can be assured that none of us will be murdered and we'll know your meagre horse crap 'one among us' theory is just another pathetic lie of yours."

Lambard walked him to the store room while everyone was watching. Bodholm looked at them hoping someone would be touched by his speech. No one even looked at him in his eyes. That was when he truly realised he was expecting rain in the desert. Though Bodholm was frequently torn between shades of morality before, after Clara and Henderson's untimely deaths, he became very clear on which side he was. He had also set a new motto now, which was very different from his previous one, 'Money always'. He took it upon himself to make them realise how important it was to be on the right side, especially in such an intimidating time; to make them see what he saw; to make at least one of them confess their sins. And he was even ready to dedicate the rest of his life for that, knowing he wasn't going to stay in this world for long. Even if he was going to leave the island alive, he was ready to confess all the crimes he did in the past for which he was most likely going to get a death sentence.

Lawrence was now forced to think about what he had to do next. Lambard was not hiding his gun anymore which Lawrence knew wasn't going to do any good to him but rather might pose a threat. *The gun, Laurie.* The voice said. *The fly in the ointment.* At once, he got himself convinced of making his move. He was going

to forge ahead rather than fall back. Unusually enough, Lawrence didn't have a second thought at all, he was absolutely sure of his decision as if he was born to do that. He left at once to start the groundwork which might be just as important as his decision.

Bodholm's speech couldn't have affected anyone more than Marcella who was both infuriated and ashamed. She would never be seen the same as before. The image of a sweet, beautiful, young woman was permanently destroyed. Who would've thought the loveliest of the bunch was also the meanest. Olenska didn't even think of looking back at her, she left the place by herself. Except Sam, none hadn't left. While he stood there alone, he felt he could reflect his thoughts well. He brought them all together to discuss something really important to him and it ended without even being a little useful to him. How much he was fooled by them!

Understanding the depth of their intentions, he found whatever it was, he had to do it himself. Olenska's words were the first to strike his mind. He had to let go of his fears to be what he wanted to be. The key to his survival and success lied only in his hands. Whatever he was going to do, he had to do it alone. With all the hope he developed at the moment, he grabbed the tape recorder and walked down to his room with sure steps. Suddenly, he gained in him all the courage he had lacked all these years. For a moment, he fantasized himself to be the bravest warrior in all of the world, walking with pride and the idea that no one could do anything to him. He smiled as he did so, he didn't need anyone else after all to make himself happy. And all he heard then was a sudden gunshot whose sound thundered through the rooms, naturally striking fear into everyone.

While Lambard drove Bodholm through the kitchen to the store room at gunpoint, Bodholm didn't say a word. But when Lambard forced him to open the door, still pointing the gun at him, Bodholm didn't immediately do so. He turned back to gain eye contact with him. "What?" Lambard asked mockingly.

"You're worse than I thought you were," Bodholm was channelling his anger to his hands which was clearly visible as he clasped his hands abruptly and forcefully for a moment.

"If that's supposed to hurt me, then you need to know it's not going to work," Lambard was calm enough now that finally somet-

hing happened as he envisioned it.

"I demand you to plead forgiveness for disgracing my wife."

"Do I have to do that for stating something as it is?"

"I won't do anything stupid or anything against you. I'll obey you for as long as I get to be with you. Just let me forgive you for what you did."

"Open the door now. Don't make me say again," Lambard wasn't moved. Bodholm sighed in dissatisfaction with his dissent which wasn't making it any easier. He stood still as an act of disobedience, provoking Lambard to bite the bullet. He held the rifle in position to get a good aim at him and cocked it. It was a surprise there weren't any verbal exchanges at the moment. Bodholm gave a look at him with a smile, "I know what you care for above all. I know it. Boy, you're a real sickness, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're blabbering about but be done with the damn door already."

"You've conceived a lot of fantasies lately, I presume, oddly for a man of your age. Those prominently involving dear Marcella."

For a second, Lambard looked surprised and rigid as if he was going to reply indefinitely and the next, he sniffed and said, "Move, I'll open it myself."

"Given you're a vile prick, how dare you even talk of Clara?" Bodholm was just determined to play Lambard's game against him by trying to trigger him. When Lambard didn't respond, Bodholm walked towards him slowly with hands in the air and said as calmly as he could, "Let's have a talk over. No insults, no threats, no guns. Whatever it is between us, let's be done with that and move on."

"I don't have to talk with a dirty pig like you. You're done. Now get on with it."

"I can tell you how to get Marcella," Bodholm went straight up for a deal when nothing seemed to work for him. Lambard didn't reply until Bodholm spoke back, "Only if this talk over is going to happen."

"Can you think of this proposition from my place? You may get to know what it lacks."

Bodholm was sharp enough to find out the answer at once, "What can I do to gain your trust?"

"Admit before everyone, you lied about Marcella. Eventually, do as you promised and then we're square."

"So, you're ready to take a seat,?" Bodholm sat on the couch in the kitchen, inviting Lambard.

"I have to sit with you? No, I'd stand. I'd stand here with my gun ready, pointing at your slimy butt and I'd hear you talk. Now, talk."

"Talk with you?" Bodholm inhaled sharply. "What was I thinking? I'd rather talk to a deaf mute and still be happy." He rose to his feet and began to walk away without even the slightest sense of fear.

"I may have to pull the trigger. Choose your move wisely."

"To hell with you! I can't be killed again," Bodholm didn't stop striding away from the room. But Lambard did as he said, he pulled the trigger and the gunshot echoed through the empty rooms. Only he didn't aim at Bodholm but the roof. The gunshot made Bodholm stop however who looked at Lambard with horror as he always thought Lambard to be the greatest example of the 'all talk no walk' persona. Looking at the roof, Lambard said, "It won't surprise me if it were your chest the next time." Bodholm wasn't threatened but he felt he was being stubborn in an untimely occasion, so he gave up. Also he didn't intend to die at the moment. He opened the door finally, letting Lambard lock him in with his hands and legs bound to the grocery rack. But the gunshot had caused tension and commotion among the others. Even Benjamin and Lawrence were brought to the kitchen by the gunshot and Lambard took minutes to convince them it was nothing serious.

It was Sam who was devastated the most by this incident. For a second, he thought he was shot; it took him more than a few seconds to realise he was alright. He was so stunned he couldn't even move for a moment. And this just made everything worse for Sam. Now, he had literally experienced the fear of death and it embarked a perpetual dread on his heart which couldn't be removed as easily as it developed. As a remedy, he requested everyone to cooperate with him that everyone should always be together, especially with him so it would be easier to smoke out the killer among them. Or it could help prove Bodholm was the one given that now he was locked away.

Luckily enough, Sam's words were given heed this time, his request was welcomed strangely in accord. As an immediate consequence, the beds were all brought downstairs to the hall and set up neatly close to the west wall with maximal space between one ano-

ther. They made lunch by themselves this time without even a little help from Bodholm though they had to come across him whenever they required something from the storeroom to cook. No one talked to him which didn't bother him at all. However, he dearly expected Fred to meet him but in vain. He saw Lawrence, Benjamin and Marcella taking their turns to fetch something from the storeroom but he spoke to none of them, nor was he spoken to. It was obvious Marcella was very angry with him but she didn't express it.

"You know, there's a hidden wine cellar somewhere in this mansion," Benjamin said to Lawrence while they both helped Marcella cook.

"I'd rather not bet on that," he replied without much interest, crushing Benjamin's hope for initiating a nice conversation. Unanticipatedly, within a few seconds Lawrence replied with a better sentence, "Who told you that?"

"Can you think who?" Benjamin asked with a wide smile on his face now that a conversation was sprouting.

"The Lady?"

"Exactly! I happened to overhear her talk with Marcella and asked her about it. She made me promise I won't tell Sam about it. You know why? Because Sam's a great alcohol addict. You know that? Lad can't survive a day without a sip, I hear."

"So everybody here has a sickness then," Lawrence's view was different from Benjamin.

"What? I mean what sickness do I have?"

"You didn't ask me what sickness I have. You prioritise yourself at every single turn. That's your sickness," Lawrence handed over Marcella the tomatoes he chopped while he was talking with Benjamin. The remark quietened Benjamin's not-so-easily-closed mouth and made him think. But before Lawrence could move to the onions, he spoke again, "Why do you say that, Laurie?"

"No one calls me Laurie. Stick to Lawrence," Lawrence sounded offended.

"Okay, just answer me already."

"See, you lack patience too. If you'd ask me that too is a serious sickness," Lawrence began chopping up the onions while Marcella remained silent all through their conversation.

"Is that a joke? I mean seriously?" Benjamin asked in surprise.

"You may find it absurd but that's just my opinion. It deserves that much of your respect."

"So the same applies for my opinion, right?"

Lawrence turned at him as if he finally said something interesting to his ears. "Yes, of course."

"I think you hold a grudge against me since the case with my cousin."

Lawrence held his knife from the onion suddenly that even gained Marcella's attention. He kept the knife aside, undressed his apron and turned to Benjamin who actually did nothing to help them while he talked, with no intent of discontinuing the conversation until a decision was made. He looked into Ben's eyes and said, "You have no idea how much distress you caused me."

"Hey, it wasn't my fault anyway. I didn't expect the price, to be honest," he shrugged with an awkward smile.

"Let me make it easy for you. You don't have to try to pretend being honest. We all know very well you are not."

"Hey, take it easy, Lawrence. Now you're beginning to sound disrespectful."

"This isn't about opinions anymore. It's about facts. That was my biggest case at the time. I was just starting out. I sacrificed everything I had for it and you came in with your smile and your stupid hat and steal my money, my livelihood! Didn't you realise if it weren't for me, your jackass cousin would still be in the prison, jerking around, ruining your reputation? God, you were soulless!" Now it was Lawrence who broke down but he realised it soon and controlled himself.

Benjamin was surely disturbed inside which made him stammer, "I-I'm genuinely sorry but it wasn't my fault... I..." Lawrence turned away, he discerned he had nothing to say that possibly could make Benjamin confess and grabbed the knife to continue his chopping work. Suddenly, he heard the voice *Do it, Laurie. There mayn't be another such a prospect*. Lawrence stared into the knife he was holding, his hands trembled oddly as his rage hadn't yet subdued. This alarmed both Benjamin and Marcella, they stepped back in caution, thinking of the right words to tell that might help to calm Lawrence down. "Easy, Mr. Lawrence," Marcella said in her soft voice which was unduly trembling. "Put the knife down, please."

"Yes, do it, Laurie," Benjamin added, clearly having forgotten he told him not to call him by that nickname. It was also a haunting

coincidence that Benjamin used the same words as the voice inside Lawrence which only helped in enflaming his rage further. Marcella shushed Benjamin and gestured him to stay calm. Lawrence, finally having gathered complete control over himself, dropped the knife and turned to Marcella who stood close to him. "You deserve my thanks," he said looking into her eyes and proceeded to embrace her. Believing it might help, Marcella didn't oppose but went along with it.

That was wise, Laurie. Desperate but wise. Lawrence withdrew from her soon enough and continued chopping onions as it was getting late for lunch. He was calm yet he didn't speak to Benjamin thereafter. Benjamin too was feeling very bad about the incident. Finally they prepared lentil soup and cheese sandwich, as they couldn't find any meat there, in an abrupt and uncalculated manner.

Bodholm was served in the storeroom itself, Benjamin unbound his hands while Lambard was pointing his rifle at him all the while Bodholm had his lunch. Observing that, Bodholm prolonged the duration of his lunch as much as possible by doing long prayers, arranging the dishes too neatly around him before having them though he was only made to sit on the floor in the space between two racks. Lambard was cussing him in his mind just as Bodholm did as they both felt too haughty to even talk to each other even if it were cursing one another.

The lunch went as mundane as ever, everyone was more than just invested in reflecting on their own inner turmoil. The tragic thing about it was there was nothing that could be called as an 'everyman's problem', everyone had their own problems with only themselves to overcome them. Among them, one was actually pretty much very jubilant and it was the unrelenting Lambard, who was also enjoying the lunch, probably the only one to do so. He was now thoroughly convinced he was better than any of us there in the sense that he was at least morally much more sterner. It would make sense if others highly disagreed with it. And that was probably the exact thing that would've happened had he told it publicly, given the arrogant nature of them. It would be no wonder if it had developed into a feud on account of that.

When the lunch was over, they dispersed at once like a bunch of flies as if they were born to do so. Same was the case with dinner too. Bodholm was made to clean the table and wash the dishes after he brought Olenska downstairs every time. Thus, day three on the island ended smoothly than expected, definitely very different from the way it started.

The next day, things went fast than expected as they found themselves tiny things to do and explore. They had many things to do to keep their mind occupied that even the boring breakfast and lunch passed by swiftly. Marcella dusted the lamps and tables; Lambard went all through the place as if he was taking a little stroll but he was actually searching for a place to hide his rifle; Olenska stretched herself on the bed to take a nap but couldn't after Bodholm's confession; Sam was strolling across, sunk deep into his thoughts; Ben and Fred went to the backyard to spend some time in the pool which was clearly visible from inside the hall and Lawrence was sitting on his bed very still with his head rested on his clasped hands. If there was something that really bothered him at the moment, it was nothing other than Lambard's rifle. Though he felt lucky he managed to evade from Lambard successfully until now, he was still a threat to him.

Last time, the one who directly opposed Lambard was Bodholm and now he was practically under arrest. This made Lawrence think he could do nothing to Lambard by facing him off directly and that from then on it was only going to be mind games which could be trusted to work. And the biggest leverage Lambard had over him was the gun. So he had no other choice than to steal it from him. *Apologize to him? No, not to that prick. It's not even an option, I swear.* He was convinced finally that there wasn't any other option. At the backyard in the meantime, Fred and Ben were all suited up to get into the pool. For others it seemed like they both were minding their own business but they were actually conversing very seriously about a clandestine plot. Since they were facing away from the others, there was no way they could perceive it.

"I can't even trust a damn painting here," Fred said taking a quick dunk. "I see a lion, they say it's a monkey. I mean, if a painter can't paint a monkey like a monkey, then what good are his skills?"

Benjamin chuckled and said, "Okay, let's talk about business. There's a wine cellar hidden somewhere in here."

"What? Like a... a whole cellar? Does it exist really?"

"You bet your buns it does."

"Is it... isn't that a joke?"

"I heard the old lady say it. It's hidden so that we, who've come for some sort of atonement or whatever it is, can be prevented from clouded judgement."

"That's insane, man! How could... I'm not supposed to be here

in the first place but... I don't know."

"So, what do you say?"

"About what?"

"Help me out with this. I assumed from all the things that happened around you that you are an alcohol-lover. Now, I need you to explain to me the accuracy of my assumption."

"That's right. I am. Truly."

"I say we find it but keep all this between us. Only us. You with me?"

Fred hadn't really have any reasons to dissuade, "All right. But how do we find it?"

"Aren't you friends with Bodholm?" Benjamin said the answer with a question.

An hour passed. The sun had gotten pretty low. Everyone were present in the hall at the moment but none of them were chatting or talking with one another. Lawrence couldn't find anything around Lambard that looked suspicious which made him guess Lambard had probably found a place to hide his rifle. He was lying on his bed, facing away from the rest of them. He looked like an idiot as he was too late to realise it. Suddenly, he got the feeling of someone behind him and turned back with a jolt. It was Marcella, looking at him with clasped hands and hesitant eyes. It looked obvious to Lawrence that she was trying to say something but was struggling to find the right words.

"Is something wrong?" Lawrence asked in a caring tone, mostly to improve his profile in her eyes which she couldn't guess.

"I thought I'd ask you the same. Feel better, now?" Marcella asked just for the sake of it to which Lawrence replied simply, "Yep. Guess so." Marcella nodded as if she was glad to hear that but kept standing there. Lawrence figured maybe she wanted to talk to him and gave her an approving look which she perceived he was ready to listen her. "May I sit down for a moment?" she asked humbly.

"Feel free to. You're not obliged to plead for permission."

Slowly, with a smile, she sat on the bed beside him improving the intimacy between them manifold.

"Do you think I'm a liar? A cheat? That I'm liable to do the things Bodholm told?" she asked with wide open eyes to show she

wanted a genuine answer.

"No, no. How could I possibly believe that? That man's a certified liar which is something that has occurred to me on more than one instance."

Taking a soft breath, Marcella said, "I must tell you this, you can never know how much those words meant for me. The hope and gladness that it brings me is out of this world."

"That's nice to hear," Lawrence smiled mildly. An unexpected silence followed, there was suddenly nothing for them to talk about. That was when a queer thought crossed his mind which he let out quickly as a question as he couldn't bear with the curiosity associated with it.

"Can I ask you something if you wouldn't mind?" he couldn't imagine how quickly he asked the question.

"Sure," she replied after a momentary hesitance.

"Were you really friends with Owens?" That really didn't seem to be a comfortable question for Marcella. Lawrence could understand it from the visible change of expressions on her face. "You don't have to answer if that was inappropriate. I was... I don't know how I came up with that weird question."

"No, it's all right. It's just, I really am startled by your question is all. I do have an answer though."

"I don't want to hear if you feel bad about it. I don't want to pull it out of your mouth forcefully."

Marcella stood up abruptly which surprised Lawrence who thought he was getting close to make her answer with his speaking skills that he believed was working. Now he realised Marcella was too cautious to fall for it. "I thought I was gonna get to marry him. Now I know I ain't." Saying so, she left at once, not even expecting a reply from him. She did it because inside she was afraid of Lawrence. She was afraid she might fall for him at such an untimely occasion. She knew she made some mistakes in the past and finally she got to realise she was wrong after Bodholm's confession. It didn't occur to her at once that what she did was actually nothing other than a bunch of deplorable choices. Only after she realised her life was practically doomed now, it did so. She walked towards the backyard to spend some time alone which she thought she needed very much.

Lawrence was just feeling chaotic about it though he was secretly glad that she wasn't gonna marry Owens. He felt it was the

first nice thing he heard in a long time. It brought him a little enthusiasm to carry on with his plans to find the rifle, his only real concern at the moment. His eyes were now riveted on Lambard, he noticed every move of his, hoping he could find any clue. Soon enough, he got to notice a weird behaviour in him. Lambard took frequent sips from a tiny flask, not much smaller than a milk jar. Lawrence found it weird because were it water, he could've just used a glass or one of the bottles everyone was provided with. Moreover, there was a can full of fresh water that everyone used, just a few steps away from him.

He wondered how special the drink must have been for Lambard to store it in such a strange container. There wasn't one good beverage that came to his mind that he could believe worthy of a similar way of storing. Weirder was the fact that Lambard could even hide the bottle in the pocket in his pants. *Now that's totally weird* he thought. He now had turned most of his attention to this little flask, wondering all through the evening what might it store. The evening went fast for him, cooking up various ideas to do after he got the rifle all the while strolling across the hall to and fro while it was the most boring evening for everyone else. Before dinner however, Lawrence managed to save enough time to talk to Sam about how much of a threat Lambard was to them.

"Our best bet is to make our move late into the night, after everyone's asleep. You go look for it wherever you think looks suspicious. I'll join you as soon as I come across any clue," Lawrence told him.

"What would you be doing by then, exactly?" Sam asked curiously.

"I've got something really interesting worthy inquiring. It could help us."

"So, you're saying I should roam about this whole damn place by myself? All alone? After all that I've done not to do the exact same thing?"

That question cut off the series of never ending thoughts that Lawrence came across. It occurred to him that he didn't think of the plans from Sam's perspective. Simultaneously, he realised he had spent too much thinking and it was time to bring it into effect. "What, aren't you gonna answer me?" Sam asked restlessly.

"You're too scared, Sam. There isn't a whit of courage in you. Where do you think that's going to take you to?" Lawrence answered in a chastising tone because he was too proud to accept the fact that he just said something with not enough clear thinking.

Sam, on the other hand, took it differently. It wasn't long after Olenska told him something similar. He thought it was because of himself he had to suffer through the troubles he had been facing for the better part of his life. All because he wasn't bold enough!

"It's all right, Sam. Stay with me. Let's do it together," Lawrence patted his back and went on strolling as Sam stood there, still pondering how weak he was.

Soon, Lambard, Fred and Sam went upstairs this time to cook dinner as they were taking turns to cook. Lambard was not going to cook anyway, he just went along because he respected the prospect of taking turns to cook. In his mind he thought he didn't deserve to cook for the people who weren't respectful and were nothing other than a bunch of uncivil degenerates. He just wandered about the kitchen, looking at Fred and Sam cook.

"Lawrence!" Fred exclaimed to Sam and laughed while Lawrence had left to fetch the ingredients from the store room. "You didn't expect it was him, right? But I swear, man. It was to him Henderson talked before he went to sleep. And what happened after that is legend as you know." There couldn't be a better thing to say to Sam that would further his suspicions on Lawrence.

"So, Lawrence is the killer, huh?" Sam asked him.

"I don't know, man. It's just how I see it. I don't believe the horse crap story about this Heartman or whatever name he cooked up. I don't see credibility in it. It's hard for me to think someone would actually believe this BS."

"I have something to say Fred. You won't believe it's true. It happened just, maybe half an hour ago. He seemed to care about me and extend a helping hand. He said Lambard's rifle is a major problem for me and everyone else and that he needed my help to dispose it. You know what his plan was to eliminate this problem? To send me alone upstairs to search for the gun while he'd be doing something interesting." Fred scoffed and howled, "Coincidence? I think not!" but for a second he thought if he was painting a bad picture of Lawrence.

"I'm gonna thrash some good sense into his head. I want to tell him he's as lame as his alias and I will tell him I'm not afraid of anything," Sam expressed anger and courage as much as he never did.

"Lawrence has an alias? How come I've never heard about it?" Fred asked.

"Henderson said, you know. It's Mr. Hearts not Heartman."

"What, you believe that?"

"There's a killer here and we don't know his name. So I thought it's better to put a name for him at least, you know."

"So you don't believe that story, right?" Fred was surprised by it as he realised that whatever happens, people would buy a story easily than the truth.

"Doesn't matter," it was obvious Sam didn't want to talk about it and so Fred changed the subject of talk.

"You could've named him better, anyway, you know. Something funny. Like, Mr. Spilled Beans or Mr. Beanie Potato. Something like that."

As soon as he said that, Fred could see a weird contortion in Sam's face which made him feel uncomfortable.

"You think that's funny?" Sam asked still with the weird expression on his face.

"I don't know, man. I'm not good at making up names. That's why I asked you in the first place."

"Better not try to do that again. Let's get this started already," Sam gestured him to pass him the garlic.

"If you want any help, just ask me," Lambard said reclining on the couch. "I'm right here."

Fred and Sam, neither of them couldn't take it as a joke. They didn't seem to mind and went on with their work. The dinner was ready earlier than they thought. It was a very simple one though, but not as interesting as ever. Things had now changed in a way that none other than Lambard cared if Bodholm had dinner. Lambard wasn't caring to him, though. He just didn't want him to die soon. When he brought Bodholm food, he didn't bring his rifle with him. The weirder thing was that Bodholm began to explain a dream he said he had when he took a long nap in the afternoon.

"I saw the moon carrying a long thread of silver fabric on one hand and a tiny golden needle on the other," he said with his eyes fixed at the starless sky he saw through the window. "She told me she untwined the fabrics of the sun and that he lost his shine."

"I assume you're hungry," Lambard said quickly before he could begin a new sentence. "So I suggest you to have your dinner as early as possible."

"It's a full moon tonight, right?" Bodholm asked in a ridiculous tone which seemed like he didn't listen to Lambard. "Take me to the eastern shore. I want to see it."

"I'm not gonna let anyone die anymore so I'm not gonna let you out of here," Lambard left the room without waiting for Bodholm to finish his dinner. He locked the door from outside in front of Fred and Sam and said, "Check him up again, before going to bed. If he doesn't eat, don't bother. By the time you're done, I want these back in my drawer," handing over the keys to them. Fred received them hastily while Sam looked disinterested as he couldn't hope for an easier start for his plan to extract the whereabouts of the wine cellar from Bodholm.

During dinner, not much were spoken or talked about, they were actually happy that they didn't. It had become a custom that the faster they left the dining hall, the more they were blessed with peace. But even when everyone had left, Lambard stayed, staring at the elf figurines around the chandelier. He took two of them in his hands and looked at them closely. *Long gone* he thought and stuck them in his coat pocket.

Olenska hadn't talked much since the Marcella's unconvincing transformation from 'Miss Adorable' to 'Abomination', all her world now shrunk to the tape recorder which she kept by her pillow, playing her favourite songs all the time. The only time she did something other than listening to those songs was when she was lifted from the bed for her necessities. It was late into the night, everyone was asleep but not her. She couldn't. She couldn't close her eyes after what Marcella did to her. She didn't sleep the previous night too. *What kind of woman was she? Who would do such a thing? A double-dealing swine. That's the most decent way to put it* - the thoughts that circled her mind.

Suddenly, a dark figure rose few yards away from her, disrupting her thoughts. She, at first, was scared to death by it, only she wasn't pushed by the fear far enough to scream. Naturally, she wondered it was the killer among them, presumably under the alias Mr. Hearts. She just waited to see something that proved she was right. To her surprise and relief, there appeared another figure, evidently a bigger one. It seemed as if both of them talked to each other, Olenska could even hear whispers. She realised there were actually two killers and not one. She was also sure that the shadowy creatures were someone among them, since from the way they rose, it seemed they got up from the bed. The bigger one could be Benjamin was her guess.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't discern any words from the whispers, not amidst Lambard's coarse snoring, who was between her and the shadowy figures. From what she could remember, it was Fred next to Lambard, so the other person was probably Fred. Within a few seconds, the figures vanished and as it was the darker side of the hall, she didn't even recognize when it happened. The brighter side, which was close to the backyard, was lit by the light from the huge LED lamp set overlooking the pool. Assuming the worst, Olenska closed her eyes swiftly to pretend she was asleep. As of her, it was the wisest move given that she was unsure and afraid that they might have noticed she was awake. It was an intense few minutes for her; if she opened her eyes, she would be dead meat, she thought. When she finally opened them, minutes later, as she heard no whispers or anything anymore, there was no one there which panicked her even more. She forced herself to sit upright despite her bad back. Good for her, she could see Benjamin and Fred on their bed, presumably asleep. At least she could see someone on their beds, covered in their blankets. Taking a deep breath, she reclined back, this time facing the other side with much comfort and composure.

Sadly, they weren't actually on their beds, it was just their pillows beneath their blankets. They were both actually upstairs at the moment, trying to open the storeroom with the keys Lambard handed in which was unexpectedly hard for them as they didn't know which was the key and had to try everything.

"What are you doing with the keys, Fred?" Benjamin lost his cool when Fred took long to open the door.

"I don't know, man. I'm trying," Fred's voice wasn't audible enough for Ben.

"Sorry, what? Is there a problem with the lock?" he asked, after which he noticed the awful trembling of Fred's hands.

"Are you all right?" he asked to which Fred mumbled. Benjamin wondered, "God! Don't tell me you aren't dry."

"What? I don't do drugs, man. It's just, you know, the lock, it's tight. The lock's too tight. It's a tight lock." Benjamin didn't need a better proof than this blabber to accuse him for doing drugs.

"What was it? Coke, huh? Right before we're about to do this? If recklessness had a human form, I'd bet it would look like you." Benjamin snatched the keys to open it himself.

Meanwhile, Lawrence got down from his bed, crept on all fours up to Lambard's bed. He had to be overcautious now that Olenska

was the one next to Lambard and the stool on which the bottle was placed was in between their beds. As Olenska was facing in the opposite direction, carefully he lifted the bottle on the stool beside his bed, praying that it wasn't empty. He was lucky there was enough in it for a sip. He emptied it slowly into his mouth to grasp its taste in his tongue. It wasn't enough to clearly determine what drink it was but he could surely say it was wine. Crawling all the way up to Sam's bed as silently as he could, he informed Sam what he found.

"What're you trying to prove?" Sam whispered, still lying on his bed.

"Don't you remember what we were told about having alcohol?"

Sam understood what Lawrence was trying to say and asked, "So they've got wine somewhere?"

"Somewhere Lambard knows while the rest of us don't. Also we can be sure only Lambard knows where the rifle is. That means there is someplace hidden here, large enough to store wine and a rifle that's presumably at least a metre long that also manages to stay hidden from our eyes."

"Better learn to use shorter sentences. I can't really understand your point," Sam replied superficially mocking Lawrence.

"Maybe a hiding place? Like a room built for the sole purpose of hiding? We saw the wine cellar in the store room was empty, right? Maybe they hid the wine in this arbitrary place for the prospect of our journey. So maybe that's where he hid the gun, I think," Lawrence tried to tie up the loose ends.

"You're missing the bigger picture, Lawrence. Even if you're right, we don't know where this imaginary secret hoard is. And we're short of resources that might help us find it," Sam said in a hopeless tone as he was quite convinced Lawrence was the Mr. Hearts and that he was trying to manipulate him into believing a story that didn't sound believable for him.

"Your point being?" Lawrence asked in a short sentence this time.

Suddenly, Sam hushed him and quickly closed his eyes, whispering, "Someone's coming downstairs."

Lawrence rolled laterally to hide himself beneath Sam's bed. Out of curiosity and a sudden rush of adrenaline, Lawrence lifted his head to his utmost, to see what was actually happening. He was able to see a couple pair of legs heading for the backyard. When he

was sure there was no more legs following, he came out from the underneath of Sam's bed and asked Sam who were they and what were they doing in whispers.

With the help of the light from the backyard, Sam could see two men conversing with one another in whispers just like himself and Lawrence.

"There's a lean guy, standing in an awkward posture," he informed Lawrence who replied at once, "Fred, of course. But what's he doing?"

"He's talking to the other guy, a fat guy. I have good reason to tell you that's Benjamin."

"Who the hell did I saw in their beds, then?"

"Probably a couple of pillows, I guess. Just like those in yours."

"Is it that common to use pillows for this?"

"Probably you're just as old fashioned as the trick itself."

"I'm to assume you didn't mean any offense?"

Sam didn't reply and was very keen on them both. "Fred disappeared?" he said in a startled tone.

"What? How? Did you miss it?"

"I don't know. One second he's there and the next he vanishes."

"Sounds like you missed him."

"Benjamin's headed outside," Sam said simultaneously brewing a plan in his mind. "I'll go after him."

"What?" Lawrence didn't get it of course.

"You go back to your bed. I'll go find where's he going."

"Why do you care about where he's going?"

"As far as anyone other than you is concerned, I'm going to use the toilet. If I don't return within five minutes, you come for me." He sounded very bold that even Lawrence trusted him and crawled back to his bed.

Last time when Sam felt courageous in a similar way, he wasn't really bold. He just pretended to be, so as to manifest an impression of bravery in front of others as a backlash to their harsh comments on him. But this time, the case was different. He wanted to be fearl-

ess because he realised fear would not help him. It was his courage that would ensure his survival. Though he suspected Lawrence to be Mr. Hearts, he still wasn't sure what Benjamin and Fred were up to at the middle of the night. He was also aware that Fred was somewhere amidst the darker side of the hall from the fact that he didn't return to his bed nor did he go to the backyard.

For the moment, he assumed Fred was Mr. Hearts and walked towards the backyard as if posing himself absolutely vulnerable in the killer's eyes. Plainly, in this imaginary occasion he developed in his mind, he was walking straight to his death. But he didn't panic, he forced himself not to as if his life depended on it which was actually true in his case.

It actually gave him hope, just as before, to do that. Luckily, Fred didn't show up and Sam made it to the backyard. He noticed the manhole cover near the pool had been removed, Benjamin was probably down the manhole. Just then it struck him that he never wondered how could a manhole be so wide - it even fitted Benjamin! To prevent Benjamin feel suspicious, he actually went to the common toilet but didn't enter as he wanted to keep an eye on the open manhole. He had to wait for a few minutes for Benjamin to pop up and when he did, he pretended to lock the toilet door as if he was coming out just now.

"Whoa, whoa, stop!" Sam gestured Benjamin to calm down to prevent him from making a sudden move. "What are you doing?"

"What're you doing?" Benjamin asked back.

"Can't you see?" Sam didn't wish to say the word himself but Benjamin didn't try to oppose him henceforth.

"It's nothing, Sam," he smiled, unable to continue which was very uncommon for him as he was almost never short of words.

"What are you holding?" Sam asked impatiently, looking at the flasks he was holding in both his hands.

"I confess, Sam. This might sound crazy but there's a whole wine cellar beneath here. It was the foxy crone Olenska who manipulated everyone to hide this from you. Such a despicable character she is! What are you, a little kid? To hide things from you. Have as much as you want, Sam. Live your life." It was remarkable how Benjamin's confession subtly transformed into an advice.

"You don't call her like that. You address her 'Lady'," Sam told him in a commanding tone which surprised Benjamin beyond measure. It sounded like a lion's roar coming from a goat's throat.

"But why, man? She doesn't even respect you," Benjamin felt helpless.

"That's between me and her. I'd insist you to stay away from this matter."

"I'm gonna get back to my bed. I'm leaving the manhole open for you," he tried to walk away from the scene.

"No. You can close it," Sam didn't let him leave soon.

Gasping, Benjamin slowly knelt down beside the manhole, keeping the flasks aside, pushed the heavy metal cover over the orifice of the manhole and stood up, breathing heavily. He then looked at Sam and nodded, wondering in his mind how much Sam had changed all of a sudden. When he entered the hall, he called out to Fred in a whisper. Fred had been standing by the covered furniture, behind the curtain of the eastern window the whole time Benjamin spent down the manhole. Benjamin asked him to stay there as he suspected he was on drugs. He replied Benjamin with a question, "Did you find it?"

"Yes," he juggled the flasks. "But get to your bed right now. We can get back there sometime later."

"What? Why not now?"

"Now's a bad time. Didn't you see Sam?"

"Sam? Isn't he sleeping?"

Benjamin grabbed his hand and walked him to his bed, "You're coming with me."

Sam, Lawrence, Olenska, all three of them were able to see him dragging Fred across the hall. Sam didn't actually want to close the manhole, he asked Benjamin to do that just because he didn't want him to treat him like a coward. Actually, he didn't want anyone to treat him like a coward anymore and Benjamin was just the start.

With the hook nearby the pool, he lifted the manhole cover which had a little handle in itself for hooking. It looked very deep from where he stood. But it didn't pose any threat as there was a metal ladder fixed inside which he used to climb down. It was at least fifteen feet deep and the ground was a bit muddy. It was very dark but he was able to see a little switch beside the ladder and flicked it. A light grew behind him, he turned to see a short, narrow tunnel that was no wider or taller than an average door, at the end of which there was a well lit, cozy room. He walked through the

muddy floor of the tunnel to reach the room that he assumed to be the highly sought after wine cellar.

It was an unsurprisingly tiny room, but big enough to hold a variety of liquor, a set of lavish couches and a small wooden closet. A rifle was rested on one side of the closet which, Sam was very sure, must be Lambard's. He reclined himself for a moment on the sofa, feeling proud of how he dealt with Benjamin. Then he grabbed the rifle, hoping Lawrence would soon come after looking for him. In the meantime, he decided to have some wine. He chose his favourite kind and looked for a glass. Were he the old Sam, he wouldn't have needed any glass to have wine. But now, he intended to stay clear-minded and to respect Olenska's intention. Two pegs and he was done. Yet, it felt like they were the best two pegs he had ever had. Finally, Sam got to spend some time relaxed, with no thoughts nagging his mind whatsoever.

Lawrence, on the other hand, was starting to feel the heat. Ben and Fred had returned to their beds but Sam hadn't yet. If he were to go looking after him, it would alarm Benjamin and Fred who were presumably still awake. For several minutes, he waited though it indefinitely seemed like hours. He observed his wrist watch to keep track of time. The ticking of the watch echoed in his head while he waited and kept on booming to a point where he couldn't tolerate.

With a jolt, he rose from his bed, wiping off the sweat from his face. He couldn't think right at the moment. Were Sam dead, how would things go down? That was the predominant question circling his mind and he wanted an answer so badly. Nothing else mattered to him at the moment more than that. He got down from his bed, his legs carried him to the backyard even without his consent. On his way, he turned back a second to see if anyone was awake. Though he couldn't see well in the dark, he could perceive no one was moving. However, with the small amount of light entering the hall, he sensed a pair of eyes looking at him. All this happened within a second, he didn't even realise what he just saw. When it struck him he saw someone awake, he turned back again but it was late. No one was actually awake or staring at him with wide open eyes.

But he was absolutely certain about what he saw. He couldn't forget the dead look in the brown eyes. And the first name that came across his mind when he recalled the look of the brown eyes was Olenska. However, he wasn't going to spare time to find who it was. He reached the backyard in a few steps and was surprised to see the open manhole. His first thought was that Sam's body was dumped in there but then he thought why would they leave it open

if they were to hide the body. Lesser did he know that Sam left it open purposefully.

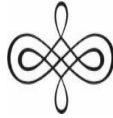
He got down the manhole, wondering about its unusual width. He realised it was the wine cellar from the way the room looked and proceeded forward through the tunnel with silent and cautious steps. As soon as he stepped inside, something long came swiftly at his direction. It was the butt of a rifle; it hit his belly, inspiring a sharp pain. It also caused him a strong, unpreventable urge to gasp for air. There was a man in front of him holding a rifle but he could barely see his face.

"It was you, wasn't it?" said a voice which he could surely say was Sam's. "You are Mr. Hearts and you killed Henderson when he learnt about you." Lawrence wasn't in the condition to reply, he just gasped again.

"You're the reason behind all the chaos and yet you lurk among us in the darkness, relishing the frenzy aftermath."

"Sam, you're mistaken. You don't understand. You don't know what you're doing," Lawrence replied in short sentences, now that he found it difficult to breath. He could sense Sam was completely convinced otherwise and there was nothing he could do to save his head. He realised his fate was sealed and there was no way of prolonging it.

"You twisted liar!" Sam swung the rifle at the side of his head, knocking him down. Lawrence fell on the floor, dizziness clouded his mind, his vision was blurred; he could barely see Sam who was pointing the rifle at him, desperate enough to shoot him, believing it was an act of bravery. Gradually, it began to black out for Lawrence as he was losing his consciousness. He could see nothing anymore but was able to hear some voices that echoed in his head, "You're a monster!", "Go to hell!", "Get up, Laurie!". But he couldn't move or reply and slowly the voices faded too. He was lost in time and in essence, wading through the pool of emptiness with no destinations left to reach.



9. NOTHING MATTERS ANYMORE

Bob and Lopez had their guns cocked before they decided to open the door. Lopez even signalled him that he was going to go around the cabin to the front and just then they heard the voice of a male.

"Open up, Chuck. It's me. You heard about the cops?"

Bob guessed it wasn't going to a problem to open the door as whoever it was outside that door, they didn't try to break in or make a wild move but Lopez stopped him. He wanted to know what the guy outside was going to do and decided to wait.

There was a minute of silence that followed their decision which made them feel it was a bad decision because silence could be interpreted as absence of anyone, that whoever it was outside, he might have run off. So, Bob rushed to open the door sighing at Lopez.

He opened the door while still holding his gun in position with Lopez backing him up. It was the same lean, young man, Hank, who got terrified at the sight of them pointing their guns at him. Dead people and the bloody environment inside were decorative seasonings to his horror.

"Look whom we got here!" Bob said in a jovial tone though he was way too far from being cheerful.

He was brought inside but was not made to sit as the whole place was a mess with no usable chairs or any sort of furniture to rest. They informed the others about Hank and requested them to arrive at the scene soon though they were already halfway to the spot.

"What exactly was the business between you and Chuck? We need you to answer the whole history, only the truth, without fail,"

Bob said.

"I didn't know what was happening at first. It was Tuesday night. I happened to see what I shouldn't have. It was that single moment that seems to have changed my fate forever. Chuck had made me clean his cabin, I told you he's the bullyragging kind, remember? He was just that, he was the sickest piece of filth in the whole world. I was doing my work just as he wanted me to and then out of nowhere, a lean nice looking woman showed up at the cabin late into the night. I could only see one side of her face but I've never seen her before and I didn't know what was the business between them. I mean, Chuck meets a lot of women, most of them were wine-pourers for the yachts but she didn't look like one. She was well dressed and looked respectable. She and Chuck had a talk, I couldn't make anything out of it other than that she was leaving the city, never intending to return. And then after she'd left, Chuck came to me with a little package and said, 'You didn't see anyone here' and lent me the package. He said I'll get another such a package next week and all I got to do was to keep my mouth shut. He was strict and serious as never before and I accepted it. When I opened it I found five grands in it. That's the money you found from me. Chuck didn't tell to safekeep it for him. It was my compensation to not tell the truth about the lady."

"Can you identify this mysterious lady?" Lopez asked.

"It was dark outside. I could barely see half her face. I think she probably wanted to hide her face from me."

"So why didn't you tell us the truth before?" Bob was curious.

"I was afraid. You couldn't even imagine what horrible things Chuck would have done to me and my family, had I opposed him. He once abused my sister in detestable ways and I could do nothing to him. We're weak, we can do nothing to someone like him. God, we can't even stop such douchebags from tormenting us. Trying police was worse than suicide. He would have destroyed my whole family."

Hank's confession only made Lopez feel better about him shooting Chuck. The other policemen finally arrived in their wagons, switching the isolated place into a media hotspot within minutes. They wanted to spread the news as widely as possible as it involved the murder of a good police officer. Hank was taken into custody for the while as they could extract a lot more information from him.

Also, Bob didn't expose the truth about Lopez shooting Chuck to anyone. There was definitely guilt in Lopez's heart about that but

he didn't actually pull the trigger out of rage. He did it as a well-calculated move and very cautiously. And he was very sure it was a well deserved fate for Chuck whom he now despised more than anyone.

Owens got what he asked for. A couple of policemen in his room, ready to record him though he told them it wasn't a confession.

"There was this little bag, not so different from an usual hand-bag, that he keeps with himself all the time. When he told me he lost the money, he didn't give me the specifics about how he lost. If I were to guess, he probably kept the money in the bag and in fact lost the bag itself and not the money alone. I say so because I didn't happen to see the bag yesterday. And the bag not only contained the money but also every IDs, license and credit cards he ever owned. I put a lot of money in his bank account. So, if you let me or you yourself try to trace it down..." Owens looked at them in their eyes, hoping they would have understood his point.

The policemen turned away from him to have a talk in whispers as to considering in what way could this information be used in this case. After a minute of discussion, one of them replied, "We appreciate your help, Mr. Owens. It would take some time even if you hold your support for us. And as of this case, you're still not proven to be not guilty. We couldn't let things go bad for both of us, so we would help to shift your office to your mansion. You can do your work from here until you are proven innocent. So, we better hit the road. It was good to spend time with you."

They stood up and shook hands with Owens who was utterly disappointed that he still had to be locked off in his mansion.

"Uh... and one more thing," the officer turned back to Owens on his way to the door. "This is officer Hardy. You want anything, you can ask him. He'll be here with you all the time. Take care, Hardy," he patted his back as he left the room with the other officer.

Thus began the worst days of Owens' life. He couldn't even have thought of what was going to happen next. First thing, he didn't earn the 'good boy' name which he thought his little act of giving them information would gain him. And the other was that

Martin's death became a widespread news, exceedingly overshadowing his cousin's death which made the police work more towards solving Martin's case, compensating his family and calm down the wild debates and controversies the incident lightened up.

So, the next day, he was inquired all over again by people from various factions, including the police, an unidentified federal agent and a few press people too. He could now see no point in having his office shifted to his mansion as he barely had any time to do his work amidst all this. All this ruckus resulted in one bad thing - the police were less interested in the lead Owens gave as it would require a lot of time to yield a result than the other presumable leads.

With the rising craving for justice for Martin, they could do nothing better than making progress. Moreover, Martin was one of them, so it had a lot of gravity from their perspective too. If something such as this could happen to one of them, why wouldn't it happen to themselves? Now that was what concerned them the most.

And Owens was the unexpected victim of it all. He couldn't do anything that he desired. The worse thing was that he was forced to do what he despised the most - being interviewed and inquired. On top of all that, most of them treated him as guilty rather than just a suspect. That really hurt his fame and became a surprise jackpot for his business competitors. It became the worst day of his career and he couldn't do anything about it. Whenever he used the rest room, he would stay there for minutes to stay away from all the nonsense he was made to encounter and would only come out after Officer Hardy asked him to. And by evening, he had asked for an excuse more than seventeen times.

Even Hardy was able to understand why. He let him take all the time he needed since the eighteenth time. From then on, Owens adjourned all his meetings indefinitely to take some breath. He was literally watching his empire crashing down as he watched the interviews and the news about the case being telecasted in the television. It was something he had never experienced before. It was like being put in a cage only to watch your whole life being ruined. And it continued the next day too.

Whenever things went downhill for him, he would give in to consuming alcohol only to cope up with his loss and prepare for the upcoming events. But this time, even wine couldn't help him. He broke the wine glass right in front of Hardy by throwing it on the floor. Then he picked the isolated corner of his room and shrunk

himself to that spot. Hardy could sense he was weeping and approached him.

"Want me to grab you some dinner for you?" he asked genuinely.

"Like that would save my life!" Owens yelled in despair.

"Why isn't your life safe?" he asked doubtfully yet with good intention.

"You don't know me. My father was born in a rich family. One of the richest families you can ever imagine. He was a good man. And yet he was the most reckless and insolent man I have ever known. He was incompetent, he couldn't even protect his own birthright. So what you see here, my mansion, the furniture, all the pompous knick-knacks, including a single clothespin, everything, including my business, I earned it all. By myself. I didn't inherit any crap. Now I think it might paint a picture in your mind. About how much effort it would have required, the humongous toll I was exacted. And I'm losing everything for something I'm not even responsible for. I mean, is there anything worse than this that can ever happen to anyone?"

Silence was the only card Hardy could play at the moment. He grabbed his arm with one hand and patted his back with the other.

"I've lost everything, Hardy," his voice broke in anguish and he shut his eyes to hold his tears. Within seconds, he opened his eyes. "No. Not everything. I've got someone who dearly loves me. This world would mean something to me with she waiting for me and I for her. Believe me, I may sound like a lovely prince from the fairy tales but it is really heart-warming for me to think of her at this time, that she really cares for me. She's in my private island now. Five days and then I'll get to meet her. All I have to do is to sit through the worst five days of my life and it'll be over for good."

Hardy barely replied anything but he felt good that Owens was able to encourage himself and stay strong, so he smiled at him.

"I'd rather forget I was rich and be gone far away with her from all this," Owens didn't say that without pain but felt relieved too.

"You can do that? Your money, your business and everything you've earned all by yourself. They don't matter to you?" Hardy asked.

"Not anymore. Nothing does anymore. Can you do something for me, Hardy? Call 'em all. Bring them up here. I want to be done

with all this bilge. Procrastination won't help me in that regard. By this time tomorrow, this should have ended."

"You sure about that? Not a minute ago, you were weeping."

"It's alright, Hardy. As I said, nothing matters anymore."

From then on, Owens hardly had any time to take care of his personal needs. As soon as he saw a steep decrease in the price of his stocks in the market, he froze all his further investments by talking to the respective authorities over telephone in front of Hardy. He wasted no time in selling all his stocks for profit or loss as he predicted that if he waited anymore, he would be rendered bankrupt as he recently had a bank loan him a big sum of money for the improvement of his firm. But he realised it was pointless to still hope that he could improve his firm, so he began the sale. Many of his close associates warned him it was a very unwise move that it was in fact this way of selling would actually make him bankrupt but Owens wasn't going to change his decision. It was proven Martin's death had nothing to do with Owens but that wouldn't change anything in people's mind. They believed Martin's death happened while investigating a case in which Owens was the prime suspect and there was no other big names in the suspects list, so naturally people developed hatred for Owens. People would easily hate a rich man than a poor fellow. But Owens was brilliant enough to realise this and made all the wise moves to protect himself from bankruptcy.

He even talked to his business friends and competitors about selling his company to them for a few to no profit. To manage his financial status, he had to sell almost all of his properties but he could retain his mansion without loss. Still, he talked to people about its sale along with most of its furniture and fittings. It would net him a few hundred thousands that could be enumerated as his worth. So, at the end, Owens wasn't a bankrupt but a man with money but no home. He had however asked the new owner of the mansion to let him stay there for a few days, until his guests returned from his private island, which was of course not his anymore. Technically, he hadn't sold it yet though the talks were done all in favour of Owens.

It was even rumoured around the city that Owens' downfall was, in fact, a well executed plan by his competitors to squash his so-called business empire that they took advantage of his situation and used propagandism as their weapon to paint the picture of Owens as an evil billionaire. But as Owens himself said nothing mattered anymore, he didn't care about it at all.

However, he had to get by the hard time without losing his hope for which he depended on a wrong crutch; he really gave in to alcohol and smoking. Not a moment was he away from a cigarette, as noticed by Hardy. He could see that in the tenor Owens was, no counsel would come to fruition.

Owens, at some point, tried to talk to Marcella by calling the emergency telephone in his private island though he was aware of the fact that the signal might not reach there. It didn't reach anyway not because of terrible weather but because Bodholm disconnected it as discovered by Marcella.

Two days had now passed and the police finally tied up all the loose ends in Martin's murder, arranged a huge, honourable funeral for Martin and the case was closed. But they were no close to finding Davis' murderer at all. It was obviously because Martin's death took all the spotlight. They asked Hank to identify the lady he saw by showing him the pictures of the servants who worked in the mansion though he already knew most of them. They also brought him the photographs of all the women related to the mansion and the mansion workers which was only partially useful; as he saw only half her face, he couldn't clearly identify the exact person but came up with eight final contenders among whom one must be the sought-after lady. As it was obviously a tedious job and the chances of obtaining a successful result were low, they also had to put effort on other possible leads. That led them to at last consider Owens' lead, a separate team was developed to do the groundwork which would take days to trace the details about all the transactions. They collected the required details from Owens to begin the work but that only worried him as until proven innocent, he couldn't be free and they were just starting the inquiry on that matter, delaying his freedom further.

That evening, after the police had left, Hardy had a little talk with Owens hoping it might help him let off some steam.

"So what is she like?"

"You mean... her?"

"Yeah."

"Well," Owens took a cigarette out of his pocket, lit it with a candle, put it in his mouth and pulled on it vigorously, "I uh... I don't like to describe her."

"Oh. I'm sorry if it felt inappropriate for you."

"It's alright. Let me try. She... you know, her name is Marcella. I met her for the first time probably a year ago."

"So it was slow burn, huh?"

"You can never imagine how slow. It took a whole month for me just to say hi," Owens chuckled heartily like it was the first time in his life. "There were a hundred different occasions and I utilized none of them. That's ridiculously over-the-top reluctance if I may say so. The funny thing is I never realised it back then."

"Why it took so long anyway?"

"It is a weird fact. We shared minutes of eye contact that came out of nowhere which would be ultimately satisfying for us. I hadn't had the guts to speak, I confess but she did the same too. I learnt that she was too shy to do so later on. That's a completely uncanny fact because as far as I know, she's way too far from being timid."

"Shyness is different from frightfulness, isn't it?"

"But often counted as the same, don't they?"

"Not for me. Doesn't sound right, man. It's like saying killing is a punishment. Like it would bring justice."

"Since when did cops start to talk about justice? Better leave it with the lawyers and judges. We've had enough of liars in this world already."

Hardy stared at him, unable to interpret any positive point from his words. "What do you mean? Cops shouldn't talk about law and justice?"

"I didn't mean any such thing. What I actually mean is, killing can bring justice. It can be mercy, either to the victim or everyone else."

"No, Owens. I think you meant something else. Something that's capable of scathing my heart."

"No, no, no. You might've got me wrong. I-"

"It's alright, Owens. I get it. You're too stressful to think right. It's better if I leave you alone for sometime."

"No, it's not like that, Hardy. I like it in your presence."

Hardy began to leave, "You've grown dislike for the police, Owens. I can understand why and you're not to be blamed. Lets stop it right there."

Owens felt a bit bad to have said what he said as Hardy leaving his room made him sad. What made him even sadder later was that it was the last time Hardy spoke to him well.

The next day, the police learnt that among the eight lady suspects, only one was not at home and the others were pretty low level workers and they didn't show any signs of being suddenly rich. The one woman was Clara Bodholm. Davis' bank account was an empty one, so they presumed Clara was behind the whole operation as she had left her home and she might be the one who met Chuck that particular night.

When they tightened their grip with their investigation on Clara, things such as Bodholm not leaving the city on the said day, Clara accompanying him the previous day were leaked. Finally, it was found that the transactions from Davis' account was all made by Chuck at various places. So, it was finally assumed that Bodholm might be the killer and became the prime suspect.

As there was no response from them when the police called the telephone in the private island, they had to send a team over there to learn what happened. With the help of the local navy, they arranged a boat to get to Owens' island with a couple missions - arrest Bodholm and Clara, retrieve Owens' guests safely back to the city. It was on Owens' request that they planned to drop the guests right where they started off their journey. Owens felt sunshine again as he was now free from the clutches of the police though he was secretly under their monitoring. Sad thing was that he hadn't had the chance to bid goodbye to Hardy. It became as if he never existed in his life.

When the day of their return arrived, Owens got to his previous beach house which he had sold anyway very early. The new owner, out of respect, let him wait there. He got to see the sunrise from there and to him, the sun had never shone on him as brightly as that before. Not once did Owens feel so hopeful as he did now, fantasizing his reunion with Marcella and his imminent marriage to her. He even wondered how was he going to explain it to Olenka, the biggest hurdle in his life ahead. He knew she would understand but he was afraid what she would do after realising Marcella's financial background.

But as he had quoted to himself many times the past few days, he said to himself once again, "Nothing matters anymore."

A couple hours had passed and when he recovered consciousness, Lawrence found himself lying on the floor in a different place. It took him minutes to be freed from the blur of his vision after which he realised he was in the same wine cellar but beside the couch in front of the shelves decorated with wine bottles of various kinds. He forced himself up to find out how he got there. The first thing he noticed was the dampness he felt in his right hand and found it was drenched in blood. He sensed no pain or wounds in his hand and so he looked around to see where the blood came from. But what he saw shook him beyond words. Sam was lying on the floor dead, soaking in a pool of his own blood, with a part of his face collapsed beyond recognition.

Immediately, he heard the voice in his head *He deserved it, doesn't he, Laurie?* Initially paying no heed to the words, he searched for clues to what actually happened. There was a thick wooden cane with bloodstain on the floor, right where he was lying a minute ago. It was surprise on top of surprise for Lawrence as he guessed it could have been from that cane he got his hand blood-drenched.

He wondered if it was himself who killed Sam as there were no clues for anyone else to have appeared at the scene. He even wondered if he actually passed out or not. The fear that now haunted him was that if not mentally, was he physically the reason for Sam's demise? Has the monster inside him finally taken control himself? Did he actually beat Sam to death out of rage? But sadly, he remembered none of it, if any of it had actually happened. He wasn't sure what was he going to do and just then, the biggest fear he ever faced arose. Was he really Mr. Hearts, the killer among them? He couldn't answer this too for he also didn't remember anything such as killing Henderson.

Standing there beside a corpse and a pool of blood wasn't particularly pleasing for him; he felt an irresistible impulse to leave the place as he thought it wasn't brilliant or safe to stay there any further. Carefully, he exited the cellar, without getting blood on his shoe soles. He climbed out of the manhole, feeling guilty all the while he did so. He closed the manhole behind him, sorrowfully, as it felt like sealing Sam's coffin himself after the tragedy of his death. He tiptoed to the restroom, making sure on the way that no one was watching. Unable to control himself, he even broke tears when he washed his bloody hands and the wound on the side of his forehead, deeply disturbed by the fact that he was responsible for Sam's death.

Though it was a relief for him to get back to his bed without anybody noticing him, it also made him realise that when he left his

bed, Sam was lying in his bed awake and now he had gone asleep forever but his bed was empty. Guiltiness invaded his heart, causing great pain to him mentally. He couldn't keep his mind from thinking about it and it was only getting worse with time like an uncleaned wound. He kept weeping over it, wetting the pillow with his tears. The fact that he killed a man while he was unconscious prevented him to fall asleep but the concussion he sustained from Sam's blow to his head caused him severe headache that required him to take some rest. It was an hour of mental torture he suffered amidst which he finally passed out as his thoughts gradually subsided.

When he recovered consciousness, he saw Fred looking directly at him, standing beside his bed.

"You alright?" he asked which echoed through Lawrence's head. He gasped in pain as he felt like his head was put in a vice. He pulled himself to get up from the bed and it required a lot of energy from him just to do that.

"Lawrence. I asked you if you are alright," Fred said looking into his eyes.

"Uh... yeah. I guess so."

"But you look like you're in pain."

"Oh, it's nothing," Lawrence disturbed his hair with his hand, secretly covering the wound on his forehead with the hair. "A mild headache is all. Why do you seem so caring all of a sudden?"

"Caring?" Fred scoffed. "I came to wake you up, lazy head. Things are beginning to go south again."

"The heck you mean?" Lawrence asked, rubbing his eyes, while sweating inside, wondering if it was about Sam.

"Sam's missing. Just after he claimed the killer was after him. One hell of a coincidence, huh?"

"Oh, god!" Lawrence tried his best to look shocked. "How? What exactly happened?"

"Nothing special with the small details. Sam's bed was empty and everybody's gone searching for him."

Suddenly, Fred paused, gaining Lawrence attention; he even felt the urge to ask him why he stopped.

But Fred continued, "Except you." That was one of the few moments Lawrence's face displayed horror, he feared what might

en next. "That too is one hell of a coincidence, isn't it?" Fred asked in a deliberately serious tone. Gathering courage in himself, he said in a rather weak tone, "Is this a joke?"

"Do you think it is?" Fred asked still being serious, staring into his eyes. Lawrence couldn't look away, thinking it would make him look guilty. He just hoped Fred would stop staring and it wasn't happening either. As the intensity rose to unbearable amounts, Marcella said loudly as she came downstairs, "I thought you guys were straight."

"Ah, you ruined it," Fred turned to her and yelled. "I almost had him. Just look at his face," he laughed as he succeeded in scaring Lawrence. Lawrence was in fact feeling like he could breathe again, now that he realised it was only a sleazy little game by Fred. He was so relieved only he couldn't show it in his face.

"What? Are you playing games? Didn't you understand the seriousness of this matter?" Marcella questioned Fred.

"I checked the backyard. No signs of him," Fred yelled back to show he wasn't all careless. That shut her mouth however. But Fred continued, "So, why have you come down here?"

"It's your dear friend, Bodholm. He's escaped. And Sam, preordained as the next target, goes missing simultaneously. Coincidence is not the word for this, I think."

There were now enough reasons for them to accuse Bodholm as Mr. Hearts but the problem was his absence. It was the classic murderer-on-the-loose situation now and henceforth they had to spend every minute cautiously.

What they found in the storeroom in the morning was a collapsed rack, spilled tin food and containers. The plastic container seal with which Lambard bound Bodholm's hands to a rack was there on the floor in the undone manner. It was more than enough proof to assume Bodholm escaped from his bounds somehow but how he escaped the storeroom was a bit of a mystery.

The door remained locked and the key was with Lambard the whole night - when he checked both before he went to sleep and in the morning - it was in the drawer of the table beside his bed, right where Fred kept it. Fred did his job right. Might he be arrogant, lazy or frequently hysterical but one thing about Lambard everyone could agree with was that he would never have let Bodholm out of the storeroom even if it had been a life or death situation for him. There were no other exits for the storeroom. So, the only possible way Bodholm got out of there was probably through the window

which was always kept open. But the problem with that was that even if he got out of the window, he had to suffer at least a twenty feet fall to the ground. Naturally, it sounded like a crazy idea. If he escaped the place to live peacefully, why should he die trying?

Eventually, it was guessed that he probably had help. Then came another theory about his escape - the helper was Samwell! Which they believed might explain his absence. The previous night, when Lambard locked the storeroom, Sam was there which proved that he knew the key was with Lambard. He might have unlocked the storeroom door and locked it later to make it look like it was never opened. Then again, there were still questions as to why Sam had to do all of this and where had he gone? What happened to him? Where is Bodholm? The only one who knew answers to all these questions, as they thought, was Bodholm.

But what he actually knew was...

Hours had passed after Lambard left him locked in the storeroom and Bodholm hadn't touched the food he was given. Rather, he was focused very much on the window, hoping he would get to see the full moon. Were he lucky or was it just a coincidence, a bright full moon appeared in the sky which he could see through the window in the cloudy night. It brought him great happiness nothing ever brought him, he felt like he attained the purpose of his life just by seeing it. The silver moon light shone on his face through the window brightly; it felt like freedom though he was still in bounds.

Suddenly, he heard a mild thud at the door that got his attention at once. He could even hear the jiggling of keys and the clacking of the door lock. He was now sure there was someone out of there, someone trying to open the door. It felt crazy for him to think it was Lambard but he was sure Lambard wouldn't trust anyone with the keys. The door opened and someone entered silently holding something long and slender like a stick vertically. Bodholm feared who it might be as the person wasn't visible in the dark until he stepped into the shaft of moonlight through the window. The person was covering himself in a blanket, so the face and the clothing weren't visible but by the looks and the way of walking, Bodholm could only say it was a man. And he knew the blanket too as he was the one to order the very model to fashion all the beds alike. That gave him away that it was one of them but just didn't know who it was.

Another terrific thing he noticed in the momentary duration the man crossed the shaft was that he wasn't holding any stick, it was Lambard's rifle! And before Bodholm could ask him who he was, he

walked past him and placed the rifle on top of the nearby rack. Then, without even looking at Bodholm or replying to his questions, the man exited the room, locking it behind him. Perplexed by what he saw, Bodholm even wondered if what he saw was actually real as he sensed no point in the man's actions.

But the way he saw it, it was an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and he chose not to miss it. After a considerable amount of time in which he assumed that the man would have gone far, he moved his legs over the floor to the rack, wrapped them around one of its iron legs and with all his might, he twirled his legs to bring down the rack. His first try was a painful failure, the iron went hard on his ankles. The next try, he managed to pull the whole rack down, scattering all the packages and containers arranged in it. It didn't cause much sound as he calculatedly let it fall on the wooden stool in the range of its fall, that helped in reducing the sound of the fall. However, the stool ended up losing two of its legs. Bodholm, with his legs, browsed through the spillage, hoping to find something, anything that could help him break his bounds and grab the rifle which was now among the spillage. He too understood that the rifle was the leverage Lambard had over anyone else and that just made him more dangerous than ever and that was why he wanted the rifle for himself.

All he managed to get was a butter knife but he knew he was more than lucky to have got it at least. He carefully brought it close to his head, he was now lying on the floor on the side of his face. Using his tongue, he pulled the knife close enough to grab it between his teeth. He then lifted his head, firmly holding the knife with his teeth, thereby bringing it closer to his hands. Once it landed in his hands, he took a deep breath that he had passed the hard and awkward part. Expectedly, it required minutes of sawing to unbind his hands.

When he was finally free, he thanked the full moon as he considered it a good omen. He threw the rifle out of the window carefully. He grabbed as many breads and buns as he could and filled his pockets to the fullest. There was a thin drain pipe laid on the outer side of the wall not feet away from the window. Bodholm hoped he would be able to use it to slide down, making his travel downwards slower and safer. But for that he had to make a jump out of the window to get hold of the pipe. With nothing but the hope he had mustered in himself, he proceeded to make the jump. Though he wasn't able to reach as far as he thought he would, he managed to get hold of the pipe with his long right hand. He was genuinely thankful for god as finally, the longness of his hand was useful to him. But the sliding journey was too swift and wasn't

smooth at all with the fixtures and the nail heads laid to fix the pipe to the wall injuring his hand as he slid down. At some point, he couldn't bear the pain it caused and involuntarily he let go of the pipe with few feet left to slide through, resulting in a harsh landing.

Again, it was his legs that sustained damage, this time due to the impact of the fall. His left ankle was now seriously injured that he had to limp instead of walking. He limped into the woods, holding the rifle in his hand, thus establishing the classic situation.

After finding Bodholm's absence in the storeroom, Lambard was both infuriated and scared but whenever he was angry, he wouldn't let any other emotions take him over. Until his anger was sated, nothing else would matter to him. As an immediate reflex after he found out Bodholm's escape, he went looking around the nearby rooms in search of Bodholm until he reached the dining hall when he realised it was useless to search for him unless everyone cooperated with him. More than once, Lambard learnt that no one there would act together and cooperation was the last thing one could find among these people. Moreover, he didn't also want anyone to accompany him to pursue Bodholm as he was now his target and he had decided to finish him once and for all, no matter what.

He walked close to the dining table, rested himself on a chair to think what he should do now. His eyes were fixed on the chandelier as he plunged deep into his thoughts. Finally, he succeeded in convincing himself to use his rifle, simultaneously developing the exact words he would have to say the police after they got out of the island to explain to them that how big a threat was Bodholm and that he was a cold-blooded murderer. He believed Bodholm had killed Sam and to avenge him and all the terrible things Bodholm did to him, he was going to kill Bodholm himself. Before he went downstairs, he took a meat knife from the kitchen with him.

In the meantime, everyone was being informed about Bodholm's escape by Marcella and she hesitated to do so when she approached Olenska who roamed about the bedrooms by herself in her wheelchair, lamenting Sam's disappearance in murmurs. There was no point in her doing as she was too worried to think right. She was still hoping she would find him in one of the rooms and she so badly wanted to apologize to him. Marcella realised Olenska was doing it herself because she wouldn't let her emotions out of her in front of others. Yet, she decided not to inform her about Bodholm and left the place.

She then got to meet Lawrence again, this time he was alone in his bed. She was mildly surprised to see him at the very same place on the bed she saw him earlier, from which she guessed he hadn't

yet left his bed. She approached him with slow steps. Though, it made him aware of her presence.

"Haven't you combed your hair? I've never seen you with unkempt hair," she asked him seemingly out of care.

"It's nothing. Just a mild headache. Nothing to worry about," Lawrence tried to get her out of the matter.

But Marcella wasn't easily convincible. She bent over to him a little, grabbed his upper arm, looked into his eyes and said, "Whatever happened, you know you are free to tell me. I'm not gonna judge you. I ask you to be open with me."

If anyone had asked him the same question, Lawrence would have replied them harshly such as *Why do you care?* or *Why should I be open with you?* or something even harsher as, for a long period of time in his life, he was almost alone with no one to talk to or even around him. He actually liked it, he thought only through loneliness can anyone attain happiness. Loneliness also created an illusion that he was better than everyone else. But this time, he didn't want to that. He wanted just once to experience being a family.

"Have you ever felt so guilty for something you did that you spend hours worrying about it and then, suddenly, out of nowhere, for no real reason, you find the guilt in you has completely vanished, leaving no trace of its existence? That's how I feel right now," Lawrence let it out from his heart.

"I have never felt being so guilty. If it were gonna make me feel guilty, I wouldn't have done it in the first place," Marcella said calmly. Lawrence just nodded as the conversation was now something they didn't expect or even liked the way it went.

"If you'll excuse me," Lawrence got out of his bed finally just to get away from her for a moment. She didn't hurdle him either.

The blow to his head seemed to have caused him a concussion as a result of which he suffered untimely dizziness and nausea. He even skipped breakfast, had nothing more than a glass of water the whole morning. Everyone finally assembled in the hall to have answers for their numerous questions with by far, no clues about Sam's disappearance.

"I'll bring in my rifle. That's something he lacks," Lambard made his say. "I don't say this to you hoping at least one of you might pay enough attention to my words but for the sake of it. I'm not compelling or even asking anyone to spend your precious time and soul to work towards cooperation."

Saying so, he headed for the backyard when Benjamin stopped him.

"I agree with you, Mr. Lambard. No matter what. Yet, I have something to add on this matter," he said hesitantly but drew everyone's attention at once. "If one among us isn't the killer, then probably I'm the last person here seen by Sam."

"So, you've taken the liberty of assuming Sam's dead?" Olenska asked which felt like she had at last spoken after an age. Olenska actually knew Sam didn't return to his bed after Benjamin and Fred went to their beds. But she didn't want to express her knowledge before them yet.

"I... It just doesn't make sense for me to think otherwise but let me put forth what happened last night. I and Fred were searching for the supposed hidden wine cellar. We met Bodholm to ask about it. Fred brought me the keys to the storeroom."

"You stole it from me?" Lambard's anger at Fred was sensible but Fred didn't reply.

"We got to know it was under the manhole beside the pool in the backyard from Bodholm. I got down into it while I'd asked Fred to keep watch for me. And when I got out with some bottles of my interests, I ran into Sam who was just coming out of the toilet. He asked me what I was doing, I told him everything. Then I left him to get to my bed with Fred. The last time I saw him, I think, he went for the manhole. I don't know what happened to him after that."

"You saw my rifle there?" Lambard was much invested in his own interest.

"That's it? You sure about that?" Olenska asked Benjamin, unintentionally inciting fear in Lawrence's heart who was afraid if she had seen him.

Benjamin replied genuinely, "I've told everything I know. I don't-," but was interrupted abruptly, not by Marcella this time but by the sound of a gunshot that echoed through the hall. It immediately struck fear into their hearts that they involuntarily sought to take cover except Olenska. She wasn't fast enough, nor was she very concerned about her life. At least, not as much as the others. The sound came from the backyard, no doubt, but they didn't see anyone there. For a minute or so, they waited for something unlikely to happen but nothing occurred.

Just when they decided to move from their uncomfortable postures, beneath their beds, they heard a voice that was distinct and clear enough for them to recognize as Bodholm's.

"You know who I am. I am holding Lambard's rifle in my hand. I shall not pull this trigger again if you listen to my simple instructions. I only want Lambard to come out. I want him to meet me at the wharf. Others stay indoors. If you wanna know what's happening, watch us through the west window in the dining hall."

He said nothing more, still, no one was ready to believe his words. But to all their surprise, Lambard strode towards the backyard.

"Don't be hasty, Mr. Lambard. You don't wanna lose your life for a goddamn wooden rifle," Benjamin advised him.

Lambard didn't stop but turned back and said, "It holds only two rounds in a clip. And he's already used one." Thus, he went to the backyard and disappeared from their sight. From the way he left, they sensed they had to get to the dining hall as quickly as they could if they didn't want to miss anything. They had to also bring Olenska upstairs which usually required a man force of two.

"Leave the chair, lad. Just bring me upstairs. I don't intend to stay there longer than the duration of the incident," Olenska said to Fred in her own way of using words which Marcella used to admire. She still admired secretly but that wasn't enough for her to not hate her. In fact, she hated Olenska just because she had no chance of mending the relationship with her.

It's was remarkably foggy in the woods, one couldn't distinguish a tree from a man. It was in such a condition, Lambard had to walk to reach the wharf. But Lambard didn't mind the trees, he just made sure no one was around him closely because he thought if he couldn't differentiate a tree from a man then the same must apply for Bodholm. Despite his over-the-top confidence, he took his steps forward carefully and cautiously. When he got close to the wharf, he sensed the fog was less denser at the spot and amidst it, he could see a man holding a rifle at him. it was undoubtedly Bodholm, so Lambard spoke up.

Were it anyone other than Lambard, their question would have probably been something like 'Where is Sam?', 'What did you do to Sam?' or 'Is Sam alive?' But his first question was, "How did you find my rifle?" and he strode fast towards him, with a hand in his pocket where he had hidden the knife.

"Slow down, Lambard. Remember who's holding the rifle," Bodholm warned.

"You remember who's rifle you're holding," Lambard replied in anger. By this time, everyone had gotten to that particular window in the dining hall, Fred held Olenska upright so that she could get a good look of the scenario.

"You leave me no other choice, Lambard," saying so, Bodholm raised the rifle, held it against his shoulder, gaining a good aim at Lambard's head. Only then, Lambard slowed down. There was now a distance not more than ten feet between them and they were facing each other like a brawl could spawn any minute.

"Why don't you put down the gun? Whatever you've got to say won't convince me to trust you wouldn't pull the trigger," Lambard said.

"The rifle is the only thing that can ensure my safety right now."

"There is something about your wife I know you're unaware of. It's a secret only I know," Lambard said in a confident tone.

"Don't you dare talk one more word about my wife."

"You know secrets are special, right? So is this. It might even change the way you see your wife."

"If it is your intention to provoke me, better think twice."

"That secret, my friend, is the only thing that can ensure my safety right now."

Bodholm now realised what his real intention was and didn't try to make things worse.

"All right. When are you gonna tell me this secret?"

"Why did you bring me here? And how the hell did you escape?"

"Look at my face, Lambard. Look at what I'm going to say and listen carefully. I don't give a damn about anything. My wife is dead and nothing can be done about that. Whatever story you're gonna cook up about her is not gonna matter anymore. You're now here, in front of me and your life is in my hands, literally. Not even the damn god can ensure your safety now. But one thing can. Doing exactly what I say. Now, kneel down."

Lambard didn't expect it but wasn't ready to do as he said.

"Now I can say your legs are the only things that can ensure your safety," Bodholm insisted him indirectly. Lambard didn't move, not at all interested to give in.

"Is he gonna shoot him?" Marcella asked in awe and curiosity.

"Not until they discontinue the talking," Olenska said, not as a reply to Marcella but to explain the situation to everyone.

"The quicker you do this, the better are the chances of your survival," Bodholm said clearly, implying he wasn't going to wait. "I've made it easy for you. There is no one around to give you the you-are-so-evil look."

Lambard momentarily considered using the knife with the intent of finishing the rivalry between them even if it was going to result in bloodshed. But then, he sensed he wasn't close enough to make it. Left with no other choices, Lambard gave up and slowly knelt down, swearing him inside.

"What's he doing?" Fred asked in surprise.

"I think we've seen something similar before," Olenska said, recalling Bodholm's confession.

"What do you want me to say?" Lambard asked impatiently.

"All those crimes you've ever done. Confess them before me."

"What do you think you'll possibly gain from that?"

"The killer. It was you. You murdered Henderson."

Lambard was shaken by those words, it was even visible in his usually expressionless face.

As they both were quite distant from the mansion, Lawrence couldn't focus on them well with his eyes as it only worsened his headache. So, he took off his eyes from them, withdrew from the window, not minding if he might miss something. Only Marcella noticed him but she too didn't wish to miss anything. He rested on a chair around the dining table and stretched himself. His headache was unapologetically rude to him, his concussion seemed to have worsened over time that he couldn't think of anything else.

He restlessly let his eyes roam about the table unsure of what to do to with his pain. He didn't realise what he saw at first, it took him minutes to actually get it. The tiny elf figurines around the central chandelier. There were ten of them when he first saw but now

there were only six. Unable to interpret what it meant, he spent a couple minutes thinking over it while the others were very much interested in the face-off between Lambard and Bodholm, reading their intentions and every move.

Bodholm asked Lambard after a couple dialogue exchanges, "Got them with you now?" .

"Yes. In my pocket," he replied calmly.

"Slowly, reach into your pocket. Take 'em out and toss them to me. And remember to do it real slow."

Lambard put his hand into his pocket just as he said, took out few tiny pieces of glass and tossed it over to Bodholm. Bodholm slowly bent over, slightly lowering the rifle to take a look at the glass pieces. At once, Bodholm recognized he had indeed been talking to the very killer they were all worried about.

"What is he doing?" Benjamin asked unable to understand what was happening.

"All I can see is, Bodholm's very unwise to weaken his defense," Olenska replied.

Lambard was in the knelt-down position which he saw as a challenge to charge at Bodholm with the knife. As for a fraction of second, Bodholm had lowered his rifle, Lambard considered he might not get another chance and finally decided to use it. Least expected by Bodholm, Lambard pulled out the very meat cleaver Bodholm once stuck against Lambard's neck from the back of his belt where he had kept the knife tucked in. He charged at him, holding the knife in the edge-in position with no intent other than to end things with a bloodshed. But Bodholm was quick enough to parry his charge with the rifle. Lambard slipped a bit in the watery floor of the wharf and his charge was an utter failure.

Lambard's move shocked everyone in the dining hall too as they weren't aware of the knife he had hidden in his pants. And when they realised it was a failure for Lambard, they knew what was going to happen.

"God, he's dead!" Olenska exclaimed, gaining Lawrence's attention, who came back to the watchers-at-the-window to try his best to see what was going on.

"Mr. Lambard's killed himself," Benjamin said in a frightened tone.

"Somebody go! Stop Bodholm!" Olenska yelled in horror, yet no one seemed to move. "At least let's shout to him." Marcella called out Bodholm from there itself though they were very doubtful if he could hear. "Fine, I'll go," Lawrence stood up from the chair, unable to resist the ignorance of others. But when he climbed downstairs, he didn't show hastiness. If he tried to run down the stairs swiftly, every time he took a step, he felt a bump in his head which inflicted him serious pain.

Lambard, however, balanced himself to not fall on the floor with his hand. He lifted his head to look at Bodholm in his eyes to show him that he still was not ready to die in his hands. It was very obvious for everyone Lambard was done, all thanks to his own arrogance and stupidity, now that Bodholm had a very good aim at his head and was only shy of pulling the trigger.

The seemingly never ending seconds only tended to slow down the time for everyone. "What is he waiting for?" Olenska asked with a weird surprise as Bodholm still hadn't pulled the trigger. After all the kills he had done in the past, his hands now trembled to pull the trigger. Though he knew it was the safest move, he couldn't do it, knowing it would be no better than a disgrace to his late wife. Lambard exploited this weakness in his favour.

He charged at him again but this time he was quick enough to disturb his aim by grabbing the rifle while simultaneously swinging the knife at his neck from which Bodholm escaped marginally. Bodholm was bigger than him so Lambard had to rely on his intelligence and tricks rather than brute strength. Bodholm grabbed Lambard's nape with his other hand and tried to pull him away to relieve his hold on the rifle. But Lambard cut his arm a bit below his wrist. Though Bodholm could tolerate the pain and not give in, he let go of the rifle because where he got cut, it was an unusually dangerous place to get cut. The knife got deeper than one would think, cutting open the ulnar artery. It resulted in immediate bleeding, causing him to lose blood profusely and that was why he let the rifle from his hand.

He shoved away Lambard, untied the cloth he had tied around the wound on his ankle which he sustained from bringing down the rack the previous night. He tied it tightly over the cut to stop the blood loss. Now that the rifle was in his hands, Lambard had the upper hand over Bodholm.

"About your wife. It isn't a secret, dog. 'Cause everyone knows who she is," it was obvious Lambard tried to trigger him. Even

Bodholm got the picture of what his next words were going to be and he begged his ears to not hear him.

"A double-dealing dirty slut," Lambard said with pride in a jubilant manner. Bodholm forced himself to tolerate it as he realised Lambard was only trying to make him anger because he wanted to show it was a reasonable murder which would require his own actions, blinded by anger against him.

"I pity for you, Lambard," Bodholm said to make himself feel better. "You've got to spend long days ahead in this scumhole. I'm lucky I haven't got any more than a few seconds."

Without waiting, Lambard pulled the trigger to the shock and despair of everyone. It was at last only Bodholm who kept his word and was indeed truthful. Afraid it was too late, Lawrence began to stride across the path to the entrance as he heard the gunshot. It was heartbreaking for him to think that now because of him, two lives were lost. He actually began to run, his headache didn't matter at all.

For a moment, Olenska and everyone at the window lost their hope. Someone whom they actually saw as the murderer was found to hesitate to kill the man he disliked the most. They felt like being alive again after years of oblivion when they saw Bodholm was still alive. When they saw him jolt as Lambard shot him, they thought he was indeed killed. But the jolt was actually an attempt to escape the bullet. He managed to get his head out of his aim but got shot close to his left shoulder, the clavicle bone must have been shattered.

He then held Lambard's hand to prevent him cut his throat with the knife. It was at the moment Lawrence entered into the scene, a minute since the gunshot. He felt as merry as a butterfly jostling out of a cocoon to see Bodholm alive. He tried to pull Lambard out of there by grabbing him with both his arms around his chest from his back.

"Leave it, Lambard. It's alright. Let it go. It's done. You done well," he tried to talk him out of it but Lambard was still keen on Bodholm's throat, only bloodshed could satisfy. He shoved Lawrence away and succeeded in untying the cloth on Bodholm's wound with his other hand. He scraped the wound with his fingernail causing distress to him. Bodholm still hadn't recovered from the shock caused by the gunshot which was why he couldn't take out Lambard with his strength. Also he couldn't move his left arm because of the pain in his shoulder and the fear that he might worsen the wound.

Lambard's act really infuriated Lawrence along with the gnawing headache. He now grabbed Lambard firmly, Lambard could feel the difference in his grip, with force pulled him out of there and when Lambard didn't give in, he grabbed his neck with the same forceful grip and shoved him away.

"You now do as I say! Drop the damn knife and get back to the mansion!" Lawrence yelled at the top of his voice, very untypical of him that he himself sensed the difference in the cadence of his voice. For a second, he thought he sounded like the voice inside of his head.

"You don't know what he said," Lambard tried to take advantage on the fact that no one was around during the conversation between them. His anger that he couldn't finish Bodholm off was evident from his wide open eyes.

"It is past now. Now, give me the knife and get in," Lawrence extended his hand to him.

"No," Lambard was actually obsessed with murdering him. "Not until I've seen more blood." Saying so, he walked towards Bodholm who was lying on the ground whimpering in pain.

"You're not doing that. You'd then show everyone you are the killer."

"I won't kill him. I just want to bloody this knife more."

"You're not gonna do that," Lawrence was firm in his decision.

"Now what is it with these guys? They don't seem to have animosity," Olenska was already getting tiresome.

"Bodholm isn't holding the gun anymore. Why don't we get down there?" Marcella asked others.

"I'm not moving an inch," Olenska replied at once. "I don't want to miss anything."

"I asked only those who can take care of themselves," Marcella indirectly tried to offend her but she wasn't completely aware of whom she was messing with.

"Please don't make me feel bad for not being born a male. 'Cause if I were, the punch I land on your face wouldn't feel like a pat from an eighty year old dame," Olenska displayed a bit of her roasting skills.

Before Marcella could speak, Olenska continued to speak, successfully interrupting the master interrupter, "Lets not lay waste to

our time debating one another. We already have too much to care about." That did exactly what she wanted: shut up Marcella, have a little revenge on her, bestow everyone with an advice and make everyone disagree with Marcella while gathering their attention on the ongoing ruckus.

Lambard wasn't ready to listen to his words. Lawrence had to hold him by embracing him tightly. It was not his mistake to not imagine the extent to which Lambard was capable of going. He didn't even hesitate to use the knife against Lawrence, he stuck it to his neck to release him. That inadvertently provoked his anger. He landed a blow in his abdomen with his elbow. While it made Lambard loosen his grip, he snatched the knife from his hand during his momentary loss of concentration.

Just as he gained back his attention, Lawrence landed a blow on his face with his fist. Lambard was stunned by it so much that it took him a few seconds to realise he was punched. His cheek turned red and thickened.

"These men are driving me crazy. Just not the way I want them to," Olenska was much frustrated by Lawrence's action not because she cared for Lambard's cheek but the awful situation Lambard had brought him in. "Bring me to my chair, lad. There's nothing more to miss," she said to Fred who was holding her upright all the while. "Don't worry, kid. I'll thank you once you get me there."

"Don't want another apple cheek, do you?" Lawrence asked Lambard who grunted as he gathered the strength in his legs to stand firmly. Slowly, Lambard walked towards the mansion, grabbing his rifle, without breaking eye contact with him. Only then, Lawrence lowered his fists.

When he saw Bodholm forcing himself to stand on his feet, Lawrence rushed to give him a hand. It was when he saw something glittering on the ground and a second later, the glow vanished. Resting Bodholm's arm on his shoulder, Lawrence lifted him up and while he did so, he caught a good look at the shimmering tiny piece of glass - they were two of the glass figurines from the dining table.

Lawrence naturally began to overthink. There were ten figurines at first; weird coincidence was that there were ten of them initially in the mansion if Clara was included. He related the figurines with the guests just like Lambard did earlier and found something strange. As he counted, if Clara, Henderson and Sam were three of the figurines, who was the missing fourth?

Considering the fact that it was Lambard who was ready to kill Bodholm, it felt right for him that the fourth piece was Bodholm. That would ultimately mean that the killer was Lambard; the way he was so obsessed in killing Bodholm was evident of that.

"Ease your hold, Lawrence," Bodholm said panting for breath. "It was nice of you to come here for me. I'm thankful for that. But I've got something to say about the Mr. Hearts. Those elf statuettes..."

"Lambard's the killer," Lawrence said immediately even before Bodholm could finish. Bodholm looked at him with a deeply thoughtful eyes and smiled at him.

"My original plan was to report confession from all of you. Plans change. I think now I'm done, Lawrence," the usual magnificence in Bodholm's voice had disappeared and he looked too weak. "You spread to them what you think is truth. It'll all be over soon."

"Lambard is the killer, right? You don't think so?"

"Trust is the key to the answer, Lawrence. Everyone of you should trust one another. Only then you can find the truth."

"What about you?"

"I have to find time for repentance. I can't get back to the city. All these years I've laid waste to everyone around me and to myself. And now I have got no time left. Leave me be, Lawrence. I'll stay away from everyone."

"Why? You're wounded severely. Someone must tend to it. Moreover, I can't convince them all by myself."

"I've told you everything I can. All that's left is handling things yourself."

"Are you trying to escape the law?"

"I can never get this time again if I get to the city. Like I said, I've got nothing more that I wish to say," Bodholm extended his arm to shake hands with him. Lawrence shook hands without protest. Bodholm nodded once at him and walked slowly towards the woods.

"Hey, wait a minute," Lawrence stopped him. "What do you think could have happened to Sam?" he asked just to find what Bodholm knew of that matter.

"What do you mean? What's with him?" Bodholm asked turni-

ng back.

"So, you don't know?"

Bodholm didn't respond to it, waiting for Lawrence to explain what happened to him.

"Sam's lost. He's gone missing."

"Well, he's the fourth elf then," Bodholm said and without thinking much about it, he took the two elf figurines with him and disappeared into the trees. Lawrence's headache lingered however, he so badly wanted to get rid of it. He grabbed the meat cleaver on the ground and walked to the entrance of the mansion where he saw Marcella.

"Where's Lambard?" he asked her.

"It's nothing. He's gone with Ben to the wine cellar to vault his rifle," Marcella said rapidly. "What about Bodholm? Where is he?"

For Lawrence, her questions weren't audible. Or it could be said that he couldn't pay enough attention to those questions because what he just heard, blew his mind off. Lambard and Ben were about to find Sam was dead. Thoughts raced through his mind again about what would happen if there were a single clue he had left behind. He would be done for sure. He might actually be good at hiding the truth but the same couldn't be said for him lying to others in their face. He had lied about things that he convinced himself to be true but there was no way he could convince himself that Sam wasn't dead.

"I asked you a question, Mr. Lawrence. Two, to be precise," Marcella asked as Lawrence didn't reply.

"He uh... he left. He wants some time for repentance."

"The hell? What did he say about Sam, anyway?" Marcella was able to see Lawrence looking a bit tensed.

"He doesn't know. He left. He wants to stay away from everyone," Lawrence managed to not stammer.

"And you believed him? I thought you are the only man here who's not dumb."

"We decoded Lambard's the killer. You remember the glass elves around the chandelier in the dining table? A few of them is missing. Lambard had been taking them one by one with him whenever someone here dies. And you know what I think about Bodholm's rage on him? He probably killed Clara. 'Cause there

were ten elves at first and with Clara we were ten people. He even made on this before, I don't know if you remember. Right now, I want your support on this. Lambard's the killer. I want you to believe it and help me make everyone believe," Lawrence spilled out words twice as rapid as Marcella.

"Okay, alright. Take it easy. You can tell me slowly and clearly, okay? Just... so what about this 'elves'? Where is it now?"

That was a huge speed bump for the racing thoughts in his mind but it just led to a new path, a series of new questions. Bodholm took away the two elves on the ground and why would he do that? Why exactly did he want to stay away from everyone of them? Did he just want Lawrence to spread the news that Lambard was the killer only to get himself out of the picture? And he did all this to hide something? Something such as he himself was the real killer from the very beginning just like everyone thought? Now would he strike again? And why the hell did he himself not realise this when Bodholm walked into the woods?

Meanwhile, a bigger question arose in Marcella's mind. She asked him, "If Lambard's the one, did we just let Ben to his doom?"

That put him back on his first path - what chaos might Sam's demise bring about. "What shall I do now?" he asked himself loud enough for Marcella to hear.

"I don't know. Warn him or something," Marcella sounded like she had got panicked by the situation. Just as Lawrence got into the hall, where Fred was resting Olenska on her chair, Benjamin came back from the backyard and yelled, "Sam's dead!" Lawrence's initial response was a grunt in anger as he felt indeliberately infuriated by Benjamin just because he found out about Sam. Luckily, he was not carried over by his anger and asked him, "Where's Lambard?"

"He needs help. He's trying to get him out," Benjamin said hastily and signalled Fred to get over there. Olenska noticed it and said, "It was your doing, wasn't it, old Ben?" Least expected by anyone, Olenska didn't look a bit distressed on hearing about it. The real reason behind it was that Olenska had already convinced about it from what she saw the previous night. Lawrence got cautious as he thought she probably saw him too. He decided to stay out of her sight for a moment, so he got to the back of Fred who was behind her.

"What are you talking about, Lady?" Benjamin asked softly.

"I saw you last night. I saw you spend several minutes in the backyard. Did he not, lad?" she asked Fred who just looked surp-

rised. "Yes. This lad Fredrick was there too. Hiding in the shadow, watching after Ben. You were followed by Sam for reasons I do not know. Minutes as lengthy as hours passed and only you came back. Sam never returned to his bed. I think you might still have something to add."

"I've explained everything. There's nothing more I know that you already didn't know," Benjamin never seemed more genuine.

"Can we first get Sam out and then talk?" Fred asked which sounded more reasonable to everyone. Olenska calmed down for her own good. Fred went to the tiny tool room beside the power room in the backyard to grab a rope. Lawrence excused himself to leave for the toilet. His headache was still cruel to him that finally the voice inside him incited an unlikely suggestion while he was inside the toilet.

The white powder has stayed too long in your pocket, Laurie. Maybe it can ease your pain.

There was a time when Lawrence believed no one could convince him to take any form of drugs but his headache seemed to make impossible things happen. Lawrence chose to consume the cocaine he confiscated from Fred. Spreading some on his arm, he snorted it hoping it would help.

Fred got down the manhole to assist Lambard. He tied one end of the rope around Sam's waist while letting Benjamin who was standing outside, govern the other end. By the time Fred signalled Benjamin to pull him out, Lawrence had joined him to share Benjamin's end of the rope. Marcella stood in the doorway of the hall, watching them because she was too reluctant to stay with Olenska alone. She could sense Olenska was whispering like she was talking to herself but she was way too far to make out the words.

On Fred's signal, Lawrence and Benjamin pulled Sam's corpse out while Fred and Lambard prevented it from suffering any damage from the ladder steps or the loosening of the rope. His corpse was brought inside the hall to let Olenska take a look at him. The sad truth was that Olenska was the only one Sam could refer to as his living relative. She was his lawful guardian too. It was one of the rare moments when Olenska was at her weakest mentally. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't help but weep in front of everyone despite the lesson she gave Marcella about not to express herself very easily and openly. Marcella genuinely felt bad watching her cry like that as she knew it was very untypical of Olenska which made her realise how much it would have hurt her. She didn't like

the idea of burying Sam in the island but probably that was the only solution so she had to give in to it.

The voice kept nagging Lawrence when he saw Olenska cry, *Don't do that, Laurie. It will ruin you. It will ruin everything you did.* But Lawrence sought not to pay attention to its words and succeeded in that matter.

He looked up at Olenska and said, "We know Sam used to be afraid always, living in a world of fears, looking at the worst possible outcome in every single action of him. But it is also true that at the time of his death, shortly after he claimed to hear about him being the next target, he gathered all his courage in him. He fought the fears that plagued him and his life. He grew brave." He said it though he was aware that she saw him the previous night out of his guilt but luckily Fred intervened, averting her attention from Lawrence.

"I can attest to that," Fred said without looking at Olenska in her eyes. "The last time I saw him, he wasn't looking afraid at all, not even close. He spoke boldly to Benjamin despite the fact that he nearly freaked him out by getting out of the manhole from the ground and all. Hell, even I would've been scared if someone just popped out of the ground late into the night in the dark. From what I saw, he died a brave death, not succumbing to his fears."

That felt really good for Olenska and everyone else too but the greatest thing about it was that she looked like she was truly convinced that Benjamin didn't kill him. Lawrence volunteered to dig the grave along with Fred next to Henderson's while others covered the corpse in fine clothes and readied a palanquin. He did so because he felt that if he invested his mind keenly on something, he couldn't sense the pain of the headache. However unlikely it seemed, the cocaine did help with his headache, though it wasn't the rightful remedy.

Till they were halfway to finishing the work, Lawrence felt no weakness at all. But as he hadn't had anything for breakfast other than a glass of water, he soon began to feel very dizzy and was about to faint. If it weren't for Fred, he would have collapsed right into the hole he was digging.

It didn't take more than two minutes for Fred to find out Lawrence snorted cocaine. Fine white crumbles of cocaine were seen at the orifice of his nostril. Fred stood as a crutch for Lawrence to lean on.

"What did you do?" he asked him pointing at the white powder

in his nostril both in anger and fear.

"It's nothing, Fred. It was the coke I got from you. Now I get it, Fred. Why it causes addiction."

"You didn't dispose them?"

"Don't think I'm gonna lend it back to you. Actually, you're welcome to share more with me if you've got any left. But believe me, Fred. I only used it for my headache. I only have to depend on it as long as my headache persists."

"Screw you, Lawrence. I thought you were respectable. And now are you really trying to right your action? If you really do so, feel free to expect a punch from my fist."

"At ease, soldier. I know what kind of consequences drug abuse can cause to oneself and his family, probably better than you. The positives are that I am a highly self aware person and I've got no family."

"Lawrence, we better get to work before they see us."

"Tell me, Fred. Didn't I truly hurt you when I snatched the dope from you?"

"I'm serious, Lawrence. We must finish it as early as possible. But yes, I could've killed you for that."

"What stopped you then?"

That was a question which touched Fred. He was with the same wonder as Lawrence. Not that he didn't want to regard the question but no answer crossed his mind initially.

"I don't know. If you really want something to come out of my mouth, I'd say lets drop this and get this going."

"This can wait, Fred. What you're about to say is much more important than digging a hole for a stranger."

"Stranger? If Sam's a 'stranger', then what good am I?"

"Now you've got it," Lawrence smiled. Fred obviously didn't get it, he was waiting for Lawrence to explain it.

"I've said it, Fred. You just have to wrack your brain to find it."

"Don't crap me with this destined-to-be-brothers or something."

"You see, I don't have such a thing as faint heart. Yet my first impression about you was out of sympathy. That's too untypical."

"Hey, let me ask you something," Fred looked terrorized all of a sudden. "I'm not asking this to hurt in anyway. I don't mean no offense, but... you are... like... do you... share the views of homos or something like that?"

"The heck you mean?" Lawrence looked angry and awkward.

"I told you I meant no offense!" Fred was worried if the thing he tried to prevent had happened.

"I thought you may have heard of the word 'friend'. But no, homo's the word, huh?" Lawrence scoffed. Fred found it pleasant when Lawrence said the word 'friend' but he also felt bad about his own action and Lawrence's response to it.

"I hoped at least you'd have the strength to say it when I couldn't," Lawrence continued, "God, how come you're gonna deal with girls in your life."

"I said I didn't mean to offend you. Didn't you hear?" Fred asked.

"Lets not talk one more word of it and get this done," Lawrence grabbed the shovel in his hands.

"Hey, can you handle it? You looked dizzy and all..."

"I can. I can. As long as I don't puke all over this hole."

Lawrence's original intent behind this whole conversation was to spend a few minutes without thinking any of the horrors he came across the past few days including the minutes he spent digging the grave for Sam. Though it turned about to end a bit underwhelming, it got set up to serve as a wholesome memory.

By the time they had completed the digging work, Lawrence felt like his back was about to break and his headache was back, worse than ever. Before the funeral began, Lawrence tried to organize himself by spending some time in the rest room - he felt every part of his body seeming to act on their own. He used the rest of the dope he had on him and it only had the effect of a grain of salt being dissolved in sea. It was only after he blew chunks, the headache finally seemed to subside for real.

Then, he attended to Sam's funeral with Benjamin reprising his role of the priest. By now, he was too hungry that he could a whole

goat and when the funeral was over, he rushed to the kitchen, keeping his mind clear of everything else.

Meanwhile in the hall, everyone filled the chairs around the table to have a talk about Sam. After asking about Lawrence's whereabouts a couple times, Olenska became all silent. Though everyone was primarily talking about Sam, she remained silent. They safeguarded the bloody cane they found in the cellar as it was the only clue in Sam's death. Moreover, they felt worried that Sam's death only reminded them of a certain phrase from the poem on the wooden board and that only scared them. Soon, Lawrence joined them, just after having some breads, only to hold his hunger. Only then, the real conversation began.

And Lambard began it gloriously with a question, "Where is Bodholm?"

Though Lawrence had his share of suspicions on Bodholm, he didn't want to let himself look like someone who had done the mistake of a lifetime. "He's gone. It's a done deal. We're never gonna see him again."

"Yeah we won't if he stabs us from the back," Lambard invoked an argument.

"Let's have a vote then."

"Votes don't prolong our death."

"A vote where each of us gets to say who among us we suspect to be the killer. I have a parchment in my hand. Here's the pen," Lawrence pulled out the pen from his pocket to display it before them, "I'm gonna split this paper into six bits and give one to each of you. I insist everyone of you to fill it with the name of the person you suspect the most. The one who gets the maximum number of votes gets locked for the rest of the time in the storeroom, well bounded."

"You're just telling that I must be bounded and locked in the storeroom literally. I disagree with this voting system," Lambard sounded very disappointed.

"So you confess you're the killer?" Lawrence tried to trap him with words this time.

"I mean everyone here hates me for what I am. No one here share my way of seeing things. Naturally, I'm gonna get the most votes and be kicked out."

"So have you got any better ideas? I'm truly willing to hear."

"I had this little thought roaming about in my mind. How does this killer, among us or not, successfully does everything he wants to and still manages to escape from us? The first answer I came up with was that maybe he wasn't working all alone. We all know no one other than Bodholm knows this island better. It's too obvious he's the one. He played that tape. We saw it. He knew about the verse on that board. We know it. He was awake the night Henderson was murdered. We have proof for it. He tried to kill me in front of all of you. We locked him up. And the very night he escapes, Sam is found dead in the very place I hid my rifle and he has the rifle. Why the hell does none of you see this? I mean, there can't be anything more that you need to accuse him. I almost had him today if you'd seen it through the window you would've known and look at who let him slip. The respectable attorney at court, Mr. Lawrence. It's clear he's the one who had been helping Bodholm all along and that's why he let him escape."

"The way I see it, it was you who was ready to kill Bodholm earlier today," Lawrence replied confidently, "It is my understanding that you said something to provoke him and it failed. Bodholm didn't kill you even when he had the chance. Which makes me feel bad to think that he would create a chance to kill us."

"He himself said he had killed before," the way Lambard looked at him didn't seem to be settling.

But Lawrence continued his say, "And the part where you got me of some wild accusations. Here's my reply to that. That tape we heard. Just imagine the possibility where another copy of it happens to exist in the wrong hands and if any of those accusations on anyone is true, how bad it'll turn out. Now look at me. An A-class attorney who has spent days with you in the very island where all the horrors are happening and knows all the specifics. I'm the best saviour you're fortuitously bestowed with. Can you imagine that if I were actually helping the killer, would I lack the knowledge of playing the game to my advantage by sucking all the money you have worked so hard to earn out of you like a bloody vampire? Believe me, I am capable of doing it. Just think of it, even if I'm distrustful and actually planning such things, you know what would be my most important priority? To keep you all alive! Losing one of you is like a hole pored at the bottom of my honeypot. Why would I do that?"

"Alright, Lawrence. We believe you. Better try not to imagine too much," Marcella said as she thought Lawrence had begun to go

off-road.

"You got anything to say?" Lawrence asked her while Lambard remained silent in return but she just stared at him without a single response. Lawrence understood from the staring that she just tried to pull him out of his situation.

"Let me ask you this one last time," Lambard said, "If there is anyone among you who share my point of view, this is your last chance to inform me."

This time Lambard was a bit lucky as Benjamin stepped up, "I do, Mr. Lambard. And I'm sorry I didn't say it earlier."

"That's too nice of you, brother," Lambard's tiny smile said it all, his painless pride and arrogance. He stared at everyone else for a second and turned to Benjamin, "Lets go." He strode towards the backyard, followed by Benjamin.

"First lets find a place to hide this gun," Lambard whispered to Benjamin on their way out. "We're not gonna strike Bodholm now. Walking out in the woods searching for him is nothing other than suicide. We have to wait till the sun goes down."

"Lets get these beds back to our rooms," Olenska's face looked unwell from all the crying. "With Sam gone, it's pointless that these stay here. I'm already beginning to feel like I'm living in a hostage camp."

"You don't think it's safer this way?" Marcella asked her to show she was more brilliant than her.

"I think maybe it's better if we do as she says," said Lawrence with some serious thought in his mind. "Yes. We may get to find the killer if we make it easy for him. Apparently."

"Whoa, hold up. If the killer's among us, whatever you're planning, it's going to be useless," Marcella spilled a fact.

"It's not a plan. It's a rule. It's actually not to find the killer but to prove if Lambard's the one."

"So say it."

"We're gonna get these beds back to our rooms," Lawrence said in a hushed down voice, yet with the energy of a political orator, "We're gonna stay there, in our rooms for the rest of our time here, comfortable with ourselves. Tonight, we're not gonna sleep. 'We', however, does not include the ones who don't want to see the next daylight. So, hereon, each of us must knock the door in a

unique way, just so we know who's outside without opening the door, as an inevitable remedy to the lack of looking glass in those doors. We must not repeat our knocking pattern. The pattern must be erratic. For instance, if three taps is my pattern, I must tap thrice, take my hands off the door and wait until you open. You, on the other hand, analyse the pattern, wait for a minute or two and must open the door only if the knocking isn't persistent. The point is, Lambard or Benjamin or even Bodholm for that matter, won't have a unique pattern and even if they had, they would repeat it within the interval of two minutes at least. Anyway, we get to know who's at the door one way or the other. All we gotta do is stick to the rules. No one should use the pattern of others at any instant. So, lets begin with Fred. Fred, what's gonna be your pattern?"

"Um... I was listening for the most part but...", Fred's poor attempt at hiding his carelessness failed unsurprisingly as Lawrence asked with frustration in the same hushed voice, "God! Be serious, Fred! We gotta finish this before Lambard and his gang return."

"Uh... okay, okay. Tap thrice, maybe?" Fred replied hesitantly. "Three taps, alright," Lawrence pointed at Marcella with both his index fingers.

Displeased by Lawrence's untimely enthusiasm, Marcella replied without much interest, "One thud."

Lawrence then looked at Olenska who kept staring at him with half-droopy eyes. "Can you knock on doors for me? 'Cause I remember myself being restricted to this wheelchair while also I've decided to not move an inch from my bed," she said in a dull, sarcastic tone.

"Right," Lawrence said rapidly and continued, "Mine is two thuds."

"I think it's best if someone gets this done quickly and moves to preparing lunch," Olenska said staring at the floor, smoothly changing the subject of spotlight. "It gets closer to noon."

Still, they had to wait for Lambard and Benjamin as it was quite impossible for two men to lift a bed all the way up to the rooms. They returned only after around fifteen minutes during which they took few shots of their favourite drinks. Though Lambard protested at first, eventually he came around for the sake of everyone. Now that he got someone to support him, he barely talked to others.

The four together, managed to bring the beds one by one with much difficult. They had to take long breaks in between each beds to prepare for the next. They even thought of dropping the idea but

it was too late as they were already done with three of them. All they could do was thanking Owens for making the staircase wide enough. Meanwhile, Marcella had gone upstairs alone to prepare lunch as it was getting late as usual. By the time they were done with the beds, Lawrence was more hungry than ever and he followed Marcella to the kitchen. That incited suspicion and curiosity in Lambard as he was infamously called by Marcella as the 'watching eyes' for no good reason.

He couldn't help but follow him to the kitchen. "Stay right here," he told Benjamin when did so.

"You don't look alright today, Lawrence. What really happened?" Marcella proved Lambard wasn't the only one being troubled by curiosity.

"It was headache, alright? It'll pass, don't worry about it," Lawrence said as he chomped on a handful of blueberries.

"You're hiding your scar. That's why you're making up stories of having a headache. Something happened last night, right?" Marcella said it disrupting Lawrence's momentary relief that it was all over.

Marcella didn't expect Lawrence to reply and continued, "What happened with Sam, you're somehow related to it. And Lambard somehow got to know about it and that's why he thinks you're an accomplice to Mr. Hearts."

"Now who's trying to imagine too much?" Lawrence asked promptly.

"I'm not trying to accuse you, Lawrence. I just want you to be frank with me. You know you can trust me."

"Oh, yeah? Who's actually hiding things here? Too much or not, there's some truth in what Bodholm said about you, can you disagree with all your heart?" Lawrence began to suspect Marcella after he saw Bodholm hesitate to kill Lambard that he might not have actually been lying the whole time. "You cheated my friend!" Lawrence's face expressed disgust that only hurt her.

At the exact same moment, Lambard made entry, "May I join your cooking expedition? I can assure you I'd be of great use."

There was a sudden mood change in Lawrence's mind. Guilt surrounded his heart if he really did too much against her that he missed his shot for marrying. While Marcella was really hurt by Lawrence, she was quite strong to overcome it at once and said, "You can peel the onions, chop them up, toast some bread and

mash some potatoes," to finally teach Lambard some lesson as he always skipped his share of work.

"Whoa. Looks like a two-man job, doesn't it?" he asked, looking at Lawrence with a smile that almost looked like a grin.

"I've been doing all of these for the past few years by myself very well and I think you too are capable of doing it as I consider it as a one-woman job. Isn't it very weird to consider a one-woman job too much for you?" Marcella jumped from teaching a lesson to roasting him deliberately.

"Anything for you, my lady," Lambard said in a soft tone as he moved towards Lawrence which Marcella understood as him trying to get Lawrence gather the requirements.

"I think, Mr. Lambard, that maybe this one-woman is too easy for you and to up the difficulty, just so the work is worthy of your effort, it would be best if you gather the ingredients yourself and, you know, it could then be called a one-man job, just as you wanted," she said in the most modest way one could with words. Lambard hadn't had the calmness in his mind to reply but instead left for the storeroom smiling. With Lambard's presence, Lawrence couldn't talk to Marcella, so he dropped the idea of doing so and got on with helping her cook.

It seemed like being in the dining hall after so long when they had their lunch there as a surprisingly unanimous decision. Similarly, it was very untypical that things went so smooth without a single discomfort, argument or insult of any form. Maybe it was too tiresome for the men after the hard time with the beds that they were more keen on sating their hunger. But as they say the calm comes before the storm, the much appraised momentary serenity began to fade.

"Those are fine little elves," Lawrence was staring at the figurines, "I remember seeing ten of them not long ago. Four are missing now. Care to elaborate, Mr. Lambard? It seems you've been stealing them lately."

"I don't steal nothing. Enough of these ridiculous accusations, Lawrence. I can't tolerate to hear such blasphemy whose sole point is only to defame me. I've come across lots of such nonsense in the past few days and I'm too tired of it. Learn and try something new, please," Lambard looked upset as he took a sip of wine from his little cask.

"Stealing may not be how you see it, Mr. Lambard but that's how it looks. You took the statuettes from here and we want to

know why," Lawrence wasn't ready to stop at nothing but an answer.

Benjamin intruded at the moment strangely as he had never done such thing, "Why are you so obsessed with accusing Mr. Lambard, Lawrence? Doesn't it ever hurt you brandishing lies every time you speak. Are you-"

Lawrence didn't even let Benjamin finish his sentence, "You are not a part of this conversation, so stay out of it. I suggest you to watch our mouths while we talk and learn to speak properly."

"I have a rifle," Lambard said to draw the spotlight to him, "I have ammunition way too much to kill a bunch of people. Were it my intent to kill you all, I would have done it very easily and very well and I would have been spared of the sick presence of y'all and your pointless squabbles."

"Let's first finish the lunch and have our conversations later," Marcella suggested though they had already decided to drop the argument. Then on, no one talked. They were truly done with all the bickering they came across by this time. Many things seemed to lose the importance they once had as life had now narrowed down to just surviving. When lunch was over, they dispersed to various directions regardless of the fear of the killer. Only Lawrence waited till Lambard left the place to make sure the elves remain untouched. While Lambard left, on his way, he bent over close to Marcella and whispered, "Your eye shadow stands out today, dear." There was a visible change of expression in her face which Lawrence noticed.

Soon, the dining hall was alone. The six elves remained. Everyone found solace in their rooms, in loneliness. But that wasn't the case with Lawrence and Marcella. Marcella had asked him to stay behind so that they both could spend some time in the hall to talk out whatever it was happening between them. Lawrence locked the backdoor of the hall, not for any wild reasons but as a safety measure on the off chance that Bodholm was the one. He seated himself opposite to Marcella on the other side of the table.

"I never saw him the way he saw me," Marcella kept a straight face while she opened up. "What I did, I didn't do it just for me. On the surface, it may look like I'm selfish but I'm not. My father was a broke man. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make enough money. Being his daughter, I know the importance of money and I'm not gonna be a miser of it or adapt evil ways for obtaining it. I did get money from Owens, mostly with his approval. The only time I fell to such wrong ways, I didn't cheat Owens. I only scammed his cousin, the biggest douchebag I've ever seen. He's the

one who didn't realise the importance of money, he spends for his own desires mindlessly. The money was worth more in my hands than his. I worked on it and it resulted in the worst way possible. Bodholm killed him and while it disturbed my senses, on the other hand, I also thought he deserved it. A lot of money is saved, a number of sins is prevented. I don't try to right my actions. I only try to live with it. I'm not a monster. And uh... I ask this only of you."

Marcella bent her head forward close to Lawrence's face with wide eyes and said in a coaxing tone, "I don't want to go back there. If you'd come with me, I'd forget everything, the money I had, my lost family, everything and begin my life anew. A life only for us. No one to judge or bicker around us. It'll be as we want it to be."

Marcella was now so close to him and her voice got only more and more soft and soothing that Lawrence didn't want her to stop speaking. "All you got to say is yes," she whispered into his ears and only now he realised she had gotten very close to him. *Yes, Laurie. Say yes. Your dream's coming true*, he heard the voice. But then, something struck his mind. He was all alone in the hall with no one around except her. What if, just an 'if', Marcella was the one and he had tripped into her trap unknowingly. Fear crawled into his heart like an eight legged tarantula, silent, spooky and serpentine, poisoning his thoughts.

"You're so beautiful, Marcella," Lawrence slowly sneaked out of his seat, without avoiding eye contact. "I really wish I had more time to think of it," he slowly took steps away from her.

Marcella, noticing his weird movement, said, "Why are you evading from me?" in the same coaxing voice.

"Wouldn't you be glad if I express my wish before tonight?" Lawrence asked softly.

"Yes, okay. I'm ready," she replied stuttering with folded arms.

"Two thuds and it'll be me," he said with a smile while panicking inside. He strode to the staircase, turning away from her. She followed him too which made him feel uncomfortable. While he ascended the stairs, he heard a sudden, low creaking sound from behind which struck fear in him that Marcella did something and so he practically ran upstairs but displayed it as a feat of 'the quickest climb' by laughing to Marcella, "I won."

When he was out of her sight, he slowed his pace to his room, taking deep breath while he did so. But then he sensed it was just an 'what if' thought and there was no proof that she was the killer.

Anyway, he was still breathing and he thanked god for that and went to his room.

Marcella too got to her room, locked the door, sat on her bed alone with her thoughts. She was wondering if she spoke right to Lawrence, for several minutes that she lost track of time, biting her nails in the while. Suddenly, she heard a knock at the door. As it was out of the blue, it didn't at once struck her to observe the pattern. She was doubtful if it was two knocks or three but waited if the knocking persists. Not once in her life did she wait for someone to knock at her door and she hoped she never would again. About a minute later she heard three more knocks and a voice from outside said, "It's me, Marcella. Benjamin. Spare some minutes?"

Despite her suspicions, she opened the door as she knew Benjamin wasn't capable of killing also when everyone was just in the nearby rooms.

"I've got something to talk with you, Marcella. Can I sit?" Benjamin asked.

"No disrespect, Ben, but I'd prefer that you not. It helps us get back to being on our own quickly, you see," Marcella said but she didn't sit either.

"Alright. I'll be done in a minute. I know this isn't the way to do this but I'm incapable of doing it any other way. Just hear me out. It'll be a great help. I feel sorry for Lawrence. I shouldn't have done what I did to him. But I swear, swindling him wasn't my intention or that I had a particular sense of dislike for him. I just proved to be inefficient at the moment. I was lazy for real, the biggest mistake I made that's got him develop hatred towards me. Hell, you saw the way he took the knife in his hand didn't you? Anyway, I'm saying this to you because I think you know what happened between us. Moreover, Lawrence likes you very much, he'd listen to you."

"Are you being a ruse to Lambard's plot?" Marcella asked out of the suspicions she had earlier.

"You're not listenin' to me. I'm speaking out of my heart. I valued you as high as someone who'd understand me," Benjamin said it with a straight face that Marcella felt he was truly not lying as he lacked his signature untimely laugh while he was talking. "I might not be much older than him but I've always felt like a father to him. I saw him grow in standards and I cherished to look at it. See, no matter how much he insulted me publicly or privately, I never really tried to hurt him back. I don't want this to be a bloated conversation so let me get to the point. You know how special this is, right?" he pointed at the huge ring with the eagle crest. "This is not only

costly but also a gift. I regard this very highly. I don't have the courage to look him up in the eye and ask him to take this as a token of my apologies while he sees me as an enemy. I would develop the courage to do so, believe me. But I need you to talk sense to him before that. I ask this as a friend. And even if you don't see me that way, it's all right. But do this as a favour for your friend Lawrence for all the respect you have for him. I implore you. You can never know how much this would mean to me. Can I hope you'd do that?"

Marcella looked at his pleading eyes and nodded slightly without fully understanding why she did so.

"Thank you," Benjamin nodded back, made his excuse and left the room. Marcella locked it behind him and started her second session of drowning into thoughts that lasted longer than the previous one. Benjamin seemed absolutely genuine just like he was when the most terrible things happened. Even if Lambard had something to do with it, all that he said seemed to be true. Moreover, she was glad she had gotten now a reason to talk to Lawrence and she decided to go talk to him, finally after an hour as the sun began to set.

She got out of her room, there was no one around. She found it supportive and walked to Lawrence's room. At the last minute, she felt too hesitant to knock on the door that she even considered to drop the idea. What made her proceed, she didn't know but she thudded the door once as was her pattern. She waited restlessly for a whole one minute, the time it took for Lawrence to realise it was indeed Marcella. When the door opened creaking, it immediately put a smile on her face, only it wasn't long lasting.

She saw a hand come at her abruptly, it grabbed her arm and pulled her in forcefully. Someone forced her to the side of their body so that she was braced close to the person with her back on his chest. It was a man, that was all she could say for sure but she wasn't in the state to speak or shout as he placed a tiny knife against her neck, shushing her. Was it Lawrence or not, she was pretty much convinced he was the killer.



10. JUSTICE

Olenska couldn't rest her mind, knowing that Marcella was still out there, scheming whatever evil plot only god knows. As much as she cared for her once, she hated and neglected her now. Her hatred was unimaginably worse that she was even ready to get rid of her. She knew Marcella would try to find some way to escape her inevitable fate which could be a lifetime in jail or worse and there was only one way to prevent her escape. To kill her. Her body might have been confined to a wheelchair but she was desperate to kill Marcella. Not only was she motivated by revenge but also she thought it was the only way justice could be done in her case. She had slipped a knife from the dining table earlier into her handbag with the intention of slitting Marcella's throat with it. For obtaining a chance to do that, she had to first pull an act that she had forgiven her. She knew Marcella couldn't be easily fooled and for that she had to put her life into her act. And most importantly, she had to wait for the right time which she thought wasn't close enough.

The funny thing was that while Olenska was thinking about all of this, Marcella was in fact under threat. The man sticking a knife to her neck said, "It was you, wasn't it?" Marcella at once realised it was Lawrence's voice. "Lawrence? It's you?" she asked softly.

"Tell me you lied. Tell me you are the killer," Lawrence threatened her by pressing the blunt edge of the knife against her neck.

"I swear, Lawrence. It's got nothing to do with me. God, why are you treating me like this?" Marcella asked softly as she began to weep. *Why, Laurie? It was indeed no god or devil that prevented you from getting married. It was you after all, Laurie. It was always you.* The voice echoed in his mind as he thought if he was giving in to a small suspicion and letting the dream life that he was finally getting close to achieve, slip away from him. That made him withdraw the knife. She turned to him with teary eyes, sobbing and looking too weak to harm anyone. Lawrence thought he went too far, not listening to the voice that warned him it was a bad idea born out of a stupid suspicion.

"I'm sorry, Marcella. I'm sorry," Lawrence gasped and continued, "Sit down, please. We have to talk."

Slowly she sat on his bed, wiping the tears off her face, trying to keep her face as straight as possible. Lawrence thought she might be a tricky liar and might have even made a lot of avoidable mistakes but she wouldn't go as far as killing someone.

"Listen, Marcella. I didn't do that for any bad reasons and I know you know. You just seemed suddenly very suspicious to me and that's why I did that. To save myself. I'm sorry I did that though I think I shouldn't be. I'm sorry because I care for you and I don't want to hurt you. Can you understand? I need you to accept my apology. Please," Lawrence grabbed her hands and looked at her eyes keenly without blinking. Marcella was a bit surprised that he didn't ask her why she came in the first place but she wasn't in the right mind to talk about it.

"Just let me go to my room," she stood up abruptly as she was still in shock. "I want some time to calm myself," she said panting.

"Of course. You can leave. Just tell me you've forgiven me. I can't put up with the guilt of hurting your feelings."

"You want me to say anything, you can come to my room at a later time," she left without saying anything else. Lawrence felt like the most idiotic person in the world and that feeling was likely to thrive until he knew she had forgiven him. He was also really glad that he was able to not let her respond to his actions in a bad manner and of that matter, he felt a bit victorious.

While she walked to her room, Marcella wept again silently that she was too helpless and that she felt like she escaped death on a close margin though she knew Lawrence wouldn't do that.

The evening was another boring one and no one got to meet one other except Lambard and Benjamin who were discussing most of the time about their next move in Bodholm's matter. Fred was very much interested in cleaning his room which he hadn't done since he came to the island and didn't bother about his late acknowledgement to do so. Olenska was praying and talking to herself as she was lying on her bed. Sometimes she was loud enough for Marcella in the nearby room to sense her talking, only it was too less audible. What Marcella was doing was the biggest mystery at the moment for Lawrence and it seemed like she was never going to open the door. Even at the dinner she was not to be found that everyone other than Olenska tried to get her out of the room though she replied she was fine every time her door was knocked. It was finally at Lambard's request that they were very afraid about

her not opening the door that she came out just so everyone could be relieved of the fear and tension. Lambard was secretly glad that she responded to him which he found very rare and beautiful.

Lawrence found the whole situation too awkward and cringeworthy as it was all happening because of his one stupid suspicion. He wished it never happened even more than the deaths that he even thought it would have been better if he were dead at the moment. When she had dinner with them, she didn't even look at Lawrence which he felt bad about. Once the dinner was over and everyone got back to their rooms, Lawrence checked the elves, six remained and only then he left for his room.

When they would wake up, it would be just one day and one night more for them to get out of there. It was very pleasant for them even to think it would be all over soon. Funny it was to think that they actually came there to spend some time peacefully and everything turned to be the exact opposite of what they expected.

A couple of hours passed since the early dinner and everyone was just fine. Fred was still awake but he felt he was about to fall asleep soon from all the tiresome work with shifting the beds. Lawrence was counting every second as a delay to talk to Marcella but he wanted to wait until he was a bit sure he could reach her room undetected by anyone. Marcella was doing the same too, worrying about the way she talked to Lawrence and wanted to apologize to him. But she wasn't ready to get down to his room herself as she so badly wanted him to come to hers, to know if he had really listened to her.

She had shut all the lights in her room off as the moonlight through the window was enough for her. Moreover, she didn't like to keep lights on at night as she felt it would ruin the feel of night. It was a bright full moon at the sky which was very clear that the stars could be seen clearly.

Suddenly, she heard two thuds at her door and was very happy Lawrence had come. But she wasn't celebrating yet as she had to wait if the pattern was over or not. She waited for two minutes, successfully holding her anxiety all the while and slightly opened the door. Through the narrow crevice she saw something shining in the moonlight that looked like the tiny figure of a bird, an eagle to be precise. She realised it was Benjamin's eagle crest ring but it was very sloppy as the finger wearing it was leaner than Benjamin's that she felt it was about to fall off. Marcella was very glad Lawrence had indeed truly listened to her that he had accepted Benjamin's ring. But then it occurred to her that she had actually forgotten to

talk to Lawrence about Benjamin's apology after he place a knife at her neck.

Who was it then, at her door? She wondered the same in fear but it was too late for her. The hand wearing the ring grabbed her neck and shoved her onto her bed while the grip around her neck persisted. She couldn't see who it was in the dim light and she was already choking. Her door was closed smoothly that if even anyone were outside, they wouldn't even hear it shut.

Earlier that day, when Lawrence and Marcella had their little talk in the hall alone, after Lawrence got his 'stupid' suspicion and began climbing the stairs, he heard something behind which he feared was Marcella's doing. Only it wasn't her. She even wondered what it was but then Lawrence began running on the staircase as if it were a race, distracting her.

It was actually Lambard, hiding behind the unused furniture to eavesdrop what they were talking, who got hit on his head at the tabletop while he tried to move. He heard everything they were talking about and he also got to know Lawrence was going to meet Marcella sometime later when he said "Two thuds and it'll be me." When they both had left, he came out of his momentary hideout and met Benjamin in his room to talk about Lawrence and Marcella.

"I don't know what to say, Mr. Lambard," Benjamin replied him. "I'm already worried about the way Lawrence sees me. He doesn't like me, you know. I won't say I was right but I feel sorry for him."

"Do you think I must too, Ben?" Lambard asked in an irritable tone as he didn't want to hear about his history with Lawrence. "I'm sorry to ask this but do you think I really should be worrying about how he feels about you while trying to save all of our lives? I think our lives are more important. Do you feel the same, Ben?"

"Yes, Mr. Lambard. I'm sorry for bringing this up."

"Bringing up such things isn't a mistake, buddy. Bringing 'em up at the wrong time is. I'm glad you're sharing this with me, it's just not the time, I hope you can understand that."

"Yes, Mr. Lambard."

"Good. Now before we land our attack on Bodholm, I have to deal with this unfinished business I got with Marcella. You know

this is a suicide mission for me, right? I may not get to do this later. I'm sorry I couldn't explain it to you. It's only between me and her. Once I'm done, I'll meet you in the hall where you'll be waiting with the supplies I've asked you to collect and we'll make our move against Bodholm. I think I might also have to visit the privy before we launch our attack."

Suddenly, Lambard became silent, probably something struck his mind, Benjamin thought. Before he asked what it was, Lambard told it himself, "About that ring, Benjamin. You told me you couldn't give it to Lawrence yourself, right? I think maybe you can talk about it to Marcella. She can convince him."

"Thank you for your suggestion, Mr. Lambard. I'll look to it."

At the surface level, it seemed like Lambard cared for Benjamin's feeling but deep down it was actually a test to determine if Lawrence had a soft spot for Marcella as he thought if he happened to have so, he would come to Benjamin asking for the ring. Luckily for him, things didn't go well for Lawrence when he got maddened by that one suspicion as a result of which Marcella failed to inform him about Benjamin's kind gesture. It led to Lambard believe Lawrence was not so intimate with Marcella after all as he didn't approach Benjamin. He also spied on Marcella and learnt she had met Lawrence at some point. However, he realised that only after she met Lawrence, Marcella locked herself in her room. So whatever happened between them didn't end well. He also noticed Lawrence's dislike for Benjamin when he didn't respond to Benjamin's "Can you pass that to me?" at the dinner table that night. So his theory about the whole thing was that Lawrence hated Benjamin so much that he even probably had a fight with Marcella when she told him about Benjamin's true intentions.

Keeping all that in his mind, he formulated a new plan after dinner and had a talk with Benjamin.

"You know why I actually took those tiny elves with me, Ben? You wanted to know why, right? So here goes the answer. You've heard of the correlation between the elves and us, right? When Henderson and that mutthead's wife were gone, I took two with me. This morning when I knew about Sam and Bodholm and took away two more. You know why? 'Cause I know Bodholm had killed Sam. As you know, I was right. Only there was no one to believe me. No one! You may now wonder why I took two when I was only sure about Sam? The other one was for Bodholm himself 'cause I was sure I was gonna get him. Nothing's changed now anyway. I've got you at my back and we're gonna get him together tonight. We proceed as per our plan, nothing's changed. You grab

everything I asked you to and wait for me at the front door of the hall. And remember to shut the back door before that. Now, give me your ring. He fouled up with Marcella, let me try this time. When I'm done with this 'Marcella business' I told you, I'll get this ring to him. Satisfied?"

"I don't want you to do that, Mr. Lambard. It's obvious he hates you too. Let's not get you both in a bit of a pickle," Benjamin cared for the welfare of them both.

"You've done a great deal supporting me amidst this pile of rubbish and I'm grateful for you. Let me thank you. I'll finish this ring business."

"I'm really glad to hear that, Mr. Lambard. But maybe you were right earlier. We've got a big thing such as saving our lives and this doesn't hold that much of importance, I can tell you. It's better if we just drop this idea. I've already caused a fight between him and Marcella, I suppose."

"Look, Ben. I told you this is a suicide mission. I might lose my life fighting that prick Bodholm and I'll be glad to die fighting a monster rather than be stabbed in the back or killed in my slumber or worse. I want Lawrence to know that I'm gonna fight for every-one of us even if it might take my life away. I'm gonna talk to him one way or the other so just hand over me the ring."

Benjamin was astounded by his speech that he was ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of others that he shed tears and embraced him, "You're a great man, Mr. Lambard. I feel sad that no one here understands you."

"Alright, Ben. Just hand me the ring. I'm more than satisfied to have you at my back at least," Lambard patted Benjamin to stay strong and got the ring from him.

Poor Benjamin didn't know what Lambard's real intention was. Lambard was ready to die not for those people whose guts he hated as much as he hated the devil but to have his revenge on Bodholm even if he were to die in the process. He asked the ring from Benjamin not to give it to Lawrence but to trick Marcella into believing it was Lawrence at the door. He didn't even had the idea of talking to Lawrence at all. He wore the ring in his finger, reached Marcella's room, thudded the door twice with his clenched fist as he learnt from Lawrence's quote "Two thuds and it'll be me" and waited for two minutes in the fear that she might be asleep but Marcella opened the door to his fortune before he decided to leave.

When the door opened, Lambard believed he finally got to attain what he was yearning for so long - Marcella herself!

A few minutes later, Lawrence got out of his room to talk to Marcella as he hoped it was time. He slowly tiptoed to her room, very cautious to not expose his presence to anyone. As he approached her room and was about to knock, he felt someone behind him and turned back at once as a reflex action. Fred's door opened slowly and Fred poked his head outside to check if anyone was around and the first thing he saw was a fear-stricken Lawrence staring at him weirdly.

"The heck you're doing!" Lawrence exclaimed in a whisper and tiptoed to him.

"The hell you're doing!" Fred replied and got out of his room completely, locking the door silently.

"I think I've got the killer," Lawrence grasped Fred's shirt mockingly in a satirical manner.

"What do you think I'm thinking right now? What if I'm the one who got the killer?"

"You'll be dead, twat. Tell me what were you trying to do."

"You know, I could ask the same of you."

"I was trying to get to Marcella and apologize. What about you? Gotta find mines hidden in the earth? I can tell you there are worse things to care about here."

"Where do you think Lambard might have gone at this moment, Lawrence? 'Cause I know for one thing that he's not in his room."

"What're you talking about? What's your point?"

"Can we get down? I'm afraid we might alarm others."

"This is a bad place to whack me, Mr. Hearts? Stop breaking my balls and tell me where you're getting at," Lawrence mimicked a mobster, half-intendedly.

"Lambard is not in his room, man. Can you guess what that could mean?"

"How do you know he's not in the room?"

"I heard his door open and close. I heard his voice. I'm sure it's him. Lets get to the part that we're unsure of. Lambard being

here out there means probably Ben's backing him and probably they are out planning something big."

"Maybe trying to hunt Bodholm?" Lawrence decoded it.

"Or maybe Benjamin will suffer being the next victim. I mean, you think it is Lambard, don't you? So think of Benjamin being alone with Lambard the whole night. What happens to the sheep in the wolf's lair?"

Lawrence was actually glad to hear Benjamin was in danger though it might not be true and asked, "So what are we going to do about it?"

"We may get to prove Lambard's the killer if we are able to track him. And maybe we get to save Ben and maybe Bodholm too, for that matter."

"So we track him down, watch the wolf feast on the sheep and then we can get the wolf red-toothed."

"What about saving the sheep?"

"The sheep is not worth the risk, I can tell you. It isn't gonna yield wool to weave a hundred coats while itself being a sleazy turncoat. Moreover, if Lambard doesn't get Ben, how could we prove he's the one? Tracking him isn't a piece of cake but of course a whole lot better than waiting in the room for the killer to knock at the door."

Fred didn't understand what he meant about 'sleazy turncoat' but nodded to him.

"What surprises is that this suggestion comes from someone so stupid such as you," Lawrence mocked Fred and asked him to come with him to help him track down Lambard. He had his share of suspicions on Fred but he was pretty much sure he wasn't the kind of person who would desperately murder someone. They climbed downstairs together silently with nothing as a safety measure other than the fact that they were together.

A few minutes after they had left, Marcella's door opened a bit too loud as if someone tried to open it forcefully. It frightened Olenska who just had a few minutes of sleep in two days as she woke up in fear. As she slept on her wheelchair itself, she easily got out of her room by herself as her door had no sill. She was careful with her door to not make any noise. As soon as she saw Marcella's door wide open, she grabbed the knife from her bag in her hand. She wanted to get a look into the room to know the situation as from where she was, the sight at things inside wasn't very detailed,

so she drove her chair a little forward only to see the door close suddenly, she even heard the clacking of the lock. Just as she worried she missed her chance, she still saw light coming out of her room as if she just turn her lights on. As she got a bit closer she realised the door wasn't actually closed, the light came out from the narrow crevice of the open door which was straight in her sight. It didn't take her long to realise that something got in between the bottom rail and the sill of the door frame which was why the door didn't fully close. It seemed as if Marcella wasn't aware of that, if she were, she would've corrected it already. She drove in closer and found that 'something' was a huge eagle crested ring stuck in between. Olenska was shocked very much as she knew it was Benjamin's and wondered how the ring ended up being there. She drove even closer and peeked into the room now that she got a very clear view of the inside.

Meanwhile, Benjamin was in the tool shed in the backyard, gathering the supplies Lambard asked him to. He had collected a five metre rope, the one with which they pulled Sam's corpse out of the manhole, a pry bar, a shovel and a headlamp as there weren't any flashlights. In addition to those, he had Lambard's rifle hung over his shoulder. He took a sip of wine from his hip flask now and then in between his work. After collecting the supplies, he came back to the hall, locked the backdoor and walked down to the entrance where he sat on the doorstep to take some breath. He gazed upon the sky and admired the full moon. Soon, he found himself unable to focus on it. His eyes were very sore because of sleeplessness that he couldn't keep them open. Also he was afraid he might fall asleep which he believed was very dangerous and so he periodically took sips from the hip flask. Soon enough, the flask was empty so he wondered if it would be right that he got down the manhole to fetch some wine. Suddenly, he heard someone inside the hall, presumably from the direction of the staircase, so he naturally thought it was Lambard.

It was very dark but he didn't call out to him just as a cautionary step. He expected Lambard to call out to him which wasn't happening. Gradually, fear took control over him that he began to sweat profusely, his breathing rate escalated, his eyes were now wide open as if the soreness vanished completely. He had the headlamp in his hand, willing to hit the switch as soon as he heard a disturbance. Were it because he was thinking right or he believed it was right, he jumped out in fear onto the pathway that continued from the doorstep to the wharf and ran to the bushes nearby to hide himself.

Too bad he didn't know who was climbing down the stairs - it was none other than Lawrence and Fred, who too were frightened when they heard someone at the entrance. It was only Benjamin jumping on the stone pathway in fear but it was too dark to see him. While they wondered if they actually heard something, they believed it could be something as ordinary as the flapping of a bird's wings. What they heard next really scared them that they abandoned their plan of chasing Lambard. It was nothing more than a faint sound of a loud thud but it came from upstairs as if someone fell very loudly that it easily led them both to believe the thing they were very afraid of had happened. They ran upstairs together to get to know what happened. Everything seemed to be normal, all the rooms remained locked which made them suspect if something happened in the kitchen or the dining hall. But then, no one other than both of them seemed to have heard the noise and so they felt they must be alarmed.

As soon as Lawrence thudded at Olenska's door twice, she opened up at once without even analysing the knocking pattern as if she had been waiting at the door all the while.

"Did you hear it, Lady?" Lawrence asked.

"Like it happened in my head," Olenska stammered as if she was scared. From her words, Lawrence assumed it must have happened pretty close to her room. As Olenska's was the first room, the only room close to her was Marcella's. Lawrence's heartbeat escalated to immense rates and in addition to that Marcella didn't respond to Lawrence's knocking. But they heard creaking of something, presumably the bed which had a nuanced pattern as if someone was trying to communicate, only they couldn't understand what it was.

Lawrence tried opening the door but it wouldn't budge. So, he tried to knock it down. When his kicks failed, he began dashing onto it repeatedly. He wasn't thinking right and he was already too weak from shifting the beds that he couldn't channel enough energy into his legs or arms. Fred and Olenska were terrified and asked Lawrence to stop freaking them out as he didn't tell them anything about what he was going to do. Since Olenska's 'Like it happened in my head', Lawrence heard nothing, his mind couldn't focus on anything other than opening the door until Fred pulled him away from the door forcefully.

"What happened to you, man?" Fred asked him, holding his upper arms. "What are you doing?"

"She's not responding. Try to open the door, I'll be back in a jiff," Lawrence ran to the staircase to get down. He didn't listen to Fred and Olenska's pleas to stop. All he had in his mind was to open the door for which he had to get something like a crowbar when his brute strength failed. Fred, unable to hold Lawrence for long had no idea in his mind about where he was going and so he continued Lawrence's task of knocking down the door.

Last chance, Laurie. Remember. It's your last chance. It was the voice in his mind that puppeted Lawrence. His destination was to get to the tool shed in the backyard where he could find something that might help with the situation. But as soon as he got to the hall, he got to know the back door was closed. He worriedly ran to it and tried to open it. He remembered there were multiple bullet locks in the double door but not their specific positions which was hard to find in the dark. Though he managed to undo a couple locks, the door couldn't be opened yet. In the hurry, he couldn't even think of turning the lights on, probably the voice had poisoned his mind too much. Gradually, he slowed himself, took some deep breaths and realised that they used to leave the back door open always. Then why is it closed? Who closed it? That was when Lawrence realised he wasn't alone. He thought every second he spent there was only making him vulnerable. So, he decided to get to the shed by walking around the mansion and ran to the entrance where he came across the tools Benjamin left there. He wondered how they got there and suddenly, he heard a rumble in the bushes which scared him like nothing else. Luckily, his eyes ran over the pry bar among them, grabbed it and left the place without even trying to look back.

Meanwhile, Fred succeeded in breaking the door open; he managed to dash into the door forcefully enough to break the lock down. What he saw inside felt like an image taken right out of a bloody nightmare. Lambard was lying, almost parallel to the door, on his face on the blood spilled floor which was his very own blood with his eyes fixed upon the door, very still and unmoving. Marcella was on her bed with a band tied around her eyes, her body, hands and legs tied to the bed itself with long, thin strips of cloth. Her mouth was filled with a clenched ball of such a similar cloth that muffled her screams into low mumbles. Luckily, she was alive. She had been kicking at the footboard of the bed to whose pillars were her legs tied to, producing the creaking sound they heard.

Fred rushed to her, freed her from her bounds, emptied her mouth, keen to hear what she had to say. The first thing Marcella did was to weep and hug him. "I thought I was gonna die," she told him sobbing hardly.

Fred didn't know what to do to comfort her and just went along with her. "What happened, Marcella? Where you- Did you manage to see anything?" he asked her.

"I don't... I-" Marcella was panting very hard that she couldn't speak. "Alright, take some breath, Marcella. Take your time," Fred patted her. "But please. I want you to be as detailed as possible."

"Lambard. He-he came to my room. He forced himself on me," Marcella then looked at Lambard lying dead on the floor and gasped in shock and fear. "What happened to him?" she sobbed.

"I was about to ask you the same, Marcella. We too found him just now. The one thing we know is that it's your room and you were inside which you are. Tell me everything you know."

"How could I? You just saw what kind of situation I was in. You didn't know what that prick did to me. He forced himself on me. He nearly strangled me. Do you see his hand prints?" she showed him her neck that had distinct strips of redness, supposedly from his fingers. "He tied me up, stuffed my mouth with some filthy cloth, what was I supposed to do? I couldn't see, couldn't shout for help. God, I could barely move. I'll tell you something. Even if he were alive now, I would kill him myself," she spat on Lambard's corpse both in anger and disgust she felt because of the filth that soaked into her mouth from the cloth.

"So what do you think killed him?" Fred asked in curiosity.

"You don't know?" Marcella looked at him and Olenska in surprise but Olenska didn't seem to care about it. "I don't know if anybody was with him but from what I know, it must've happened while my eyes were tied." There arrived Lawrence, covered in his own sweat, with a pry bar in his hand. Only after he saw Marcella alive, he calmed himself down.

"Took you long enough," Fred said to Lawrence and looked at Lambard. Though it was surprising for Lawrence to acknowledge Lambard's death, he was more keen on the specifics of his murder. Fred explained everything to him including Marcella's vulnerability and inability at the moment but there was something unlikely in his face that Fred noticed. Everything seemed to happen very fast for Lawrence that in turn made him feel slow that he felt like he couldn't breathe. He couldn't think right, nothing looked right in his eyes. He tried to understand it like everyone else but he couldn't. The way he saw things made him feel suspicious about the event.

"You've got anything to say?" Fred asked Lawrence.

"Found what killed him?" Lawrence tried to clear himself.

"I don't know. We've got to scan the place, find any clues and..." accidentally, when Fred ran his eyes around the room, something caught his attention. It was a shiny little thing beside Lambard which was nothing other than Benjamin's eagle crested ring. He moved towards it, bent over and took it in his hands. Displaying it to everyone he said, "Benjamin's. And where the hell is he now?" Without saying anything, Lawrence pulled Fred out of the room with him by grabbing his arm.

"What? What? You forgot I can walk?" Fred asked irritantly.

"You really believe her, Fred?" Lawrence asked in a whisper referring to Marcella.

"What? I saw in her bounds, man. I untied her."

"The door was locked from inside, right? How could the killer do that when he's outside?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Lawrence. You're saying Lambard committed suicide?"

"What about her? Couldn't she have done it?"

Olenska interrupted their whispering, "If you're really talking about the specifics of the murder, gentlemen, feel free to join me in your discussion too. It seems as if you've left a clue while orchestrating this murder and worry about it now."

"I think this is a bunch of lies. Isn't it obvious?" his voice cracked in sadness that Fred couldn't understand.

"Are you okay?" Fred asked.

"I think Marcella is the killer and I know you can see it too." Those words from Lawrence's mouth shook Marcella.

"I believe you, Lawrence," Olenska said in a loud tone at once as if she had been waiting for the moment since forever. "But what can you do about it?"

Marcella was utterly confused as to why everyone began to speak like they didn't believe her all of a sudden. "What the hell is happening? Am I being paranoid here or are you all? I've just suffered through hell. Why can't anyone see it?"

"Look at this little bitch lie. It's so sweet that you almost like it," Lawrence laughed ruefully as he felt betrayed by her. He felt so bec-

ause no matter how hard he tried to see her in the good light, things always happened to prove otherwise.

"You don't get to talk here, Marcella. Now that's speaking fair, don't try to make it foul," Olenska warned her.

"Stop it, old lady. What's happening between us? I want to know what's happening between us. Is it something like a cold war? Avoiding me at every corner. Trying to hurt me every time you get a chance with your words. I'm sick of it. And all of this because you think I betrayed your precious grandson? You don't know how big a prick he was. Even if I kill him, that would only make me holy for sparing the world from his lousiness."

"You killed Lambard. I saw it. End of story," Olenska sounded calm and clear and began to leave the room.

"Now who's the liar here? She can't even get down from her bed," Marcella scoffed.

"You and I, we're done. I find no reason to trust you anymore," Lawrence looked at Marcella with furious eyes that clearly exhibited the hatred he had developed towards her which was alarmingly horrendous to watch knowing that apparently it took no more than a few minutes for the hatred to build up especially from Marcella's perspective. She was so confused on top of what happened to her that she wasn't able to even come up with the right words to talk to Lawrence who turned his back on her. When he rushed out of the room in anger, she stood there helplessly with no idea of what to do next. Only Fred ran to him, trying to stop him and calm him down. Marcella didn't know where to let her anger and the first person that came to her mind was Olenska. Hadn't she lied to them, things would have been better and importantly, Lawrence wouldn't have been mad at her. The raging winds turned their direction towards Olenska and surely there was going to be a storm. Olenska had gotten to her room by now, from where she yelled out to Marcella, "I want to take a piss. Take me to the privy, Marcella." That hit the mark without fail for Olenska - Marcella was so infuriated that she came to her room rushing just as she wanted her to.

"Why did you lie to them?" Marcella yelled at her. "Why do you want so badly to ruin me? How come you got to believe the cheat you always called a dog? You want me to take you to the toilet? I'm gonna take to your grave!"

As Lawrence descended down the stairs, Fred followed him all the way through, pleading and swearing him to stop. Lawrence's only response was to get down faster than before. Even when they

had reached the bottom of the staircase, Lawrence didn't slow down though Fred did.

"I trusted her only to find I'm an idiot," Lawrence shouted to him when Fred finally got to him and grabbed his arm.

"You are an idiot, Lawrence. That I know for a fact," Fred mocked him out of frustration. Lawrence wanted his mind to be free of Marcella as the pain of the betrayal reached unimaginable heights. The first thing he saw was the closed back door. He walked towards it, past the stocked furniture.

"Something's wrong, Fred. You know, we don't lock this door."

"What're you talking about? You out of your mind? I can't understand the way you talked to her. You know what? The window in her room was open. Just like in the storeroom when Bodholm escaped. Did you even see that? God, what the hell is wrong with you? Maybe Lambard was right about you. Maybe you let Bodholm escape and now you're trying to save him."

"Wh-what? What do you mean the window's open? Just because it's open it means it's one of Bodholm's evil actions? And somehow I'm responsible for it? Tell me you're not doing drugs again, Fred. I'm confused."

"Cut it, Lawrence. Get to the point. Why were you running all the way down here?"

"You say I helped the killer get Lambard? How dare you? Did you see Ben's ring up there? Did you see it? What are you gonna say about it?"

"Did you even hear what I just said?"

"I've got it. Benjamin's been helping Marcella kill and that's how they got to Lambard. That's right. I've got it," Lawrence's weird careless behaviour only scared Fred. "I'm asking you again, Lawrence. Are you alright? 'Cause you sound insane to me."

"Insane? There's nothing wrong with my mental health, Fred," Lawrence said softly and became silent all of a sudden. *It's the headache, Laurie.* "It's the headache, Fred. Yeah, that's why," he said half unwillingly as he wondered if it was a strong point. But surprisingly, Fred nodded slightly and spoke nothing more. Seeing it in the positive light, Lawrence continued, "Something's wrong, Fred. This door is closed. I found some gear at the front. That pry bar I brought, I found it there. I wonder if it's still there."

Many bad thoughts and suspicions circled Fred's mind. Not a single notion occurred to him that was strong enough to disprove Lawrence was helping the killer. He tried to force open Marcella's door and failed while Fred did it in a few tries. When Lambard was found dead, he wasn't even on the spot, it seemed he purposefully left the place, not for any pry bar or tools. Now, he had lured him downstairs to this dark corner of the hall and didn't answer why he ran down to this spot. What if Lawrence just did it to have him killed? Fred slowly walked to the window, "It's too dark, Lawrence. I can't see crap here." He slowly drew back the curtain a little so that enough light from the lawn lamp entered through the glass window.

"Let's just calm down and take a seat, okay?" Fred took a couple wooden chairs out of the unused furniture that had intricate designs carved onto it which manifested Owens' wealth and taste in art. "All we've to do is to sit down and talk it through. We can do that, can't we?" Fred managed to convince Lawrence to do so. So there they sat on the chairs, opposite to each other just pondering over their own thoughts to let the heat die out. They spent minutes in this manner with none of both their thoughts relating to what the ladies might be doing upstairs. Obviously, also the ladies didn't care about them too. It clearly showed what kind of people they were. Arrogant people blinded by self importance. No one really cared for anyone other than themselves.

After what felt like an hour, possibly just a few minutes, Fred asked Lawrence what he had been trying to ask since before they rested on the chairs, "If anything's wrong, just tell me, Lawrence. You can have my trust." Too bad that his choice of words was strikingly similar to that of Marcella's earlier. It felt like sprinkling water on hot iron for Lawrence who had been failing to calm himself and ultimately, he erupted. He threw his hands at Fred's neck with the intent of strangling him. *Trust is the damn answer?* "You are talking about trust? Like trust is the damn answer to this mayhem?" Lawrence yelled and gave a blow to his face with his fist that knocked him down.

After waiting all this time behind the bushes with the rifle at ready, Benjamin decided to get to the backyard where, hopefully he might get a peek into the hall and find who actually came downstairs, what were they doing and finally break the suspense. As there were no windows on this side of the hall, he realised he could see the inside of the hall only through the glass windows at the back which if he were lucky, weren't fully curtained. It turned out he was actually lucky since Fred drew them back quite enough for Benjamin to accomplish his mission. Carefully, Benjamin tiptoed

across the backyard to the glass window and when he peeked inside he saw the unlikeliest thing he ever saw - Lawrence punching down Fred. To his dismay, Lawrence didn't just stop at that. Even after Fred fell on the ground, he didn't shy away to land a couple more blows on his face. Benjamin couldn't hear him yelling in anger or even what he was saying.

Before landing another punch, Lawrence realised what exactly he was doing - beating the one person who actually talked well with him to a pulp. He also realised a moving shadow fall on him which could possibly mean someone was in between him and the light in the backyard. *Someone named Benjamin.* Lawrence figured it was Benjamin and looked at the window though he couldn't see nothing but a part of the shadow which was actually his head. Benjamin looked at him too but he could see things clearly. The look on Lawrence's face revealed it all. Sad thing was that both of them were thinking they were looking at the helper of the killer. Lawrence made the first move as he sprang at the door, as now with the light, he could unlock all the locks. Benjamin predicted this move and inserted the rifle through the door handles outside so that even if Lawrence managed to open the locks, he wouldn't be able to push open the door. It worked and Lawrence had to go around the mansion to reach the backyard. "I'm sorry, Fred. I'm sorry that I hit you. I'll be right back. I'll fetch some water for you. Hang tight," Lawrence apologized to him in vain. Fred could only reply in mumbles, he wasn't even out of the shock from the first hit.

As far as Benjamin was concerned, the rifle was empty which was why he apparently used it for a simpler purpose. While his trick was effective and drove Lawrence away from the door, it was indeed very foolish of him to leave the rifle at the door itself. He must have thought after how cautious, bloodthirsty and dangerous Lambard became, would he really keep his rifle empty? Of course he wouldn't. Benjamin didn't think twice about the rifle after that. Right now, all he thought about was to get back to Lambard and tell him he was right about Lawrence. But he was running out of time, Lawrence was already after him. He couldn't outrun Lawrence, so his best bet to escape would be to hide, just like before.

On his way, Lawrence took the shovel at the entrance of the hall amidst the gear Benjamin left just in case. It took exactly forty eight seconds for him to reach the backyard which was apparently empty, devoid of any human being. He ran his eyes all over the place as swiftly as he could but not a single clue was visible. Now it was time to be cautious and tread carefully. No assurance could be given as to where what might be lurking and what might happen.

Other than the chirping of the crickets in the woods nearby, Lawrence could sense nothing. Until his eyes took a glimpse at the manhole cover which was slightly out of the place. Lawrence was able to see what it could mean. Benjamin was hiding himself inside. Possibly, he did it because it was favourable for him. That could mean it was dangerous for Lawrence to get in and that was why he hesitated. Also he still was feeling traumatic about his previous experience down the manhole. Good thing was that he could still trap him inside and Lawrence believed it was going to be his next move.

He's not the killer, is he, Laurie? What could you possibly gain from trapping him?

Lawrence realised Benjamin wouldn't kill him, so he might not be as dangerous as he thought. Moreover, his past history with him wasn't really endearing too. Thus after a few minutes of fighting his dilemma, Lawrence finally decided to get down there and have his revenge. Unfortunately, Benjamin wasn't as stupid as Lawrence thought he was. Benjamin wasn't hiding in the hidden cellar, all this time, he was sitting in the toilet, not for the usual business but to watch what Lawrence was doing through the fissure in the wooden door and was pretty much able to see the whole backyard. He tricked Lawrence into believing he was down the manhole by displacing the cover slightly. As soon as he saw Lawrence get down into it, he rushed out of the toilet as quickly and quietly as possible. "Thanks to the toilet," he said to himself and ran out of the place. Even when he happened to lay his eyes on the rifle, he thought it was empty and couldn't risk breaking his sprint, which he rarely did, to try to grab an empty rifle. He knew he wasn't fast so he shouldn't make stops which would break the momentum. It is indeed true that people often suffer the most because of ignorance. Benjamin just couldn't see how big of a mistake it was going to be.

Sensing he had been tricked, Lawrence got out of the manhole in frustration, throwing the shovel out first to make an easier climb on the iron stairs. When he got outside, no one was around just as before. But this time he saw something he didn't the last time - the rifle in the door handles.

Regardless of how much Lawrence cared for him, Fred couldn't easily forgive him for the welts he left on his face though he recovered ably from the shock. When he got up on his feet, he looked around for Lawrence. He saw him running upstairs which he found pointless and weird. Weirder was the fact that Lawrence had bloated multifold with jiggling cheeks and a huge belly. The more he looked at his face, the more he seemed to look different from Lawrence. It wasn't even Lawrence. That face belonged to Benjamin. That would only rise another question in his mind along

with the many other questions he already had - what would make Benjamin run like that? All of a sudden, he felt nausea along with a headache, probably from his head colliding on the floor. In urgency, he tried to open the back door which was literally only a feet away. It opened casually as opposed to Lawrence's words. It was because Lawrence by now had taken the rifle with him. But Fred couldn't make it to the restroom, he puked all over his way to the pool and into the pool too.

Lawrence searched for Benjamin in the bushes that stretched along the length of the mansion on the suspicion that the flap of wings he thought he heard earlier might have actually been him. He guessed right but he didn't find him because he wasn't there. Assuming he didn't run into the woods, Lawrence got back into the hall at whose entrance the remaining gear was found disarrayed. That could mean someone walked through it, presumably Benjamin. But he almost forgot about Ben when he got into the hall; he saw the back door wide open and Fred was missing. He wondered where he was or what happened to him given that Benjamin was roaming free. Lawrence began to see Fred as an unwanted responsibility when he realised he forgot to fetch him the water he promised and that now his disappearance felt like it was on him. He forced himself to not think about Fred to try to enhance his rates of survival.

Benjamin, by now, had gotten upstairs and caught his breath for a moment as he was already wheezing from all the running. The first thing to do in his mind was to get to Lambard as early as possible. He kind of limped to Lambard's room, a consequence of his first long sprint in years. On his way, he came across Marcella's room which was suspiciously open. He didn't know by then that he would regret if he peeked into the room and when he did, the world felt like falling apart for him. He almost broke into tears on looking at the horrific murder site with a lifeless Lambard on the floor. He just couldn't believe it. He sat on the floor beside him unable to control himself mentally or physically.

A couple minutes later, he pulled himself together to get up on his feet with no courage and determination to find the killer. He literally blacked out in his mind, he didn't know what to do. He definitely hadn't had any idea of going after Bodholm whom he still thought was the killer. His ring, lying on the floor by the wall, caught his eyes. He didn't know why but when he looked at it again, he felt hopeful and wore it back. Probably because he always considered it to be a gift from the Almighty himself. Only now it struck him where the ladies had gone and proceeded to find them out. It was when he heard some murmuring from Olenska's room

and as it was inaudible he stuck his ear to the door hoping to find whom she was talking to secretly in her room while someone had murdered Lambard. What he heard only shocked him, turning all his suspicions to a different direction.

It was a very cold night as usual in the island and Bodholm knew that better than everyone. And yet he was resting on a rock by the shore at the southernmost part of the island in the freezing cold, shivering and whimpering. He had his legs stretched out at the sea and the waves continually washed them that his feet went numb from the coldness. His wound was severe, he knew that but decided to not fight the pain. He took out the two elves from his pocket and looked at up the sky. It was the full moon he was waiting for. He smiled when he saw it and remembered Clara's beautiful face.

Looking at one of the elves he said, "I tried my best, Clara. I made it. I had everything against me but I did it. It was in my fingertips, the fate of a man I truly hated but I didn't make the decision myself. I left it to the Lord though it was dangerous for me. God, I wish you were with me. Just so I can tell you with a monstrous glee that I did what you wanted me to do, what was right. Of course, it wasn't easy. It's a miracle that I made it but I'm glad I made it. I just wish you'd seen it. It felt stupid but glorious. Also, I'm very glad that I'm going to be done with this world. Yeah, sooner or later, I'm gonna be. And because of that, I'm gladder than you've ever known me to be. I just- Were you here, I'd still be clinging to this world. For that, I'm glad you're not. You're luckier than me anyway. You left earlier. You missed all the worst parts for which I'm grateful to the Lord. I don't know where I'm gonna fall. I don't care where I'm gonna fall. I only want you to know I tried to be the man you wanted me to be and I beg the Lord I be with you. I be with you. Just one little wish. I be with you. And I'll be with you."

Bodholm looked at the bright moon at its full intensity and felt mesmerized by it so much that he didn't look away or even blink. He wanted to look at the light and only the light. Darkness shouldn't shroud his soul ever again. And he firmly believed in it.

Fred had locked himself in the power shed in the backyard when Lawrence found him missing to catch some sleep because, to his knowledge, all his bodily issues stemmed from sleeplessness. At times he even thought all his problems wouldn't have existed if he had slept well during his younger days. He was quite lucky Lawrence didn't go searching for him so he got some time to spend alone. Of course, he couldn't sleep but he was free to lie on the floor, snort the last tenth of the coke he had and stare into the ceiling with nothing but his own thoughts around him. He found solace in doing so and he didn't want to leave. For the whole time he spent there, he was the king of his world, he was completely invulnerable so what could a mindless killer do to him. With the comfort level reaching its zenith, Fred closed his eyes to feel it. Gradually, he slipped into a slumber that lasted for a duration he didn't know how long. When he woke in fear that he had been too careless to let himself get some sleep during such a dangerous time, he thought he had enough rest and got out of the shed to find what had happened during the while he passed out.

The fog had grown unusually thick that it partially shrouded the backyard and the pool was barely visible. With the help of the backyard light, he waded through the fog, successfully evading the pool and reached the back door of the hall. The chairs he set earlier to have a talk with Lawrence remained right where they were. It was almost always silent in the hall when no one was present but not once did it felt as eerie as the silence that prevailed now. However, he walked to the staircase casually hoping nothing bad happened. But then he thought whatever happened, whoever died, none of it was any close to bad as long as he was alive. That was until he reached upstairs where things had apparently gone wild. None of the rooms were closed which was surprising as everyone appreciated their rooms for the privacy it lent them. Fred was very aware of it and that was what scared him. He couldn't really convince himself to not find if others were alive though he was pretty sure from the surroundings that he wouldn't be satisfied.

To keep his mind relaxed he tried to recall his favourite songs that he brought him pleasant memories of the past. The first room he arrived at was Olenska's and when he peeped into it, the songs failed to sound pleasant in his head. Olenska was on her chair, unmoving with her eyes fixed on the ceiling and her mouth wide open. Her head was hung over the head cushion of her chair that her whole neck was visible to Fred. He could see something like a rope burn on her neck which could mean she was strangled to death. Marcella was on the floor, lying close to the wall on her back. The better part of her clothes was blood-drenched though her face and hands remained unspoiled by any bruises or cuts. On a quick

glance, Fred could find she was mortally wounded somewhere around her abdomen.

Though it shocked him to find them dead, he sort of predicted it so he could manage to endure the shock. He kept playing songs in his mind, exited the room to find what was in the other rooms. He did only try to get to his room and he got to see another horror site. The door of his own room was splattered with blood and at the corridor in front of the door, Benjamin was lying dead. There was a wound on the lower part of his cheek which looked like it was caused by a gunshot. Fred said to himself may he rest in peace and moved past him, still playing the songs in his mind and humming to their tone. He quickly checked through the other rooms and found nothing.

Then he arrived at the dining hall from whose window he could see the sun rise. He stood at the window watching over the scenery from there, listening to the crashing waves at the shore and the cheeping of little birds in the trees. The music of the songs in his mind stopped as he preferred to hear the sound of the nature. He could see the seagulls hovering over and the warmth of the sun spreading over the sea. He teared up as he felt their lives had no measure of value to whoever the killer was and wished he was just killed right then while he was still able to watch a stunning example to the essence of life through the window. He didn't exactly enjoy watching it all, he just wished he was killed then and there peacefully and be done with it all. No more fear. No more pain. No more worries. He wished he had the strength to do it to himself and regretted his weakness. Sadly, he withdrew from the window and walked towards the dining table to rest on a chair and stretch himself. His eyes ran over the chandelier on the table which he always thought was beautiful than the chair he was about to sit on.

Naturally, he came to notice the glass elves around it and now there were only two of them. The first thing that struck his mind was that he wasn't the only one alive. And of course he knew who the only person whose corpse he hadn't yet found was. Lawrence of Vancouver. And just as he was gathering his thoughts about his actions, he heard footsteps coming from the tiny washroom attached with the hall. It was Lawrence who came out, wiping his hands with a tissue. He had slung Lambard's rifle over his shoulder which made Fred suspect him. Fred was scared when he saw him as he was pretty sure he was the killer. They both looked at each other in awe and fear and stood still wondering what the other was going to do.

They both just stared at each other but both of them knew the reason behind the stare. They were both afraid of each other's next move which would reveal the truth one way or the other. But the

move might also take their life away which was unacceptable to both the parties. Lawrence stretched his hands out and gestured him to stay calm.

"I can see how you feel, Fred. I feel the same. Let us take a seat and talk this over. Just like you asked me to do before," Lawrence said softly and clearly.

"You killed them. You cheated us," Fred's watery eyes left tears.

"What do you think I think? You disappear suddenly and they wind up dead. Why don't you tell me why you did it?" Lawrence was scared but was cautious and firm in his words.

"Want me to answer to this crap? I ain't gonna do as you say."

"I have a rifle with me, Fred. You're gonna take a seat with me," Lawrence sounded commanding and scary to Fred that he quickly got convinced. He didn't fight. Thus, they both moved slowly until they seated themselves opposite to each other.

"Now lets talk. Lets be cooperative for our mutual benefit," Lawrence suggested.

"I'm done, Lawrence. I'll walk over to the window and watch the sunrise. You put a bullet in my head and forget about it. You'll just be doing me a favour," Fred was hopeless.

"Listen to me, Fred. We're here to talk. I may sound weird, even I didn't believe it first, but I gotta say that. We have to trust each other to get past this. I want you to be cooperative. Lets ask each other questions and answer them truly. Lies won't help hereafter. It doesn't bother me if you ask first. I just-"

"Where are the other elves?" Fred asked the first question before Lawrence even finished his sentence.

Nodding slightly, Lawrence replied, "I took it. I have it now in my pocket. I didn't find you lying on the floor dead so I thought you were still alive. I wanted to tell you I was alive too, so I left two. As a message to you."

"Why did you run downstairs earlier like a damn freak? You still haven't answered that question."

"I barely knew I was running. I was... It was mind-blowing to learn Marcella lied to me after all the time she swore she didn't. I was going crazy. I just wanted to get out of there at that instant. I still can't understand why you want me so badly to answer such a

silly question. It's not even a question. It holds no importance over the blood carnage that's happened here."

"An answer to this?" Fred pointed at the welt on his face that resulted from Lawrence's blows.

"Like I said I was going crazy. I was still angry about it."

"Are you angry now? While we're sitting in these chairs in a talk-this-over situation. I assume you're not. What if I suddenly punch you in the face right now, knock you down to the floor and keep on hitting you till you squeal like a pig? That's exactly what you did to me. Only I didn't squeal. And you're telling me it's because you were pissed off about Marcella, a third person who wasn't even on a chair with us? Yeah, that's completely logical, my friend."

"Look if you suspect me to be the killer..."

"I know you're not the killer!" Fred shouted it to him though he was only a feet away. "I never suspected you in the first place. It is you who suspect me and that's why this sit-down-and-talk kind of crap you're pulling me into. You don't trust me or anyone and yet you talk like a damn sage. Like 'Trust is the only way out of here.' The rifle now you hold, I don't care if it's loaded or not. It doesn't make any difference. You had the chance but you didn't do it. Moreover, I trust you. And that's the end of it. Still got no trust in me? Hear this out. I was never sober. The dope you snatched from me, that wasn't all. I had more hidden everywhere my eyes found a spot, every pockets, every little crevices. I just didn't have enough for the rest of the days here and that's why I fought you. You were damn right it made me unstable. I was unstable. I can't even imagine what horrible things I would've done when I'm unstable. But I can give you a picture of how horrible those things can be. I killed Henderson. I'd killed him and returned to my room even before Bodholm returned from his wife's funeral."

Fred didn't look remorseful or worried but was rather smouldering with anger which shocked Lawrence for all the bad reasons.

"Beheaded? Yeah, Bodholm isn't the first person here to use a knife," Fred continued smiling which showed he was happy to have murdered him. "All those terrible things he did to me in the name of treatment. He disillusioned me. I was losing my sanity because of him. And then I'm made to attend a meeting hosted by the same psychopath who claims to be a psychoanalyst without my consent. Believe me, I did a favour to myself and all of you by getting rid of him. He would have driven y'all crazy. You should be thanking me for that. Even what happened to Sam-" Fred stopped suddenly but

as Lawrence was listening to him keenly he had no other way than to finish the sentence.

"It wasn't intentional, Lawrence. That night, I didn't sleep. I saw you go to the backyard and I followed you. I wasn't in the right mind. I was very high. I managed to figure out you got down to the cellar. When I found you there, you were lying on the floor unconscious and Sam held the rifle on you and was ready to pull the trigger. I saw it the way anyone would've seen it. I thought Sam was the one. I think I tried to talk him out of it but I was truly more paranoid than him."

"Are trying to say you killed Sam too?" Lawrence asked it straight out as he wasn't interested in the specifics of the event.

"I didn't know, Lawrence. I didn't mean to. I don't really remember a big deal of it. As far as I can recall, we argued. Sam probably understood I was high and tried to get me out of there. That's what infuriated me probably. I turned it into a fight and apparently beat him to death with that cane I got from beneath the couch. Only when I realised I killed Sam, I recovered my consciousness. Then I took the rifle in my hand. I wanted to hide it but somewhere else. But then, you see, Bodholm didn't deserve to be locked up like that. It always bothered me. So I took the keys from Lambard's drawer, right where I kept it. I covered myself to hide my identity, opened the storeroom, placed the rifle in the rack nearby Bodholm and closed it. I just thought he'd use the rifle to scare Lambard when he'd open the room the next day but... I don't know how he escaped. I don't."

"So you accept you're the killer?" Lawrence readied the rifle. "You killed them all and now you're pretending you're ready to die just to deceive me."

"Just the two of them. I don't know who killed the others or how or when it happened. I was in the power shed all this time. I was shocked to see all this."

"That's- Can you realise what exactly you've done? You practically started it all. If you'd just... God! But how can I believe it, Fred? Are you really not the killer? And what of that crazy recording stating our names and crimes? Even if all of this you said are true, you've been hiding it from all of us. From me. Why? What more are you hiding? How would I know you've got nothing else to hide?"

"Just the way I believe you," Fred stood up. "I have unloaded all the burdens I've been carrying. I'm ready to die. I insist you to do it. I don't care if you killed them or not. Either way, it's best for you to

put a bullet in me and make sure I'm dead. I'm all for it. I've snorted the last of the dope. I'm glad I'm not gonna die sober."

He's lying, Laurie. You're right. You're too intelligent to get fooled by him. Don't trust his words, Laurie. Don't hesitate. Just pull the trigger, Laurie. Pull it. You'll thank me for it, Laurie.

Lawrence slung back the rifle to his shoulder. "Nobody calls me Laurie," he said rather loud that Fred heard it and responded to it with a 'what?'

"You've said your part. Now let me say mine. You can sit back. It's been almost two decades since I came to Vancouver and I've been an attorney-at-law for a whole decade. All these years I've been always alone. My family is worse than a train wreck. My parents don't like each other and they blame it all on me. I don't call them my family anymore. I just waited to escape from them and when I got the chance I didn't hesitate and this is where I arrived. Owens was my only friend at high school or college. And then there's no one else in my life other than myself. I thought I was satisfied with it. The point here is for a whole lot years, I've been always alone. Alone at my home. Alone at my office. Alone at church. Now here's the important thing.

"Deep down I wasn't satisfied and I tried my best to convince myself that I was satisfied. I had arguments with myself in my mind on that manner where I had this little person I personified as my conscience. For years, my conscience was the only person I've been talking to. I literally talked to it. With words. Making sounds. It even became a part of my habit. Gradually a part of my house. A part of my clients. A part of my family. A family. Me and my conscience. My conscience wanted me to get a family for myself. I tried and I failed. Innumerable times. It never worked out for me. I can't bend them to my will which I blindly wanted to happen. How stupid it was of me. Only failures. I was pissed off. I wanted it to end. And finally it happened.

"I defeated my conscience. I believed I was satisfied with myself in my life and I needed no one. I thought this conscience persona died with it. But I never realised it didn't. That the persona of my conscience and the mental proof of my existence, my true conscience, weren't the same. All my dilemmas. All my decisions it was a part of me. I didn't sense it until now. It guided me in all the wrong ways. It ensnared me into believing false notions and emotions. It fuelled my hatred. My rage. I was satisfied with it. It made me believe revenge was the way to deal with Benjamin. You know what he did to me, right?

"So, I met Benjamin about an hour ago in the corridor. Right where you found him. And when I saw him, it called to me, 'Laurie, Laurie. Remember what he did to you. He doesn't deserve to live. He must die. That's the right thing to do. That's the only way you can find justice. Do it.' He told me something like he cared for me and some crap and he lent me his ring as an apology. I asked him to wear the ring back and shot him in the head. I don't regret that. Maybe he deserved a worse death, I don't know. But I just shouldn't have pulled the trigger. I shouldn't have. As a man who've dealt with a thousand murder cases shouldn't have done that. It wasn't me who pulled the trigger. I'm proud enough to not get the blame of a murderer on myself. But I did.

"I forced my hands, my fingers to do it. I was just like you. I did it without my full sense. So I'm not gonna get the blame of it on me. Of course, I didn't want to kill him. Just like you. So lets stay together on this. We don't deserve to be punished for the crime we didn't intend to do in the first place. By tomorrow, someone will arrive here. So here's the plan. We killed no one. Whoever killed them, Mr. Hearts, the Zodiac killer or whoever, it's someone we don't know. Someone we're afraid of. From now on, we stay separate. We're hiding from the killer. We don't know what has happened and who have died. The last person we know have died must not be Benjamin and we mustn't say the same person. I'd say Lambard's the last person to have died. And as of me, you, Bodholm, Olenska, Marcella and Benjamin are all alive. You choose the person yourself. But it shouldn't be Benjamin, he's actually the last person. We haven't seen each other since whoever among us went into hiding first. I'd suggest you're the first. It's better if you choose Sam. Never tell them anything that happened after Sam's demise. We leave it to them to tie up the loose ends. We're just confusing them."

"Lawrence, just stop!" Fred had to say it very loudly to even gain Lawrence's attention. He was not exactly happy to know Lawrence trusted him. It didn't sound like Lawrence at all to him. He spoke more than what he had spoken during the whole time they were together at a single instant. It was very untypical of Lawrence. He thought maybe Lawrence was scared that he might be arrested but he tried to break the truth to him. "They'd find, Lawrence. There's no point in what you're doing."

"No, no, no, no. It's gonna work. It must. All we have to do is to trust each other and cooperate. See, I trust you now. I said everything I've been hiding."

Fred decided to go along with him for sometime, "What about Bodholm? He must be alive, right? He probably killed Lambard and

the ladies."

"It doesn't matter if he's alive or dead. He left the place before Lambard's murder. And... yes. Bodholm is the perfect person we can convince everyone to believe the killer is. So whoever asks us, tell them you don't know who is the killer but that your prime suspect is Bodholm. Tell them everything that poses him as the killer and be careful to not let a single word out that contradicts your own words. You tell a story, stay with that story, whatever happens. We don't need to gather any evidences, just have to destroy a few. Like Lambard's rifle. Maybe we can just lay it beside Benjamin, make it look like a suicide. It isn't really that useful anymore when I don't know where the hell Mr. Rationale stacked his bullets if there's any left."

"Lawrence, I need you to listen to me. You're talking more and more like a criminal," Fred tried to pull Lawrence out of the fantasy he was building in which he received no punishment for his actions which he thought was doing justice.

"No, you listen to me. I explained what he did to me clearly. You sound like you didn't pay attention to my words."

"Alright, just tell me what you've got to say."

"I've said enough. I said it all. I need only your support on this. Tell me you've listened to me this time."

Fred thought for a second and came up with something which he thought might strike sense into Lawrence or at least into himself. "That tape said you murdered someone. So Benjamin isn't your first victim after all."

Lawrence didn't respond at once. He stared at him for a few seconds and smiled lightly. "It makes sense to me now. I've always got this suspicion and now I think it's true. About the man behind the tape. It was Owens. There was this guy Shoddy. A stoner with no brains. I had a history with him. He was the most self-destructive man I've ever seen. He ended up spending years in prison because of me though it was mostly because of himself. When he came out, he started troubling me to have revenge on me. Like I was the reason he got arrested. I used to tell Owens about him and all the worst things he did to me. Suddenly, I stopped talking about him and mysteriously he goes missing simultaneously. Days later he was found dead. Murdered. And based on some ridiculous stupid suspicions, Owens thought I killed him. No matter how hard I tried to convince him, he never stopped believing I killed him. In the whole wide world, Owens is the only person who knew about this. And it ends up in that stupid tape. Owens. The only person who knows

about all of us. And the only person to not arrive at here. I wonder if he'd really hired men to do this for whatever his true intentions were. I can see Henderson probably worked with him. He once told me something like artists trick us or something but it is him who's actually tricked us. Tricked us for what exactly? To let us all kill each other? God, he saw himself an artist!"

"Told you he's a psychopath," Fred replied though he didn't listen to him for the most part. He was pretty disinterested in Lawrence's way of dealing with the situation. When Lawrence extended his hand to shake on it, he went along just to end it. While they shook hands, Lawrence said, "This might be the last time we get to speak with each other. It's sad and tragic that we have to part this way. I don't want this to be dramatic. But it's for the good of the both of us. We did what was right. Lets do this together. And we stay out of punishment. I wish you all the luck in this world. Goodbye, Fred."

"Goodbye," Fred said softly and turned away towards the window. Lawrence, who thought it was going to be a very emotional parting was surprised by how simply it ended. Anyway, he wasn't shook by it. He firmly believed now that he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself and finding happiness in life after how it all went with Marcella. Even Fred couldn't stay in his life long. With such thoughts, he walked up to the walk path where Benjamin lied dead. And suddenly, he heard Fred call to him loudly, "Lawrence! Come here! Get a look at this." Lawrence's first thought was the suspicion if Fred was trying to lure him and he readied his rifle. It had a bullet left in it. It had to be an immensely accurate shot if he expected lethal results. Slowly, he tiptoed to the dining hall with the rifle in position, ready for it. But it wasn't what he thought it was. Fred was just peering into the window and said, "Couldn't you be slower?" without even looking at him. Lawrence quickly tucked the rifle away.

"What is that? It- it's... It looks like a boat. Can you come over and see it?" Fred asked confusedly. Though it sounded ridiculously like a ruse, Lawrence too saw something near the horizon that was pretty clearly visible due to the rising sun. He approached Fred to take a good look at it and realised it was truly a boat heading in their direction. They didn't know who were inside or why was it headed their way as there was still one more day left in their 'journey' but they surely knew it was a threat. They had to hurry things up to sell their story.

It was the police officers headed to Owens' island in that boat, directed to arrest Bodholm for murdering Owens' cousin Davis. It was like the death bell for Lawrence and Fred though they didn't

know who were inside. They ran in different directions, didn't even trying to work together. Lawrence had wiped the rifle clean and made sure it got Benjamin's fingerprints on it. He scanned through his room for any sort of imperfections he might have missed noticing and noted none. He cleared Benjamin's gear off the hall's entrance and got them to the power shed including the pry bar he left in Marcella's room, on Fred's request. He left Olenska's room untouched because he wasn't involved in any sort in their murder and it would be foolish of him to enter there and unknowingly leave a clue. He then managed to assemble all the elves he took, back in their place. When he was confident he cleared everything and the boat had got close enough, he settled himself in the store room where he locked himself in as a safety measure against the killer.

Meanwhile, Fred analysed his room for any clues of drug abuse and blew off the tiny white grimes that remained in the spots he used to chop the cocaine up before snorting. He made sure he rubbed off his fingerprints from the cane which he used to kill Sam. When he thought he was good to go, he ran to the power shed when the boat had already reached the wharf. On his way, he did notice the manhole cover was open but didn't try to close it and he had to set the shed up as if he had been there for quite sometime.

Among the officers who were assigned for this mission, there were both Lopez and Bob, who got there only based on their requests and their intelligent work on dealing with the misfortune at Chuck's cabin. They all were quite surprised that no one welcomed them or even tried to find who were at the wharf, without knowing what had happened inside the mansion. To them it seemed like a beautiful and serene place, quite well suitable for a spiritual meeting. They addressed themselves when they reached the entrance of the mansion and stated the purpose of their arrival but there was no response, of course. Assuming the worst, they entered with their guns at ready. They split themselves into teams of three and spread in different directions. They expected bad news but certainly not as bad as what they found upstairs. Who would have thought they were about to find bloodshed everywhere and more dead than the living? None of them had ever witnessed such a horrible manslaughter in their life. It certainly didn't feel holy or spiritual inside as it did on the outside. They wondered if they just walked into a house from a horror picture as it was that unsettling for them to be there.

Their first suspicion was on Bodholm whom they now feared and despised. It was until they organized a search for him which resulted in finding Lawrence in the store room who pretended to be afraid and teared up when they got to him and Fred in the power

shed who had a shovel in his hand which he claimed for his own safety. The search continued in the woods and by the shore and they soon stumbled upon the graves of Clara, Henderson and Sam. *Who the hell is Edwin Bodholm? Jack The Ripper himself or what? Thought this was a peaceful city.* Wild thoughts raced their minds. Not for long of course. They found Bodholm the Ripper dead beside a rock by the shore with the remaining glass elves in his clenched fist. He had lost a lot of blood from his wounds and apparently he couldn't have died a long time ago.

Lawrence and Fred were inquired separately and they told them everything that happened except the parts that concerned them. So, they were the only two who had survived a place eight others couldn't and both of them claimed there had been a mysterious killer in their midst. The police couldn't help but suspect them both as they sounded very weird. Their stories weren't impeccable and the way they delivered it felt too forced and unrealistic. Especially, Fred's poor attempts to hide the true story behind the welts on his face. It was as if they were just trying to evade their questions which felt like they were hiding something. At the moment, they kept them both separated and under their supervision and continued their hunt for clues and evidence. It was a shame that the case was only growing bigger since it started with Davis' murder. Now they had to find this mysterious killer whom might be the Mr. Hearts from some other case as per Fred. They figured they had to stay there till evening by when, hopefully, another team they had asked for, would arrive. Luckily, they had a lot of food in the mansion itself.

Knowing the time left, they worked quick. They packed all the evidences they collected to develop the case, sealed them and readied them for official use. They assembled the corpses in the hall, covered them with white cloth after removing all the valuables and pieces of evidence from them. One important object among them was a cassette tape found in Benjamin's coat pocket. It easily fell under the evidence column and as they had many things to do in the time they had, they left it for the new team to examine without playing it.

When they further examined every spot on the island, they naturally came across the manhole in the backyard that wasn't well covered and found the hidden cellar down the rabbit hole. As they thoroughly examined the spot, they found a secret safe inside the cupboard that had a number lock. They packed it as an object of debatable matter for how suspicious it was, to be hidden in a wine cellar which itself was hidden from plain sight down an unusually wide manhole.

The new team arrived at the island precisely at five in the evening in a particularly bigger boat with all the necessities required to safely bring five fresh corpses and three rotting corpses to the city. The forensics team examined all of them roughly and came up with the first report before getting them on the boat. Lawrence and Fred too were brought to the boat along with all the packed evidences ranging from Sam's death cane, the blood stained knife in Olenska's room and Bodholm's cleaver to the elves in his fist, the mysterious safe, the tape from Benjamin's pocket and a whole lot other. Thus the boat set off to Owens' old beach house where it was expected to arrive early the next morning.

That was where Owens had been waiting eagerly, hoping to see Marcella and a good lot of others who cared about him. However he was most excited to see Marcella and when he saw the boat arrive, he felt hope again. He literally ran over to the wharf with a smile crossing his face after a long time. The first face he saw was Lawrence's and then Fred's and while he was certainly happy to see them again, he noticed they didn't look comfortable and didn't smile back to him. They were surrounded by the policemen who guided them out of the boat. Owens wondered where were the rest of them and within a second, they began unloading the bodies off the boat one by one. Owens didn't believe what he saw at the first glance and then he couldn't help but run towards them. The policemen didn't let him close to the bodies, he was only allowed to see their faces from a distance. He was starting to feel he shouldn't have come there when he saw their dead faces, all familiar but cold and lifeless. Loyal servants. Pedantic mentor. Loving grandaunt. True adviser. Good friend. And amidst them was Marcella. Was she really dead? She was. He stared at her for a moment with unblinking eyes, he didn't know what exactly he was feeling - anger or sorrow. All roads led to a single route that ultimately ended in a ditch. That was how it was for Owens. All hope vanished into thin air. The feeling people encounter before giving it all up.

In anger and utter disappointment, he shoved away the nearby officer and broke down. He wanted to let it all out of him and burn the world to the grounds if it made him feel any better. He collided on the floor and from his view he could see the sky. The morning sun was still bright but he couldn't feel it or the hope it gave him an hour ago. All he could see was darkness that blacked out his hope.

News spread. The case Martin dealt with simply kept extending. The corpses were all brought to the mortuary after doctors had examined and finalized their death reports. Lawrence and Fred were still under investigation no matter how much detailed they could be

ate island. For them both, the fear wasn't over. Fear of death metamorphosed into fear of getting arrested. They were alone in the inquiry cells they were given. They had all the privacy they wanted a few days ago. But nothing had changed. There was still fear and loneliness poisoning their minds. Lawrence wasn't new to being lonely but now he wanted something he had before when he was lonely in his house. Freedom.

On the other hand, Fred already began to suffer. He fell into the valley of depression and anxiety. He hadn't snorted since the previous morning. He wanted so badly to take a snort of coke which had become a part of his behaviour and now without it, he was going crazy. He knew what it was happening to him and why it was happening. Because of the pain he suffered, he even thought of asking the cops to let him have some or he would die.

While in the department building, where the evidences were safeguarded, Lopez and Bob both were welcome to work on the case as the primary victim Martin was close to them. Since the incident at Chuck's cabin, Lopez had been distressed about the choice he made there. Bob too didn't talk to him normally after that. He never saw what Lopez did as justice and Lopez was well aware of it. Amidst all of the confusion, Lopez accepted to work on it just out of the respect he had for Martin and to free his mind from it. He was in the room given to him, examining the evidences when he heard Bob at the door.

"Lopez, they've got something. You might wanna hear this out." Lopez never sensed such excitement in Bob's voice in recent times so he immediately got out of the room.

"I'm coming," Lopez continued, "Hey, Bob. You still think I shouldn't have done that?" Without replying, Bob walked away. Lopez understood nothing had changed for him and followed him to the new inspector's office. A whole team of officers were there, surrounding the inspector's table. When everyone had gathered, the new inspector Marlow began his talk about the tape they got from Benjamin's pocket.

"There's this subject among the victims we found dead by the name of Olenska Downhart. This tape had been recorded by her at different times while she was in the island. She's been an intelligent one to do so as this tape is the game changer of this case. We don't necessarily have to believe everything she says but by far she hasn't been wrong except a few controversial points. She practically states every incident that's happened there till her death. I and Julian have studied the whole tape and there are some specific portions of it

which explain crucial points. This is one such a portion." Inspector Marlow played the tape.

"This is Lady Oleska Downhart. It's the second day of this stupid gathering. The date is 23rd of November. This recording is done by only me and not on anyone's request or threat. No one here knows I record this. Things are going crazy here. The purpose of this recording is to state the details on Dr. Henderson's murder. Yes, he was found beheaded this morning in his room. Yesterday, when the tape of my favourite song was played at lunch, we heard a gruff male voice citing the name of everyone of us and stating the crimes it claimed we did. The bad thing is, we don't have the tape with us anymore. The Napoleon of us, Mr. Lambard broke it."

"That mysterious tape is what started this craziness. We found the broken tape in the garbage. Unfortunately, it can't be restored, the experts say. Now we're sure Henderson is the first victim. But from what the survivors and this old lady said, Henderson's suspicion, hours before he was killed, was on the mysterious killer Mr. Hearts from some other case whom our guests thought to be hiding somewhere in the island. Our boys has searched the whole place and found no one. Anyway, Mr. Hearts has become one of our suspects. On the third day, she claims that Marcella, whom she considered the best match for her grandnephew, betrayed her and that she was responsible for Davis' murder and that Bodholm was just the pawn, just as our survivors said. That proves our survivors were right about that. But not everything it seems." Marlow skipped a few minutes on the tape and played it.

"I loved her like my own family." Oleska's sobbing was audible softly. "I want to kill her but I can't. You know what? What the tape said about her, I think that's true. She really could've murdered her husband's child, I'd wager. Probably because the kid wetted his blanket. For the first time, I regret being on the wheelchair. My servant Bodholm doesn't seem to be as evil as I thought. I feel ashamed of that. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be able to learn her treachery anytime soon. I don't like him but I now respect him. I don't want to call him dog anymore. When I talked with him, I learnt about that tape. The voice was Bodholm's, he spoke through a tube or something so that we couldn't find it was him but it was Henderson's work. That sick person. May he rest in peace. It's just as Fred said. He's a maniac. That tape was supposed to be a part of his sessions. He did that to create a sensation of fear in us and render us desperate mentally. All he made Bodholm say in the tape is true, I guess. Owens had told him all of that, it seems. The lesson was to confess one's own crimes. But with these sick people, I think it's not going to happen. I'm going to let it stay the way it is now."

I'm not gonna tell this to anyone. I'm going to make another tape with Bodholm. Just for Samwell. He's a coward but he deserves to be corrected unlike the rest of them."

Marlow paused it and said, "So there we have it. That second tape our survivors mentioned. Wasn't the killer's work, the tapes. Speaking of Dr. Sam, we come to this" and skipped to the desired portion.

"Today's 26th of November. The fifth day. Sam's funeral was just over. He was found beaten to death in the hidden cellar beneath the manhole beside the pool in the backyard. I know who did it. It wasn't Bodholm. We've brought the beds downstairs to the hall on Sam's request, thanks to the tape I made, it worked in all the wrong ways. Last night, I wasn't asleep. From my bed, I could see everyone who went to the backyard which is well lit. Benjamin was the first one to go there, followed by Sam, for no reason I could think of. I should've stopped him," Olenska's voice broke. She sniffed and continued, "If only I'd known what was about to happen. Within minutes, Benjamin returned but not Sam. I was afraid. I wanted to get to him but I couldn't. Both mentally and physically. And then, minutes later, Lawrence the demon went to the backyard like he's been waiting for it. Then his dog Fred followed him wagging his tail. They both returned too but not poor Sam. If there's someone who's responsible for Sam's death, it must be the demon or his dog. My guess would be the both of them since they often share the same cause. But I didn't accuse them. That wouldn't be wise for a woman in a wheel chair. I'll wait. My life isn't worth a nickle if I don't get Sam justice. So here me out. There is no one in this world who cares about him more than me. I say these two mutts are killers. This recording is the primary evidence. Whoever you are, inquire this matter in this point of view."

Marlow paused it again and stared at all of them in the room. They understood it was for how similar Olenska's and their ideas were. "Now we're at the culmination," Marlow played another portion of the tape.

"27th of November. Morning 1 am. I'm here to break the truth on Mr. Lambard's death. He'd always had an eye on Marcella, she had explained me about it the day I met her and late into the night, probably about an hour ago, he entered her room by force. Apparently, he'd strangled her and tied her down and was strangely found dead on the floor. Marcella's eyes, mouth and limbs have been tied to her bed when her door was opened. Naturally everyone thought it was the killer's doing but I saw what was happening inside when no one around. She tied herself to make everyone believe her story. I didn't see her kill him but it was obvious she did. If she

didn't, why did she have to pretend otherwise? That fool Fred untied her but didn't realise how loose the knots were. Prick. So then I lured her into my room after the dog had gone to wipe the demon's butt. I had the dinner knife with me. I pierced her abdomen with it. I did justice to my Owens. She wouldn't get a better punishment even if the police catch her. I confess. I killed her and this is the truth. She's been dead for the past five minutes I'd gladly accept any number of punishments you'd give me for murdering her but this is the truth. I've done a grand bigger justice to this world than you'll ever do. Ugh-" They heard the opening of a door lock and Olenska became silent all of a sudden. They could only hear her breathing.

"You killed her?" said a male voice from a distance. Olenska didn't reply but her breathing was audible. *"If I wish, I can suck the little life out of you. You are poison. I know how you manipulate people to your interests. And I remember very well how you destroyed my family. I'd forgive you for all of that if you just beg me to let you live,"* said the male voice. *"Benjamin!"* Olenska said softly. *"Oh, you know my name! Just do what I say. Beg to me like you've never done and I may consider leaving you alive."* *"I always thought you weren't as dumb as your father. But it's true what they say, right? Like father, like son. You talk to an eighty year old woman on a wheelchair like she cares about her life. If you're going to kill me, if you got balls to do that, then do it already. But remember this. Your father was the sleaziest and dumbest man I ever saw and I spit on his grave."*

All they heard after that was Olenska gasping for breath, followed by constant silence. Right then they heard Benjamin cussing and a click sound when the tape ended. "Olenska betrayed Benjamin's father and there's been a big deal of family wars following that," Marlow shared his view. "It seems this is an extension of the feud that's got her killed. Anyway, lets focus on how the tape ended. Benjamin found out about the tape and took it with him. But he didn't destroy it. He kept it with himself and obviously he is the last one to die. Now this leads to an interesting point. I had the report on Benjamin's death pulled out of the doctor's hand first and something is unconvincing. This is when my first doubt on Benjamin's death turned into a suspicion. Did he really kill himself? With a tape evidence against him in his pocket. Not a likely spot to choose for a suicide, either. I learnt from the report that the bullet had pierced through his skull and the wooden door of Fred's room in front of which he was lying dead and the trajectory of the bullet inside his skull is a straight line perpendicular to his face. Which means he would have had to stick the muzzle of the rifle to his cheek, hold the rifle parallel to the ground and reach out to the trigger of a one metre long rifle to pull it. Seriously? Who wants to try

to die in such a complicated way? Could've just put a bullet beneath the chin. Don't even have to take the gun in the hand. So let's ask our survivors about it. If the old lady's right, one of them must have killed Benjamin."

And when Marlow and Julian had come to his cell inquire about Benjamin, Fred begged to them, "Just get me a tenth and I'll tell you whatever you need."

"Julian says you've been asking that since morning. Do we look like a bunch of dope selling junkies to you?" Marlow asked in anger.

"Do I look like a prince in his royal chamber to you? Do I look like I've found solace in this crappy cell? Can't you see I'm suffering? It's the withdrawal syndrome! I've been consuming cocaine for the past few months and suddenly I've stopped. You know how much painful that is. I'm in pain!" Fred broke down and his suffering was truly visible to everyone. He was literally shivering in a room with no sort of ventilation. "Either give me some to snort or provide medical assistance. 'Cause without any of them I might just kill myself."

"You'll get the required medications," Marlow said firmly, "If you tell us all that you know." He stared at Fred who became silent suddenly. He thought for a few seconds and said, "I'd say everything if you make my pain go away. But on one condition. Lawrence shouldn't know I told you this. Can I believe I have your word on this?"

"Sure. You have my word," Marlow said immediately and there was a mild, visible expression of happiness on his face. They recorded his statement in which he confessed everything he did. Had he done that earlier, a number of people would have been alive and the spiritual meeting would have been meaningful for once. After his confession, he told Marlow, "The scar on his forehead. Sam caused it. Lawrence knows that. And I have one more thing to tell. I don't think this is gonna be useful to you but I just wanna say this. The way Lawrence acted yesterday before you arrived, it seemed like he had lost his sanity. I mean, he himself said he developed a persona in his mind and talked with it all the time when he was alone in his house for like ten years or so. Also I think, he might've murdered someone before. Way before all of this. When I'm treated, I'll try to explain everything to you. Just, don't tell him I said these, please." And just as promised, he was given the treatment he yearned for and he certainly had an improvement on his mental state.

An hour later, Marlow and Julian met Lawrence in his cell where he was kept isolated since he arrived at Vancouver. "Who are you?" he asked Marlow who was just entering his cell. Marlow didn't reply to him until he had seated himself and Julian opposite to him on the other side of the table.

"I'm Inspector Marlow and this is my associate Julian. We have something to straighten out with you and be quick with it. We've got a lot of things to do," Marlow said without looking at him.

"So, you're the inspector. The half baked one. Do you have the slightest idea of what you're doing? You've kept me arrested for more than a day without any charges against me. You know what, I'm a lawyer myself. I can sue you for that."

"Enough said, smart guy. You're just under inquiry based on suspicions. You're not arrested. Not yet," Marlow replied calmly and continued, "But with the recent discoveries we've made, it seems you're actually guilty of a murder. We've got proof you murdered Benjamin. You confess?" Lawrence was utterly surprised as he thought it was a foolproof plan he made. But then, the worse part of his mind influenced his judgement and after a few seconds of thinking he asked, "Did Fred tell you something?"

"Hey, I asked you a question, buddy. What I expect is an answer not another question," Marlow didn't want to expose Fred's involvement in the fear it might turn the tide.

"I assure you I'll provide you what you need if you answer my question," Lawrence didn't sound honest to Marlow. He just kept looking at him wondering if it would work. "An yes would suffice me. From the looks of you coming over I'm sure you've got very close to tying up the loose ends. An yes is a small effort to achieve success in such a big deal," Lawrence added more words to his point. Marlow turned to Julian to learn his opinion. Lawrence was very keen on how they communicate. Julian gestured his reply in a subtle nod. Marlow couldn't believe Lawrence manipulated him into it and proceeded to say, "Yes, he-" but immediately stopped by Lawrence's lightning reply as soon as he heard the word 'yes' coming out of Marlow's mouth, "I killed Benjamin. With Lambard's rifle. But I do not confess to any crimes because I did none."

"Wait, what?" Marlow was confused by his reply. "Can I get to meet Fred? In his cell. In front of any number of you. At a distance. I assure you I won't harm him or do anything stupid," Lawrence said calmly and clearly.

"Lets make this clear first. Did you actually kill Benjamin? Do

you confess?" Marlow asked to clear things.

"Get me to his cell. You can have my hands in cuffs. I just wanna have a talk with him. And then I'll give you my statement that I killed Benjamin."

Marlow was truly infuriated by Lawrence's behaviour, he didn't want to do as he said but also he wanted to move things quickly. So he agreed. Later that evening, after Fred's primary treatment was over. As soon as Lawrence was brought inside his cell, Fred got panicked. He looked at Marlow whom he thought betrayed him. Marlow, unable to bear with his own conscience, walked over to Fred and whispered into his ears, "I tried but he found it out himself." He patted his back and came back to his position. "Mr. Lawrence here wants to speak with you momentarily," he told Fred loudly. Lawrence with his hands cuffed at his back, kept staring at Fred who was getting more and more scared each passing second. To his relief, Lawrence spoke first, "Are we still friends, Fred?"

Surprised by the question, Fred couldn't reply at once. He also wanted to give the best answer for it so he stayed silent, thinking up the answer. And when he thought he got to reply the best answer, "I know I've hurt you-" Lawrence asked his next question as if he didn't need an answer from Fred, "Do you know what we humans are?" and continued, "Pedantic bundles of flesh and bones tied together. Craving for all the puny things in this world. Love and time are the abstract spells that make us believe what we see and what we feel which are often untrue. I learnt this is the truth from your actions. I should thank you for that but I won't."

"Lawrence, stop this. I don't get your point," Fred felt the same way as before when Lawrence broke down the previous morning but Lawrence kept on saying what he was saying. "Because I know what you are. A worthless human who can't keep himself sane. The true existence of us human beings isn't in the physical form but the mental one. And someone such as you who is mentally insane doesn't even exist. You do not exist. You're nobody. Nothing. I'm right now losing my breath talking into the air. And why the hell do you believe the words of a nobody?" Lawrence turned to Marlow who was as puzzled as Fred.

"I'm done. Get me out of here," Lawrence said to Marlow immediately and continued, "I did kill Benjamin. But the way you see it as a crime is wrong. It's not true. Abstract, like I said. It's not justice that you think is. It's madness." Lawrence kept talking in the same way as they tried to get him out of the room. He kept on explaining them the way he saw things even when they didn't listen to him. They began to believe Fred was right about his mental health. Fred

saw him leaving the room in the accompaniment of the cops and realised he had truly lost a good friend. The image of Lawrence he thought was true until a couple days ago felt unreal and stupid to him now that Lawrence's way of understanding the world sounded insane to him. Apart from all of that, Fred still felt very bad about betraying Lawrence though he thought it was the right thing to do. He kept apologizing to him in his mind, fantasizing him to be the man he remembered from the first time he talked with him.

The safe obtained from the hidden cellar seemed to hold something suspicious within; when it was scanned with the help of some experts, they opened it forcefully as Owens didn't share the pin with them. When it was opened, they found a surprising amount of illegally smuggled diamonds and other precious stones inside which Owens confessed were bought from the black market. He also confessed to his various crimes he committed in the process of earning the stones which included a number of murders in which Bodholm took part too. One of Owens' closest friends who bought Owens' private island which was familiar to him, originally accepted to buy it only because of the precious stones Owens hid there. But Owens didn't expose this truth to the police just to prevent his friend from the trouble it could have caused him.

Marlow and his team finalized their report on the case as everything was finally made clear. Everyone who were assigned for the case were shown the report. Thus it reached the hands of Lopez and Bob too while they were in the canteen. Lucky for Lopez, Bob discussed everything related to the case with him but nothing else and not the way they used to. Bob read the report and told him, "So. People of the parliament, huh? Vengeful, squabbling, imbecile jerks. They just killed each other based on their own stupid prejudice and hatred. Like only what they believe is justice." At this point, Lopez began to wonder if he was actually talking about him and Bob's immediate silence proved his guess was right. He turned to Bob if he got anything to say.

Bob pouted his lips and said, "You won't get to see a better example in your life, dear friend." Lopez understood what he meant and said to him sarcastically, "So we're still friends, huh?"

"What did you think? Been feeling that way?" Bob mocked him and patted him. Lopez was relieved that finally Bob was speaking to him like before. A few minutes later, Bob asked, "Have you thought about it, Lopez? Your justice for Martin. How you feeling about it?"

"Yeah. I've made my share of thoughts. You know, I did it because I thought I can do that. I had the power to do that. I deceived myself to use my power to my interests. Now, that is wrong. If I'm

capable of bending the law to my will using my power, I don't deserve such a power. It is wrong. I want to right it and I've made my decision about it."

"I'll be glad to know what's that," Bob said with a smile. "You'll see. I'm gonna confess," Lopez smiled back and walked away. When he got to his house late in the evening, he felt he had made the decision. He talked to his wife about it and succeeded in convincing her he was right. He got to his room and since the incident at Chuck's cabin, he hadn't felt as relieved as he was now. He stayed up at night, sat in front of his computer, finished typing up his resignation letter and faxed it to everyone he knew in his department including Bob. He wrote down his verbal confession on a paper and practised on it for some time. When he was confident he was done, he lied down on his bed beside his wife who was already asleep. Reclining himself on his pillow, he peeped out through the window. He looked at the waning moon and the stars in the sky, listening to the cricket chirps and found peace in it. He wished his life was just as peaceful as this moment as anyone would and sensed he had a lot of hope left in his life and all he had to do was to be careful in making decisions and avoid the wrong ones.

***** THE END *****

