

# Grotesque ~ A Gothic Epic

by G. E. Graven



## Chapter XX

[ Final Chapter of Book I: Resurrection ]



~**L**azarus trailed the greenish, glowing Spectre of Lord Medici as they flew southward down a conifer-covered coastline and toward the port village of *Saint Maxime*. To his right, he saw the dim and irregular edge of the seashore, with its many inlets and peninsulas; and in his speedy flight, the shoreline might have appeared as but a bouncing blur, leaping back and forth, over and again. And even with him in motion, to his left, the sprawling ocean and its crimson horizon struck his eye as unmoving seascape. Still, Lazarus sensed a subtle, nearly imperceptible graduation in that thin red line of dawn. Its swelling radiance and rising heat all but forewarned of a fervent and fiery dragon, in hasty ascent, and bent on scorching the face of the earth with its deadly light of day.

Time rolled beneath drumming wings and the pace of the Eljo's racing heart meticulously marked its passage in mere fractions. Onward Lazarus flew, even as the furthest edges of easterly clouds glowed in sweeping hues of red that could have resembled a collage of colossal bloodstains, smeared against the underside of Heaven. He doubled his pace, in keeping with Medici's; yet the Ghost pressed onward in

deliberate and unbroken haste. Thin lines radiated from the seaward horizon, them spreading outward and through the dim heavens with a semblance of the beginnings of a monstrous, fiery spider's web. Massive streams of sunrise ripped skyward, and so eventually great was this heavenly display of daybreak, that, from afar, Lazarus' silhouette might have resembled that of a moth's shadow against a massive volcano's glow.

Lazarus' alarm turned to dread—and rose to panic, when he cried, “Medicci, there is no more time!”

“A bit more, Lazarus!”

“No; I must course inland!”

“No! 'Tis just there,” Medicci exclaimed, pointing before him and toward an outcropping of rocks that formed a lengthy peninsula. “We are nearly upon her! Make haste!”

Lazarus clenched his jaw, tightened his shoulders, leaned into the wind, and lunged forth with a new speed. He dropped low and skimmed the surface of the sea, holding tight on Medicci's heel. Together, they rounded the rocky cape and banked hard. Feathers exploded over the ocean as Lazarus scattered a flock of cliff-dwelling birds. They tore through startled wings, covered the stony isthmus, and veered further inland to sail into an inlet of shallow, greenish seas. The cove lay filled with small, randomly scattered islands that could have seemed as existentially presented, steeple-like heaps of scarred and naked rock. Altogether, they stood in the bay as ocean-burned tombstones of gray, rising from the wider green of a watery grave.

“She's there!” Medicci pointed toward a pair of proximate islands that, together, might have resembled a row of lower canine teeth, complete with incisors, raised toward the sky. A narrow gap of darker waters separated the stony formations. And as Lazarus neared the space of ocean betwixt the twin islands, he spotted a distinct and seemingly displaced speck of a structure that, from his ever-advancing vantage point, swelled into developing detail.

“What think you?” Medicci questioned aloud as he fell alongside Lazarus. “She's suitable refuge and remotely stowed, yes?” In the shadows of the rocks, Lazarus marked the remains of a leaning cog ship, sunken at the stern and jutting upward at the bow; and by its singular angle in the water, the vessel might have appeared, intent on sailing straight into the northern skies if not held at bay by ocean waves. Lazarus slowed to better inspect the skewed wreckage.

Stained hull planks confessed of a once-level waterline, and just below them, a blanket

of bleached barnacles protruded from the bottommost sides of the jutting bow, giving the upturned and broken-down ship the likened appearance of sporting a bony white beard. And there was more, however minuscule in mien, to suggest that the vessel was not entirely a lifeless shell of a ship. Lazarus spotted large hemp ropes that traversed its algae-covered deck, still secured to various parts of the vessel. Then there were others only partly fastened, with their unbound ends draping over its stern and dangling freely in the darker water. Rhythmical swells of gloomy waves swayed the frayed ropes such that they moved in unison to resemble a row of raised and dancing snakes.

In all, the ship might have seemed of considerable size; however, 'twas not of a seaworthy design that could have undergone lengthy ocean voyages, but more of a make to have overcome the serene seas of shorelines betwixt provincial coastal ports. Nevertheless, in its exceptionally decrepit condition, the vessel sported no sails or mast; and remnants of a quarterdeck lay collapsed atop its main deck. And, over most of its algae-covered platforms and broken baluster walls, parts of dried fish carcasses lay strewn about as likely evidence of prior seagull meals.

Medicci lit upon the ship as Lazarus re-circled the vessel to better inspect the hull for breaches and, satisfied of a seemingly sound ship, he joined Medicci on the main deck. Planks creaked beneath his new weight. Medicci marched heavily and without a sound toward this ship's hold. "In here," he called back before disappearing within. Lazarus stepped lightly after him, deck planks groaning with his every steady footfall. "I do not care for it," he grumbled, still winded from flight. "'Tis safe?" He slung sweat from his brow and caressed a knot on his forehead. "She's safe enough for a day's stay," Medicci shouted from below, his voice resonating through the ship's hold. "And her belly is dark as night—well suited for your affliction, I gather." Rapping and tapping sounds carried through the decking, noises like those of knuckles against wood, when the muffled voice of Medicci added, "Her hull is a sound one, given her fallen condition. I suspect that these islands spared her from the brunt of many a tempest. And she lists a bit sternward; however—Lazarus? Why do you remain topside?"

In the veil of island shadows, Lazarus stole a final upward glimpse of naked rock formations before climbing down into the dim depths of the vessel's belly. All the while, he complained, "As I am no wingless floating Spectre Medicci, I must catch my breath at times."

The Spectre chuckled. "You fly so hastily, Lazarus; I never suspected such." Lazarus planted his boots heavily on the hull floor, turned, and crossed his arms. He

stared blankly in Medicci's direction. "I nearly died from the sun; I slew a bird with my head; and I nearly crashed into the sea. And now we should laugh about it?"

Medicci snorted and arrested his mirth in the same breath whilst pulling several lodged gull feathers from out of Lazarus' hair. "Forgive me Lazarus. I never saw you fly into a bird. Are you injured?"

"Better than the bird," Lazarus responded, rechecking the rosy lump on his forehead.

"I do not mean to make light of your misfortunes, Lazarus." Medicci stepped alongside Lazarus and inspected his brow. "Perhaps, after two hundred years, your new companionship has shed fresh light on my own affliction. Strangely, it now seems as though I have good cause to fear death; and with it, I feel more alive. Not my death, mind you, but yours. After all, if you were to perish, then I would certainly perish as well, alongside my poor Sophia." Medicci cleared his throat, clasped his hands, and offered him a solemn oath; "Lazarus, I give you my word that I shall never knowingly steer you into harm's way."

Lazarus smiled weakly and nodded; and the Ghost presented Lazarus' whereabouts with open arms. "So here you stand, with a mere bump on the brow, yet quite safe from the sun, yes?"

Lazarus fell deeply into his senses—his nose tasted the dank and briny air, with its mixture of smells that emanated from algae, fish, decayed wood, and the sweet sweat in his clothes. Fortunately, the last of the fisherman's lingering stench had disappeared from his clothes. He felt the cold beads of perspiration on the flesh of his wings, now chilled in the dim, ocean-cooled hold. His pupils swelled wide in the darkness and the ship's interior features took form. He could see that Medicci spoke true—the vessel's hollow appeared solid, with its ribs and shell well sealed. The Spectre chuckled. He could feel the unnatural angle of his feet; and he studied the floor to find that its furthest planking disappeared beneath a pool of stagnant black water that spanned the entire width of the hold's aft. He turned about and inspected the narrower fore of the hold's floor, which lay high and dry. He peered overhead, through the entrance of the hold, to see the naked sky and its exposed stars. Then he turned to Medicci and pointed upward. "Unfortunately, the sun rises; and at its highest shine, it shall burn away this darkness—and me, with it."

Lazarus made a move to step topside when Medicci sped forth and stopped him. "Not to fret; allow me. Rest yourself." The Spectre smirked and whispered a physician's cryptic, rhythmical, and philosophical wisdom to him; "As every affliction gives rise to its eventual demise, by way of remedy; so might we mistreat our misfortunes and thus, give rise to relief and ease."

“And what does that mean?”

“It means that a few strewn timbers can turn even the brightest day into the darkest night.” He chuckled, vanishing topside.

Overhead, Lazarus watched Medici hastily disappear and reappear, only to return with new bits of the ship's collapsed quarterdeck and layer them over the opening. And when the last scrap of wood removed all hint of the heavens, Medici returned below and stood beside Lazarus to appreciate the darker underbelly of his doings. “Black as pitch; as you wish. What think you?”

Lazarus smiled wearily. “Why, thank you—once again.” He turned away and climbed the inclined floor, towards the fore of the hold and, to hull planks that lay high and dry. Near the bow, he dropped to his knees and plopped himself belly-down before lazily reshuffling his wings. In the ensuing dark-still, lapping waves and a creaking hull nearly lulled him to sleep when he drew a sudden breath and stirred. “Medici?”

“Yes, Lazarus?”

“Do you ever grow weary?”

“In a manner,” Medici answered, “yet differently than you might gather.”

“How so?”

The Ghost paused, in likely contemplation. “Tis perhaps best expressed by example—so I shall present it thus—might you recall a moment in your life when you suffered a profound loss, and with it, a sorrow so heavy that you felt drained of, all will to live?”

“I can.”

“Splendid,” Medici said. “Now, if you would, do attempt to part the sorrow from the moment such that, the lacking will, was all that remained. And by its lonesome, you might likewise know how a soul feels when it grows weary.”

“Medici?”

“Yes?”

“Can you fly forever—never tire?”

“I never tried. And with that flying *goat-of-an-angel*, seeking all it can devour, I shan't risk it.”

“Azazel?”

“The same. And I would not be so terribly struck if both Azazel and Azrael have means to fly forever; as they traverse the world, going up and down in it, seeking strayed souls like myself.”

“Up and down?”

The Ghost chuckled. “I have learned a bit of the ways of Angels in my, many years

dead. After all, they have yet to snare me, even as I move amongst them, going to and fro in the world. I have seen hundreds of Angels about, all as Spirit and Shades—we merely discuss the two because they are the seekers of wandering souls.

“So these Angels seek those souls that have not yet left world. I gather,” Lazarus stated. The Spirit returned a nod. “Only the two, as I gathered from Azrael—Azrael and Azazel seek souls.” Perhaps I might be more casual in their description.” He stroked his chin and then shook an upward-pointing finger as he continued. “These two are much the divine servants of the Great Manor of Creation, who collect the refuse and clutter, thus keeping the Great House tidy and clean.” Medici shrugged. “They go here and there, hoping to find me, yet I am not there, since I know how and where they seek to snare me. My Sophia's grave is one such a place where Azrael lays in wait, like a snake on the heel. Yet, she always lets me flee as promptly as she catches me. 'Tis like a seasonal game we play—I pretend my intentions to go with her; and she allows me to escape again. And truly Lazarus, I oft-times wondered if I might be the oldest soul to wander the earth.” Medici rapped on wood. “Pray tell, my wise and winged squire. Might you know of the reason that, after two centuries, God has not swept me clean from the earth? I'm certain that He sees me, as easily as could anyone watching a bit of refuse or tangle of matted hair blowing 'round on the floor. What think you? Why so?”

Lazarus snorted once before settling into a steady snore.



The sun soared high, only to hang over the twin islands, bathe the grounded Ghost ship with its midday rays, and brown the newly grown algae of the past eve. Chattering gulls gathered atop the decking, where they shredded the flesh of gill-breathing fish. And thus, another day's catch of Pisces Eyes dried against a burning sky. Yet, never once did the sun violate the vessel's belly—Lazarus slept soundly in her cool and shadowy womb. Midday rolled into afternoon as the shade of the westward island crept over the vessel. Dusk followed; and when the winds died, and the tides turned, the gulls once again abandoned the ship for the mainland, leaving the evening to chase away, yet another day of freshly dried and wide-eyed fish.

A large orange moon rose from out of an eastern sea, casting its cool light over the ocean. And like a cock that stirs to the first glow of a dawning day, Lazarus awakened to the latter shades of a greying night.

“You slept hard.” The voice of Medici carried through the hold.

Lazarus worked to collect his wits. He rolled upright, groaned, rubbed his eyes, and

caressed the side of his cheek, which bore distinct impressions of floor planks. Then he spotted Medicci near the stern of the hull, with both hands and their folded fingers holding opposite seams of his vest. He stood, with an air of apparent dignity, yet knee-high in water.

“Good eve.” Medicci gave greetings, and strode toward him from out of the water, which never rippled. “Are you well rested?”

“I am.”

“Well, I am delighted to hear that one of us is rested,” Medicci complained. “You deny me sleep for the entire eve with your snoring.”

“Forgive me, Medicci. Perhaps I—”

Medicci laughed, especially at the notion of a sleeping Ghost.

Deliberately, Lazarus rose to his feet. He glared at Medicci with eyes like knives. “I should laugh now?”

A pale Medicci stopped short, his gleeful expression gone; and Lazarus chuckled at the sight of a startled ghost.

“You truly had me,” admitted Medicci, shaking a pointing finger at Lazarus and resuming stride.

Lazarus sported a smirk of satisfaction. “I bid you a good eve as well.” He bowed curtly. Medicci halted before Lazarus and snapped a return bow. “Welcome, aboard the Jewel of Eden.”

“Jewel of whom?”

“Eden,” Medicci retorted with quick completion. He pointed over Lazarus' shoulder, toward the bow. “’Tis the ship's name. Whilst you slept, I ventured about for further inspection; and her existent condition reveals much about her past.”

“How so?”

Medicci clasped his hands behind him, rocked back on his heels, and smirked. “I shall tell you, my good Lazarus.” He dropped a contemplative gaze toward the floor, and strode in a tight circle, sharing his findings. “It appears to me that she sat heavy in the water, hauling bolts of cloth and parts for clothing, when she ran aground. Most of her tattered cargo now rests on the rocky seabed below, perhaps discarded by her crew in every attempt to lighten her load. As well, it appears as though they tried to pull her backward with a second vessel, hoping to dislodge her from the rocks.” Medicci rolled his eyes without missing a beat. “Clearly, ’twas uneventful since she is still lodged firm. I gathered such efforts from her many tied ropes, the largest of them still laying in precise arrangement atop her deck, with their broken ends evenly draped over her stern. And of course, aside from the Hand of God, only a greater ship can pull a lesser ship.” Medicci stopped and looked squarely at Lazarus, nodding. “I suspect that her bold and

impatient captain barrelled forth in shallow seas, with a proud wind and a full sail, when he set a course betwixt these opposing islands. He may have done well to steer clear of them, no matter the temptation or cost.” Then he shrugged. “Nevertheless, here she lies, waiting for her demise—a former jewel of a vessel—since discarded and forgotten by all but the birds and fishes. And we are likely her last passengers before she goes the way of her sunken cargo.”

“You have a keen eye for the particulars,” Lazarus replied. “I attempt the same, when afforded.”

“Well, 'tis only by observation. I could equally suspect all of it wrongly, mind you.”

“I think not,” Lazarus offered with a smile. “You seem to glean the greatest truth from the smallest signs.”

Medicci raised his brow. “Words, kindly taken; however, only by the Grace of God may I know Truth.” He gestured overhead.

“Now, shall we step topside to stir and wake the world from its eventide slumber?”

“Oh, indeed,” Lazarus answered. He turned and scaled the vertical case, pushing layered boards aside to reveal a clear and luminous sky. And like a guardedly emerging gopher, Lazarus raised his gaze only eye-level with the moonlit deck to peek over its surface. He discovered the hastily-ascending visage of the Ghost, which rose clearly through solid decking.

“Well, do come on; the eve is yours,” Medicci insisted, beckoning Lazarus to emerge with all of himself.

Lazarus glowered at the Spectre before climbing out the hold. He strode gingerly over the algae-covered deck, canvassing the disarray of dried fish parts, disjointed and splintered wood, and the tangled web of rope that weaved, this way and that; and, up and down over the whole of the vessel.

Medicci quietly trailed him, his attention absorbed by the heavens.

Lazarus wandered warily toward the raised front of the ship. His clothes whipped in a warm and steady breeze that blew seaward from the mainland. He stopped near the bow and studied its keel, which bore the partial carving of a woman's nude backside, now broken away at the waistline. “The jewel,” Lazarus murmured, looking about the deck for remnants of her upper torso, only to find splintered wood and scattered rope. He turned toward the sea, combed the windblown hair from out of his face, and held it against the top of his head. From his new vantage point on the foredeck, and with him peering around the lower northern side of the seaward island, he spotted the dawning and luminous face of the moon. A reddish and hazy halo encircled the orange orb, giving the heavenly body an ominous and wraithlike facade. Lazarus stood, immobile as

a statue, as he came to terms with the wide and pitch gulf before him. At length, he inquired; “How deep is the ocean?”

When he heard no reply, the Eljo turned to find the Ghost self-absorbed with a matter of outward measure. Medicci stood with his back to Lazarus, an arm raised toward the south-easterly skies. He peered betwixt two erect fingers that formed a V-shape, through which he aligned in its crux, a fixed line of sight against the stars. Then he brought his fingers together, turned them sideways, and lowered his arm to bring the pair of pointing digits level with the horizon. And in a single flow of motion, he discerned the precise degree of direction, of the distant Isle of Corsica. “As the crow flies; so might we,” he mused aloud, propping his hands on his hips and surveying the raven sea.

“Medicci?”

The Ghost spun about like a submersed and suddenly startled master of arts, unexpectedly torn from an extraordinary and abstract world of extrapolation. “Oh, ahem—yes, Lazarus?”

“Do you know of the ocean's true depth?”

“I do believe,” Medicci replied. “And it truly depends, Lazarus. There are some parts of it that are no more deep than your boots are high. Then, there are other parts, which are no less shallow than the clouds are high. He stopped short of Lazarus and expounded. “You might gather the lay of the ocean to be much like the lay of the land, with its highest mountains and deepest valleys. What is more, that the world's water flows in waves, much like the earth's ether blows in winds.”

Lazarus nodded and scanned the ocean, gathering its depths in a fresh light. He shot a gaze to the heavens and sought confirmation. “As deep as the clouds are high, you say?”

“Indeed, and even deeper; I know, in its furthest reaches.”

“How do you know this?”

Medicci sighed, crossed his arms, and rocked back on his heels. “This, I know, for the world told me so. In my many bodiless years, I have seen much of the earth's face. I traversed its every terrain, going to and fro; both high and low. From the highest clouds and tallest mountains, to the lowest oceans and deepest waters beneath the earth, I searched for Hell's whereabouts. Truly, the oceans are vast, varied, and deep—enough to seem as dark and dismal worlds of their own.”

Lazarus turned back to Medicci after having peered over the side of the deck. “On its surface, it does not appear so deep.”

“True,” Medicci replied, clasping his vestment seams with both hands and adopting the

posture of a proud statesman's stance. “On their surfaces, most things appear so—plain, unthreatening, and perhaps even peaceful. Yet, even a common stone, once overturned, oft-times reveals many mysterious facets and hidden workings beneath it—mostly unappealing.” He offered an intense and thorough inspection of the ship's deck, as though to search for prying ears or spying bystanders. Then he smirked and whispered, “In my former days as an alchemist, I overturned many unturned stones, in a manner of speaking; driven to unearth many of the world's marvellous unknowns. And all, whilst the Church remained none the wiser—my work remained secret from prying eyes.” He chuckled dryly.

”Why, did you hide your work,” Lazarus asked.

In a melodramatic show of disappointment, Medici huffed and dropped his now lifeless arms beside him. “’Tis the way of village people—especially those who fall stricken at even the slightest shades of night, or see their own shadows as trailing Demons and Devils, secretly stalking to steal their souls. I once lived in a town, rife with such Church-inspired communal drivel. And as an alchemist of the day, seeking the *Elixir of the Ancients*, and its cure for the affliction of Death, even the smallest details of my studies called for utmost secrecy.”

“Yet, healing affliction is a good thing; so, why, secrecy?”

“Why—you ask?” Medici inquired, guffawing in seemed disbelief. “Lest I rouse a town's suspicions, stir a communal fear, and find myself standing before the Church council, defending myself against accusations of heresy and witchcraft. After which, I would be marched to the market square, baptized in tar, set aflame, and serve as an exemplary example of the town's brilliant and crowning Church torch.”

Lazarus narrowed his eyes to the graphic images, reeling in his mind.

Medici cleared his throat. “Lazarus, I do not know if you are aware of it; but the Church actually burns people alive for far lesser crimes than practising alchemy, physiognomy, or a similar discipline, without a properly appointed overseer of the Church.”

“I do recall mention of such burnings,” Lazarus admitted, now pondering over the assumed fate of the catacomb prisoner. “To be burned to the bones.”

“To ash and dust, even,” Medici affirmed, with a touch of repugnance. “They are burned to keep the subservient fool under pontifical rule.” He shook his head. “In the year prior to my embarking upon my last voyage abroad, the town square lit brightly with every new moon—brightly with the burning bodies of the council's accused. And the ritual burnings were so routinely staged that the townsfolk began to hide in their

homes and secretly condemn the Church. I agreed with them and, although I was not so passionate as most, I did permit my guests the openness to express their outrage of the mass executions. 'Twas not till a particular incident occurred that enraged even the most influential townspeople. I was terribly angry, and my Sophia was in tears—as were many of us who knew the accused boy. The lad suffered terribly at the hands of the Church council.”

“What did the boy do?” Lazarus asked.

“Nothing significant, of which we were aware,” Medici answered, defensively. “I should say that the boy behaved a bit differently than did his peers; and perhaps, his appearance was equally as queer. He was quite active and restless; his mind wandered, and he often spoke so broadly, and in such haste, that his original intentions had often times escaped him even before he was able to complete his words. However, I truly believed that he had more redeeming qualities about him than did most mischievous boys of his same eleven years. His name was Stephan and; through Sophia, I grew quite fond of both, him and his equally striking mother, Magdalena.” Medici stepped toward the edge of the ship and slid his hands into his pockets. He studied the naked rocks of the coast-side island.

Medici continued, with his back to Lazarus; “Stephan's parents were good, God-fearing, and dutiful people. Upstanding nobility, they were, before losing a succession of substantial investments and falling into a more—how shall I say—perhaps, a more prudent lifestyle.” Medici shrugged his shoulders. “Well, they were not reduced to mere paupers, mind you; even though many of their former, noble acquaintances became, increasingly and conveniently more unavailable. Nevertheless, our doors remained opened to them, since Sophia and Magdalena had grown to be like sisters over the years. Rich, poor, or otherwise; even God and the Devil, working as one, could not have separated the pair of them with even more space than might exist betwixt a button and its thread. Besides, what was wealth to Magdalena when Sophia often times carried my purse to the town shops for a shared spree of lavish spending? Sophia was eager to please her; yet, I did not mind my purse over it. After all, my disciplines demanded most of my days, leaving Sophia with ample and idle time for herself. And with my work adversely unaffected, Magdalena and Stephan offered Sophia a rich attention that I could not readily afford to spend on her. Thus, all and all, it served all.”

The Ghost turned and approached Lazarus. “In any case, Stephan had many of his mother's features, save her distant, *Norlander* accent. His hair was of the lightest shade that I had ever seen—'twas almost white. And his skin was so much more pale than,

even Sophia's fair complexion, that the deep shine of his blue eyes seemed to cast an eerie beam, as might azure crystals, sited before a flame. 'Twas much like the same uncanny stare as is yours, Lazarus. Nevertheless, there was much more to him than surface appearance.”

“Stephan was markedly clever and crafty for his young years. Yet, in the deepest sense—perhaps, even to his soul—I felt that his very existence bore a dreadful curse and a divine meaning in the same. Truly, I could only witness his doings for yet a moment and become, altogether vexed and awed; as the boy exhibited an unsettling and uncommon sense of orientation, especially in moments where most persons might lose all balance of self. Even with his undeniable ability—of which, I can most assuredly attest, by my having been a rigorous and disciplined practitioner of reason and reflection—his continued demonstration of it invariably troubled me. And on those numerous occasions when Stephan exhibited his queer gift, I sensed the same: feeling myself equally divided, and torn betwixt two opposing parts of me that remained, steadfastly at irreconcilable odds with the other. Yet that torn feeling never lingered, as my thoughts seemed to settle into a newly made space, of equidistance, betwixt the opposite and warring ends of me.” Medici placed his hand on his forehead as perhaps to check it for signs of fever. He searched the stars as he confessed; “And in that seemingly dead space of newfound silence, apart from the countering screams of reason and feeling, it seemed as though I could safely witness Stephan's doings from afar; and watch in wonderment whilst the boy worked my ever-failing senses into a welcoming yet bothersome state of senselessness.” He lowered his hand and looked blankly at Lazarus before shaking his head.

“What did Stephan do?” Lazarus questioned.

“Well,” Medici stated, drawing a breath, and an expression of apparent concern in the same, “Stephan was inclined to suffer abrupt episodes—or fits—where he was not quite aware of himself. His fits were often prolonged and perhaps disturbing to an unsuspecting bystander, as he would spin himself in place, with arms splayed, and stare directly upward. No loud call, hand clapping, or direct touch stole his attention. One could rest his hand over the boy's upturned face and he would spin beneath it; however, if one moved to block his arm or impede his spinning, Stephan would fly into a screaming rage till he could continue with his spinning. Truly, during those moments, he was completely unaware of all happenings about him, recollecting absolutely nothing afterward. 'Twas as though an unseen veil had settled over him to thoroughly separate his senses from the world. And in that strange and seemingly severed state of himself, he would simply *spin—and spin—and spin*. I must admit that, even for a moment, the mere

sight of his spinning had my mind reeling—with me feeling as though I might be on the verge of losing my own footing, even when I was not standing. However, Magdalena and Sophia had long since grown accustomed to the boy's frequent spells of spinning and pretended not to notice.” Medicci shook his finger at Lazarus. “And I might dare assume that, if the boy climbed atop their very heads to spin, and I offered even the slightest hint or notice of a '*Spinning Stephan*' in their midst, then I would certainly draw twice the wrath for bringing it to their attention. They always conspired against me like that—the two of them.”

Lazarus turned away with a tight-lipped smirk, and blew a bout of humour from his nose.

“You should laugh?” Medicci asked with a highbrow demeanour before continuing; “Even so, I could not easily dismiss it, or pretend it away, especially with so many precious vessels and pedestals lying within a spinning arm's reach—and with rows of delicate artifacts lining every wall of the manor hall; I could not turn a blind eye.” Medicci crossed his arms, nodded, and leaned closer to Lazarus, as though sharing a secret. “Nevertheless, there were moments when Stephan had his fits, and the women were elsewhere, leaving only me and the boy together.” He cocked his chin forward to suggest forthcoming and privy details, which he shared; “On one particular occasion, Stephan fell into a spell where he proceeded to spin directly beneath an entryway, his splayed arms repeatedly passing a stone column only by the slightest degree. Upon discovering it, I positioned a candle table and a chair beside the boy and the fixed column; and in a good light, I studied the slight gap betwixt his passing fingers and the nearby stone. He *spun—and spun—and spun*; and I never once turned my gaze from the brief space that he made with his every rotation. I looked for the slightest measure of shifting space, where his passing fingers might tend toward or away from the fixed column; however, in his fingers' every passing, there was absolutely, no perceptible deviation of that space. For the longest, Stephan spun perfectly in place. 'Twas as remarkable as it was, troubling.” After a fleeting pause, Medicci shrugged, admitting, “I was a bit consumed—by wine—perhaps slightly drunk when the women returned to discover my continued study of Stephan's movements.” The Ghost looked down and rubbed the side of his face in woeful recollection, continuing, “The women chased me out of the manor; threw my chair and wine bottle out-of-doors; and told me to go and gauge the gaps betwixt the trees.”

Lazarus chuckled, half-collected himself and asked, “What did the Church do to Stephan, for his fits?”

“Oh, 'twas not because of Stephan's fits—when Stephan spun, he stayed silent. The

Church became suspicious of Stephan when he opened his mouth—the boy truly had a tongue. He was much like his mother in that regard. I do not mean to say that he spoke irreverently, or with a crude tongue. On the contrary, he was quite reverential and articulating, even to show amiability in his most unsparing remarks. The trouble with Stephan was this: if a notion began to cross his mind, he spoke of it even before the new idea had completely settled within him. On occasion, he would have to arrest his tongue till the notion caught up with his overly-tempting desire to express it. Truly, he seemed incapable of reflecting upon a thought long enough to measure its worthiness or appropriateness before sharing it aloud. Thus, if an idea was forming in his mind, 'twas likewise forming in the minds of those in his immediate company, by way of his restless tongue—without fail, he spoke his mind at the expense of all else.

This particular detail about Stephan vexed me greatly—even more than his fits of spinning—especially when he openly conversed with a proximal and frequenting friend of his by the name of 'Victor.'" Medici propped his hands on his hips, pursed his lips, and nodded. "And like Stephan's fits of spinning, Sophia and Magdalena pretended not to hear the boy's blatant and ongoing conversations with his friend. I played my better part, not to listen. 'Twas yet truly daunting a task for me to bide my tongue when the women would spur Stephan into personal and detailed conversations with his friend, behaving as though Victor was a part of our same family. Instantly, the women would whisper to Stephan, for him to ask Victor if he wished to accompany them for a stroll on the manor grounds; or partake in a carriage ride to town; or even dine with us at the very end of my same table."

Lazarus shook his head in expressed confusion. "Why did Victor's presence vex you so?"

Medici raised his brow and stated plainly, "Victor never existed."

"Yet you claimed that Victor was Stephan's friend, yes?"

"I said that Stephan had a proximal friend by the name of Victor—only, his friend was not real. What is more, Stephan would permit himself no other friends, save this 'Victor', whom he devised, completely from the imaginings of his mind."

"And the Church came to learn of Stephan devised friend?" Lazarus asked.

"Indeed; almost at once," The Spectre affirmed. "Thus, the Church council summoned Stephan for sworn confession and full testimony. Beforehand, I attempted to convince the boy to recant everything of Victor's existence; however, during the hearing, his restless tongue answered the council's every question, blatantly and without consideration. In the end, he refused to dismiss his pretended friend. Instead, he enraged the council elders, suggesting that they might be feeble, by saying that 'old men suffer

from worsening eyes, weakening ears, dying hair, and dying skin.” Medici shook his head. “I should have never had that conversation about the particulars of ageing with Stephan. Truly, the boy had an unchecked tongue.”

“Yet, the council did not openly condemn Stephan till he stood plainly before them and engaged in whispering conversations with Victor. At once, the Church ordered him placed under strict confinement for observation; after which, they discovered his fits of spinning. Only a day passed before the council elders summoned Magdalena before them, that she might witness the record of their findings. Desperate and terribly stricken with grief, Magdalena pleaded for my company, and with it, any influence that a respectable town physician might afford. Thus, I accompanied her to the council's oratory chambers in hopes to persuade the Church to release Stephan under my special care; however, the council had already reached a verdict on the boy's condition. In their formal decree, they stated that Stephan suffered from a rare affliction, requiring a grave prescription of grossly applied treatments that fell outside of the 'notably esteemed yet limited capacities of common physicians.’”

“What was the verdict?”

“Whatever sortilege that they might prescribe—and then some,” Medici grumbled. “In Stephan's case, they claimed to have discovered that he suffered from being under bodily possession of a Succubus.”

“And what is a suc— yah—”

“Tis a female Demon-Spirit—as the council clearly described it—that attaches Herself to a mortal male, by way of spiritual seduction, for to draw all of his essence. The Church discovered that the She-Demon went by the name of *Lamiamubus*, or similar namesake; and after careful clerical consideration, they came to a concise conclusion that the Devil-Spirit had somehow penetrated Stephan's dreams, revealing Herself to the boy, simply as 'Victor', before violating his soul.”

Lazarus shrugged. “Victor?” He drew a breath. “How did the Church learn of the Demon's true name—this '*Lamia*—’?”

“—*mubus*,” the Ghost finished the name. “The council made formal reference to a notable bishop's reputed papal record, named openly as, '*A Canin of Worms*', or something of the sort—the particulars of their professed findings still escape me, especially since I truly believe that they contrived a hasty explanation to convince and quell an angry congregation.”

Lazarus narrowed his eyes as an expression of suspicion brewed on his face. He countered Medici's claim; “I do not recollect a '*Canon of Worms*'; however, I did read

of a sacred *Canon*, scribed by the Bishop of *Worms*. Might that have been your intended reference?”

“*Canons—bishops—worms*—I do not recall the Church council's precise words,” Medici admitted with an expression of disdain, flinging his fingers about loosely. “After all, I was well-learned in the art of alchemy, and served dutifully as a practised physician; yet, I was only slightly versed in liturgical ways.” He shook his head and sighed. “Nevertheless, Stephan was a frail boy; his repeated lashings and open wounds caused his blood to turn. I pleaded with the Church to allow me to see and treat Stephan under strict clerical supervision; yet the council denied all access to the boy. Instead, and against my earnest advice, the Church priests and physicians proceeded with a prescription of '*head oiling*,' together with a strict '*leeching regimen*'.”

“What is *head oiling*?” Lazarus inquired.

“’Tis a practice of clerical precision by which three appointed agents of the Church submerge the back of a possessed person's head into a bowl of consecrated oil. The first agent administers the oil, rubbing it over the subject's eyes, nose, and mouth, expressly to wash away all perception of Evil Spirits. The second agent orally administers prayerful scripture during its application, for to keep proximate Demons and Devils from fouling the oil. In the same moment, a third appointed agent blesses the subject's breath with an unbroken flow of sulphurous and sub-lime smoke, blowing it precisely into the facial orifices of the possessed. In all, the process is quite lengthy and involved, calling for three days and three nights of continued prescription.”

“I have heard tell of it, yet what again is a *leeching regimen*?” Lazarus questioned.

“Leeches are as river worms that chew through skin and feed on bodily fluids. The Church physicians attached a succulent heap of them on the boy's groin, for to draw all of his poison. ’Twas the last that we heard of Stephan's worsening condition; and three days passed when they buried him.”

Lazarus drew back his head in bewilderment. “His wounds were not on his back? Where did they lash him?”

“They refused to say; and we never laid eyes upon the boy's body or his lonesome tombstone—Stephan's final resting place became a fading enigma to us all.” The Spectre shrugged. “Nevertheless, the boy was frail, and peculiar in his own secluded way; yet he was never possessed, save with a queer but true, mind and heart. All said, he went to a closely guarded grave, forever loyal to his Ghostly friend. And I suspect that Stephan is now safely in Heaven, beside himself, and perhaps forever-more spinning and speaking to his friend, Victor.”

“Those were dark times,” Lazarus declared with a sigh.

“’Twas a dark age for all,” Medici affirmed, “Especially for persons, both foolish and wise, who could not readily afford their tithes to the Church. And for those of us who could, and who were learned, and who dared to cast a glimmer of light or hope in the long and far reaching shadows of the Church, those were truly terrible times.”

“Yet, by your wealth, you could readily afford your tithes, yes?” Lazarus asked, suggesting that Medici might have suffered in a lesser way than most.

The Spectre nodded. “’Tis true; I fared well, even with the overly generous tithes that I gave. The Church was especially fond of the wealthy. They demanded just enough from the coffers of the affluent to keep the wealthy in their place and, at the same time, taxed them heavily, so that they grew no more wealthy than they were. The Church allowed only itself, its fiscal and pontifical agents, and its loyal vassals of nobility to grow their wealth. Nevertheless, I gave charitable tithes and kind words to the clergy before sending them on their way, and quietly cursing the very ground upon which they walked.”

“In secret, I found these self-righteous and self-concerned men of the Church, thoroughly despicable. I despised them, likening the lot of them to a great flood of languid leeches that drew from the material possessions and efforts of all persons with whom they came into contact. And in exchange for such material gains, they offered mere useless words of authority, costly absolution, and false promise of Heaven. Truly, they expected real and tangible property in exchange for uttering mere drivel in the form of religious and political rhetoric. And whether their confiscations consisted of a few hares and plucked vegetables from a peasant and his wife, or a purse of gold and several steeds from a lord and his lady, these men considered their words, prayers, and promises—their babble—to be equally as valuable as their any levy, of any amount, placed on any person. After all, in their eyes, the promise of eternal life was equally as valuable to a pauper as it was to a king. And although the notion of immortality might momentarily quell the hunger of a starving stomach, or even loosen the drawstrings of the tightest purse; the bitter truth of the matter is this: one cannot fill his belly on words, before riding to town on a prayer, in hopes to spend a promise. Even the languid, inept, and babbling men of the Church knew this; and this was precisely why they demanded from everyone, whatever they refused to provide for themselves: hunted game, harvested vegetables, well-raised steeds, family-earned fortunes, and the sweat and labour from all smiths of all trades. And all of the wealth that they accumulated from the efforts of the poor and rich alike, they claimed as due payments of lifelong tithes owed to the Church.”

“Tithes?” Medici asked, incredulously, before orchestrating a new course of reasoning. “To be set aside for God? Did these men of the Church believe that they were God?” The Spectre briefly stroked his chin in a melodramatic show of contemplation. Then he chuckled, and checked his reckonings aloud. “If I recall correctly, God does not suffer from the pangs of hunger, and; neither does he go, to and fro, by way of a steed; nor does he go into town for immoderate purchases.” Medici's mood darkened and he looked squarely at Lazarus. “No, these tithes were set aside for the leech-like and lavish lifestyles of the Church clergy and its close company. And for my own part, I considered the clergy, en masse, as nothing more than communal dens of disciplined thieves, bent on confiscating the wealth of all God-fearing peoples. They moved in much the same manner, as might a plodding and debilitating disease—behaving precisely as a spreading and unrestrained infection. Their method was not unknown to me, as I can attest, even by degrees. Firstly, the clergy would contaminate the minds of the common peoples with its corruption of common minds, planting unneeded seeds of suspicion, apprehension, and self-doubt. Secondly, the clergy would steadily corrupt the affected peoples by regularly administering them for the express purpose of replacing all of their former feelings of merit and virtue with weakening sentiments of unworthiness and guilt. Lastly, when the people were at their weakest, and finally believing that they were the sole cause and effect for every nasty and shameful happening in the world, the clergy would make its move to consume them, nearly to death—yet not wholly so—as it relied upon, and steadily drew from, their ongoing material worth. And lastly, the clergy would use this new-found worth to contaminate even more masses of formerly satisfied and unsuspecting peoples, for to further its earthly gains. Indeed, this method of mass and repeated infection was largely designed to spread like a plague of collective servitude—all for the sake of amassing more wealth for the worldly Church, in the form of undying tithes.”

“Tithes, for God?” Medici again asked, leaning against a free-standing section of balustrade as he turned his gaze out to sea. “The Church knew no modesty or empathy in their unquenchable desire to pillage every worldly possession—from the confiscation of a peasant's paltry vegetable basket, to the seizure of every third steed in its provinces; their monstrous appetite was never sated. And I can assure you that the Church never gave the peasants' vegetables to the hungry, or needy; and they certainly did not offer them up to God as a burnt offering. I shall tell you precisely what they did with them—they took them for themselves. Obese priests, bishops, and tithe-collectors dined on them, only to slop the troughs of their own fatted swine with, whatever food portions remained for longer than a single meal; leaving the peasants to console their crying and starving children, who suffered through yet another eve of, bowls of boiled grass with a

hint of herb.”

Medicci turned to Lazarus and popped a nod. “I have seen it with my own eye, I tell you; I knew the fat priest and his swine yard, and the unfortunate peasants as well.” Medicci smirked. “In secret, I gave the famished family three goats, two toys for the two children, a generous purse of coins, and I held them to their word that they should never confess it—especially to the Church. After all, I did not want even a single bit of bone, sinew, or hair from those three goats to fall into the swine trough, only to feed the obese priest, his associates, and more fatted swine. And the peasants were extremely grateful, knowing that I had risked the confiscation of my entire estate for transacting a donation outside of the clergy's treasury records. The family kept to their word, confessing nothing of the matter; and they never boiled grass again. Shortly thereafter, the father of that family became one of my dear and trusted servants; and eventually, one who carried my remains to its final resting place.” Medicci sighed and smiled. “Certainly, we could not have provided for every peasant in the province; yet Sophia and I did find, in our hearts, a profound sense of consolation in having been able to offer a glimmer of hope to at least one family in need.”

Lazarus smiled. “I am sure they were forever grateful, for your kindness. And I believe that I might know, if even in the smallest way, how you must have felt. I once did a similar thing.”

“Oh?” Medicci pulled his chin back. “Do tell me, if you might.”

Lazarus stifled a chuckle. Expressions of modesty and embarrassment swarmed his countenance as he confessed, “Truly, 'twas not as bold or lasting as, was your kindness.” He shrugged. “Nevertheless, when I once lived in the Abbey catacombs, I brought a portion of my food to a hungry prisoner; even though, father had instructed me to eat all of my food, and forbade me to go near the prison cells. It troubled me to defy such orders; however, the notion struck me more-so: that I might eat all of my food and leave another to go completely without, especially when there was meal enough to share. And as I supped, I knew that, if I ate all of my food—sharing none of it with a hungry soul—then I would feel more empty, afterward, than if I had only smelled the food and never once taken the first bite of it. I could not deny this notion more than, I could accept my duty to obey the orders given me; so I dismissed my duties and aided the prisoner in secret—even to try and free him from his captivity.”

“And did you free him?”

“He refused, for he counted himself already free.”

“Well, as is said, 'Fine friends come from famished men, fed'. I am sure that he was

deeply grateful for your selfless efforts, Lazarus.”

“I believe that he was,” Lazarus stated, beaming. “And afterward, even though I had disobeyed my duties, I felt more filled than, perhaps, if I had eaten three goats, whole.” Medici laughed. “Indeed. 'Tis the precise feeling that I knew. Who was he, this prisoner?”

Lazarus' smile faded. He lowered his gaze. “I never knew his name. Yet, he did say that I might best recollect him as, '*Poor Man in Christ*'.”

Medici's mirth vanished as he commented, “I gather that there were many such humble and devoted peoples, long since dead and forgotten, who might be remembered and honoured by such a fitting title of vagueness and glorious distinction in the same.

Forever blessed is this man, of whom you recall as such, Lazarus. 'Tis a title that any Pope might envy; yet it comes with a common robe, which none would dare to don.”

“Yes,” Lazarus affirmed, “'Tis fitting; and I shall remember him in that way.”

“Fitting, indeed,” Medici remarked before thrusting a single finger into the air, to declare, “And by similar scrutiny, aptly applied, this expression is equally suitable: even as the Church brims like a swollen cornucopia of obesity, opulence, and oddments, you shall never hear a man of the Church openly boast of it, by calling himself, 'Wealthy Man of the Church'.” After all, if he truly drew his wealth from its pontifical purse, then he would never openly admit it, for fear of losing his life-spring of lavishness. And if he was a man of the Church, who honestly did not acquire his wealth from its coffers, then the Church would demand from him, all account of his continuing success, in the form of additional tithes. Thus, there are many such wealthy and pious men of the Church, alive and well, and who could truthfully wear such a defining and pompous title; yet, none would honestly, and openly, do so. Do you know why, Lazarus? I shall tell you. From my personal perspective, the Church resembles little more than a gilded and glorified mound of maggots that feeds on the decay of a slowly suffocating Humanity; all, whilst single-handedly keeping unsuspecting peoples near to death with its repeated secretions of pious poison.

Lazarus rebuked him. “Your irreverent remarks have troubled me greatly, for some time. You should refrain from speaking so harshly against the Church and its servants of God. I do not wish to continue hearing of it.”

Medici's sudden show of astonishment collapsed with laughter. He threw his arms open, in an obvious show of self-presentation. “Shall I be made to stand before the Church council, when they remain deaf and blind to my very attendance? Shall the clergy find me guilty of heresy or witchery. and confiscate my worldly possessions, when I do not possess even a sliver of flesh for myself? Shall I suffer a second death, by

fire? Is such a thing even possible, that the dead ought to fear death? Shall I find Hell, over harsh words?” Medici dropped his arms. “I have tried—to no avail.”

“You present yourself as a bitter soul,” Lazarus plainly remarked. “How were you afforded Heaven, when your heart—”

“God knows,” Medici interjected and sighed, “I do carry a burden of resentment towards the Church. And with good cause, since the Lord God, Himself, requires neither a, *Vicar of Christ*, nor an army of clergy, nor an exalted and vaulted marble temple, in order to commune with His flock. Since the days of Adam and Eve, and their children, the Lord spoke directly to them, through their very own hearts. And he hears us even now in our private prayers to Him. Where is there a place or role for the Church in that? There is none, I say, save in the redirection and corruption of communication with the Divine.”

The groans of stressed and expanding wood planks reverberated through the vessel; and a stricken flock of deck-resting gulls exploded skyward, toward the shore. Medici stepped forth and addressed Lazarus a bit more personally. “I should make it known to you, Lazarus, that I do not despise my Lord God simply because I question the Church. The two shall never become one. They do not naturally belong together. There was no temple in the Garden of Eden—merely a tree of temptation. Our Father, who resides in Heaven, and His Holiness, who calls himself the, *Father of the Church*, are as separate as the sun and moon. Their distinct images were combined into a single fabricated worship practice by these corrupt, opportunistic, and vain men seeking power and control over the resources of others. I've seen their secrets with mine own eye. By former social stature, rank, and privilege, I've rubbed shoulders with the most wicked and scheming of them. My generous and continued contributions to the Church kept these pompous, hypocritical, and parasitical men at bay—and especially away from my more *questionable* alchemical works. I may not have read Scripture, yet I have religiously sat in Church sermons with my dear Sophia, long enough to remember the preaching of scripture. And one recollection that stands clear in my memory is this very commandment: '*Do not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.*' Now I ask you this, Lazarus. If a man is vain enough to insist that he be called His Holiness, claiming that he is the highest agent of Christ, and that *only* through his Church may others find proper penance, absolution, and a rejoining with the Lord—is he not wrong for it?” Medici stepped closer to Lazarus asking differently, “If vain and pious men take it upon themselves to speak in the name of the Lord, then, through such vanity, do they not likewise take the very name of the Lord thy God in vain? Is it not clear enough?”

Lazarus replied, shaking his head and turning away. “Perhaps you twist the meaning for its original intent.”

Still more planks creaked in the ship's hull.

Medicci pressed his message further, “The Lord knows my heart, Lazarus, which is precisely why I was afforded Heaven. And the Lord knows likewise, the hearts of the wicked, who might scheme through intervention, to come betwixt God and Man, whilst claiming themselves to be the sole passage to Heaven—a path only *properly* earned through tithes, blood, sweat, and suffering. These men are monsters, and would eagerly and most assuredly drink the spilled blood of your children to sate their unquenchable thirst for power and control with an insatiable and monstrous vanity. It has always been so, and shall forever be—'tis the nature of it—that Evil remains evil, whilst calling itself 'good'. Verily, just as Wickedness proclaims most vehemently to be the sole path to salvation.”

Medicci spotted the growing annoyance in Lazarus' eye and abruptly filtered his *colourful* opinions—he further refining his lecture, blending scientific observation and investigate methodology with religious conviction and past practice to articulate his own logical deductions. “From my keen recollection, 'twas neither a burden that I placed upon my own shoulders, nor one that I could readily discard, by my own volition, without losing all good sight of the wicked truth. And truly, I found it utterly appalling for the Church to behave in a precise manner strictly forbidden by Holy Scripture. In its duplicitous dealings, the Church had forever commanded that no person should inherit, covet, or cherish anything on earth, save the chance of a place in Heaven, even as the Church coveted and inherited all manner of earthly wealth, in the way of collected tithes, which it generously divided amongst its vast clergy of pontifical agents. As a learned man of discipline and strict study, I could not readily disobey my own duties and meticulous methods of observation and, at the same time, ignore the ill effects of the practising Church. Nor would I turn a blind eye toward the many causes of fear, poverty, suffering, and death, which occurred in abundance, under its ruthless rule. I could not—I would not. And for that, as you have divined rightly in me, resentment is a cross that I shall always bear.”

The ship abruptly listed and settled to a steeper angle, its hull planks splintering and popping betwixt shoreline stones and the gravity of its shifting weight, Lazarus braced himself and shot raised eyebrows to the Spectre. The ship steadied as a new quiet settled. Medicci folded his arms over his chest and continued, as though the ship never shifted. “As another fine instance of pontifical practice, where the Church robs the poor for its very own gain; I once saw a gilded clergy carriage in the town square, equipped

with six strung steeds and an overly plump driver. The carriage stood unmoving before a cobbler shop, its interior filled with finely crafted shoes. Initially, I thought little of the moment; and I might have continued on my way, had one of the steed's particular markings not caught my eye. Curiosity got the better of me; so I crossed the lane for better inspection of the animal and, as I was still unsure of its identity, I called out to it. The steed perked its ears and spotted me. A fine and gentle one, he was. He came by the name of Barlow—Magdalena helped to name him when he was a mere colt. Barlow regularly turned the gardens for a peasant family that lived on the former lands of Stephan's parents. Nevertheless, I did not expect Barlow to struggle so fervently against his restraints, even to spook the other steeds and send the carriage driver into a fit of rage. The driver popped his whip at me, screaming loudly for even the Pope in Rome to hear. Then he beat the animal till its mouth hung with foam.” Medicci sighed. “Since that morn, I have always regretted my, calling out to Barlow as I did. Certainly, I only confused the animal with perhaps, scattered recollections of more pleasant and youthful years, since dead and gone.” The Ghost nodded. “Truly, much goodness was lost in the shadows of those stark days, where it seemed that even the beasts of burden were as piteous shells of their former selves.”

“Yet, there is still much goodness in the world; and the days never remain dark.” Lazarus remarked. “This is made plainly known in Scripture. Haven't you read such verses, sir?”

Medicci shrugged limply, curling a faint grin in the corner of his mouth. “I intended to—when I found the time. Unfortunately, I ran out of time—when I died.” He raised his brow, admitting, “I did have a copy of the scriptures in my library at the time. 'Twas passed to me through the Medicci family. 'Twas quite large, old, and heavy, with ornate stitching and tight seams on its bindings. The leaves were filled with colourful painted images and inscriptions. I was told that it was one of only three that were created by *Norsekan* Benedictine monks in the Italian region of Umbria. I gathered it to have been the oldest tome in my family's library, which was quite extensive at the time.”

Lazarus dropped a troubled gaze to the floor planks before questioning Medicci, “And with such a beautiful book, you do not even recall a single verse from it?”

“I never found a free moment.” His demeanour abruptly changed with a smirk. “Yet, it did serve a valuable purpose, even if never opened; simply by its place on the shelf.”

“Its place?”

“Indeed. 'Twas the first book on the shelf, positioned far left and precisely near to, and level with, a short quick-tempered zealous Italian woman's eyesight near the entrance of

my study.”

“Sophia?”

“No. Her adopted mother—her blood aunt. And that ancient family tome was the first item that she religiously noticed, offering it comment with her each and every passing. That meticulously-placed and unopened tome drained the very fire from her eyes *every* time, before stepping foot into my study. She was a righteous lion on approach, and a tolerant lamb in departure.” Medici chuckled. “Over time, the scriptures did well to shield me from my mother-in-law's brimstone zealotry.

“She admired the book greatly, it seems.”

“Very much so. 'Twas much older than her family scriptures.”

“Yet, she never asked you to see within—to see its words, pictures, and pages?”

“No.”

“Did she ever ask if *you* read from the book?”

“Never in passing.”

“She simply gathered that you read from it because it was *there*?”

“Yes,” Medici managed betwixt a chuckle.

Lazarus reflected, perplexed, before suggesting, “It seems as though she needed the scriptures closed and left lay *more* than you needed them moved and used.”

They both burst into laughter.

“Of course, my mother was not so easily convinced, the Spectre stressed. “The two of them were as night and day. When her guests ventured past the study and spotted the old tome, they would invariably ask about it. To which my mother would faithfully reply, “That particular binding belongs to none other, than *Doubting Thomas*, himself.”

“From the Apostle, Thomas?”

“The very same. And when troubled with me, she always called me by such name, especially in my more daring days as a young and stubborn boy. She called me so often that her guests would mistakenly refer to me as Master *Thomas*, rather than Master Gregory. 'Twas quite unsettling at times—and so it was.” The Ghost sighed and stared nowhere, reflecting on intimate recollections of centuries since passed.

He paced a bit, reflected a bit more, and finally continued, “As a former Abbey squire, with access to an entire Abbey scriptorium, I must admit that you are certainly more versed in Scriptural ways than me; however, I only speak of the Church in such ways that fit with its happenings in History. I do not lie to you in that regard. And neither do the many confessed ways of the Church and the various records of History bare false witness against themselves—all accounts and records share the same truths. Thus, just as

you keenly know Scripture, I am equally learned in History, and especially of the art of war, and of those many events that shaped the Church.”

“Like your indisputable historical account of 'glorified mounds of maggots'—was that a part of your *learned* Church History as well, Medici?”

The Ghost struggled against ever-contorting expressions of mirth before collecting himself. “Well, not precisely. Yet, for the sake of appealing discourse, of an otherwise, hopelessly dry matter as the Church, such expressions do add a shade of colour, do they not?”

Lazarus rolled his eyes. “You expressed only blackness. Is *black*, a shade?”

Medici chuckled and partly surrendered his liberties of unchecked expression. “Very well then, perhaps I was a bit boundless with my tongue; please forgive me. I shall make no further attempt to convey Scripture, since I am not as versed with it as you are. Yet, I must be allowed to voice my views of the Church from a purely historical perception, even though you might be, initially opposed to some parts of them.”

Lazarus shrugged and conditionally agreed, “So long as the colour of your disdain for the Church is not so blindingly bright.”

“Well, they truly were, in infinite ways—”

Lazarus narrowed his gaze and cut him short.

The Spectre thrust his finger in the air, smirked, and politely completed his intended declaration; “However, for your sake, I shall strike all mention of *worms* and utter *loathing* of predatory piety from my communiques, and gently convey to you, perhaps a more palatable version of Church history—as I distinctly recall it, mind you.”

“Perhaps a more palatable version of—something *else*?” Lazarus hinted a change of subject. “Perhaps maybe, more about your dear Sophia?”

“Very well then. Perhaps I might share with you, when I first asked Sophia's adopted parents for her hand in marriage? Shall I share that most dreadful event, complete with its very own, '*Book of Don*'?”

Lazarus' ears perked and he tilted his head like that of a curious dog. '*Book of Daniel*', you mean to say?”

Medici laughed. “Yes, precisely. Sophia's aunt barked the same. 'Twas quite an unbecoming moment for me; yet quite humorous and eventful in the same.”

“I would like to hear of it,” Lazarus admitted with a resumed smile and gathered composure.

“Then I shall tell you—perhaps along the way to Italy. I gather you might enjoy its retelling.

“I'm sure of it,” Lazarus replied.

Another crack thundered through the wooden hull followed by sounds of a sudden rush of water below deck—still lodged firm against the rocks, the vessel had finally surrendered to the sea. Wood groaned and crackled, and the deck leaned only slightly more. The both of them searched the endless southern ocean and stars. A steady wind blew, carrying within it, the tang of ocean brine. The sound of unbroken waves rapped and gurgled below them, slapping their froth against the hull of the ship. Lazarus broke the silence betwixt them. “You said that the ocean is perhaps deeper than the clouds are, high,” Lazarus stated. “Is it even deeper than the stars are, high?”

“The firmament itself? I should think not,” Medicci replied.

“Have you ever flown to the stars?”

The Ghost chuckled. “Of course not. And I would dare not attempt to risk it, for fear of being spotted by every angel in existence. There is nowhere to hide, up there,” Medicci said, nodding upward. “My place is down here, searching for Hell—and for my Sophia. High and low, I have searched—mountain tops to ocean bottoms.” The Ghost looked squarely at Lazarus and smiled. “However; I trust that my search is now over, with you as my guide.” Then he glanced at the sea and winced. “And I truly detested searching the ocean bottoms. Ghastly and unfathomable sea beasts swim its plunging valleys of eternal darkness.”

“Even Sea Monsters?” Lazarus asked.

“Especially so,” Medicci affirmed. “I have witnessed great Monsters lurking in the deepest hollows: White Giants with massive heads and no bodies; and many long and loose legs stemmed from it—legs so exceedingly long that they could have spanned the entire length of the largest ocean-faring trade ship. And I have seen enormous Ghostly bodies with no heads, which appeared as nothing more than massive swimming hats stuffed with long, flowing hair—glowing hair that slew its prey. As well, I saw massive, toothless sea bats with gaping mouths and long tails. And once, I happened upon a sprawling sea bed of giant clams; the largest of them could have devoured the whole of two men in its abruptly closed shell.” Medicci huffed and winced, adding, “Then there were those pale and hideous head-things—” He shuddered in expressed revulsion before continuing, “— they were as floating heads, sporting rows of irregular teeth; and their oversized eyes and gaping mouths consumed nearly all of their being. Big-eyed, many-toothed heads, they were. Gather, if you might, an undersea world, black as pitch, and filled with ferocious and voracious, glowing and floating heads.”

“There are monstrous heads in the sea,” Lazarus asked, now thoroughly captivated by Medicci's fantastic descriptions of such outwardly grotesque and titanic, oceanic oddities.

“Well, they were not as monstrous as the other Sea Monsters.”

Lazarus scanned the depths of the ship's tattered deck. “Were they larger even, than the Jewel of Eden?”

Medicci might have paled with a shade of embarrassment before presenting a space of, about three inches betwixt his fingers, and admitting, “Well, they are—this big; however, they are truly horrendous in appearance with their seemingly incomplete selves—*very* disproportional—and Ghostly in all manner and appearance, much like myself. Can you imagine that? Horrendous, they were. When I first happened upon them, I believed that I had ventured near to the gates of Hell, since they certainly did not look like something of the Lord's marvellous design. Yet I gathered wrongly—they were not from Hell. Nevertheless, even spiders might be more handsome, in their company, as spiders have discernable bodies and capable legs. Yet, floating heads, with no bodies or legs?” Medicci shook his head in disapproval before casting a gaze toward the seashore. “’Tis a bit like those cave crickets—large, lengthy legs that seem to support too small of a body for any ordinary cricket. There is no proper balance in their bodily parts.” He shuddered again. “’Tis vexing, in a queer manner.”

The Eljo now pondered the seeming odd notion of a ghost, formerly disciplined in physiognomy, who suffers a phobia of observed organic disproportions or anatomical grotesqueries. He pursed his lips to confine the hilarity that begin to warm him from within. Then he turned away and bit his lip before confronting Medicci in a seeming serious and troubled manner. “Yet, what if one of those little head-things was tossed at you, Medicci?”

The Spectre turned and nodded, stating coldly, “Then they would have to die.”  
“The Head-Things?”

“No,” the Ghost barked; “Whoever threw it on me!”

Lazarus choked and surrendered to complete hilarity, doubled over, and lost his balance. *Crack! Splash!* A standing section of balustrade collapsed into the ocean, and; had Medicci not abruptly grabbed the trailing Eljo, Lazarus might have tumbled headlong overboard. The Ghost hauled a humble Lazarus back aboard the ship's deck.

Lazarus rose to his feet. “Yet, you are a spirit; the thing would pass cleanly through you.”

Medicci turned him loose. “Nevertheless; it shall happen but once. And I see nothing humorous in what you might suggest.”

Lazarus collected himself. “Forgive me, Medicci. I was merely—”

“Yes, I know; and you are not the first one to find humour in it. Yet, do keep in mind that the last living man who threw a cave cricket on me, became my longest patient for that short season.”

Lazarus reassured him with a stiff half-escaped grin, “I shan't do such a thing, Medici. And I thank you for catching me.”

Medici winked and shrugged. “I truly believed that you were due for a mouth-washing of seawater; however, I merely caught my Sophia when you fell; as you now stand betwixt me and her.”

Lazarus smiled and nodded. “Even so, I am in your debt.”

“Good enough,” Medici replied, clasping his hands against his vestments and rocking back on his heels.

Lazarus surveyed the missing section of balustrade and the churning seas beneath, and his mind drifted to earlier and simpler days. He entertained a particular recollection of a rather comical moment where he, Miguel, Thateus were together in the Well Hole, rinsing spent Abbey wine barrels. Miguel leapt into the water and cried that a Sea Monster had taken hold of him. And although he knew Miguel to be pretending, since he was intimately familiar with every hollow and crevice within the small Well Hole cavern, Thateus scrambled to save Miguel from the presumed Sea Monster, scolding Lazarus for doing nothing to save Miguel from certain death. Lazarus chuckled, forever embarrassed for his gullible and mischievous catacomb companions. He raised his gaze to the starry heavens.

“What is it?” Medici asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

“Tis nothing of you,” Lazarus offered, waving a dismissing hand. “I merely recalled a moment long passed.” He nodded, elaborating, “Once, I gathered the world to be much smaller than it truly is. 'Twas more agreeable, when I thought it, small.”

“How did you gather it to be less than it is?”

“Well, I once believed that birds might fly high enough, even to reach Heaven.” He shrugged, admitting, “I know that they cannot, yet I did wish to believe it.”

Medici smirked. “And how can you be certain that birds cannot fly to Heaven, Lazarus?” He opened his arms and briefly peered upward. “Have you flown so high and far, as to have inspected every part of the sky?”

Lazarus searched Medici's eyes before answering, “I can be as certain of it as you, with your similar belief that your monsters did not come from out of Hell, Medici. Have you searched so deep and far, as to have inspected every part of the ocean?”

“They are not *my* monsters,” Medici rejoined with a grin. “Yet, perhaps we can be,

mostly certain of both notions.” He nodded and praised Lazarus; “There is truly a discerning and deliberate alchemist lurking within you.”

“And by your balance of faith and misgiving, I believe that you may likewise make a fine friar,” Lazarus conveyed, in passing, as he strode toward the centre of the ship's deck. Medici followed.

They stepped over scattered debris and moved into a relative clearing near the entrance of the hold. Lazarus halted and closed his eyes. Medici rounded Lazarus. He watched him draw a deep breath and gracefully tilt his head up and down, and from side to side. And from without and within him, Lazarus drew distinctness and direction from an Eljo's keen sense of orientation, upon which he simultaneously overlaid, the unblemished memories of Abbey maps. He turned about and opened his eyes toward the southeastern ocean horizon. Medici spotted his now widened pupils; and the apparent blackness of them nearly drained all of the blue hue from Lazarus' eyes. “We shall find our new course in this direction,” Lazarus stated, pointing toward the ocean horizon. “Shall we be off?”

Medici checked him—he glanced skyward, located the pole star, and followed the lay of the constellations evermore down, till his gaze fell parallel with Lazarus' pointing finger, and precisely in his calculated direction of the distant Isle of Corsica. He pursed his lips and shook his head. “And you dare to accuse me of witchery, when I merely fetched a hare? How do you navigate so perfectly with closed eyes?”

Lazarus smiled and popped his wings. “You are not the only one of us, with an ability; which is not witchery.”

The Ghost sighed. “Vague enough; good turnabout.”

Lazarus asked, “Shall we set a course for Corsica?”

Medici extended a presenting hand toward the heavens. “Upward and onward, by the Grace of God; do light the way, Friar Lazarus.”

Lazarus beamed, turned, and unfurled his wings.

As one, they abandoned the wreckage and took to the night skies, circling it only once before cutting a deliberate course out to sea. The Jewel of Eden sank into the distance; the lands of France fell away; and beneath the brightness of a new moonrise, the choppy ocean surface eventually smoothed into a shimmering sheet of smoked glass. Still higher, they climbed, till the sprawling waters of the Gulf of Leon appeared to swallow the whole world, once again, as only Noah might have known. Yet, even with the water's featureless seascape and infinite horizon, the migratory-like Eljo and the coldly calculating Spectre never wavered from their aerial course betwixt the earth and the heavens. Together, they served as an indispensable set of instruments, even to rival the

most notable navigational tools of any ship's captain. They were like a high-flying, compass and sextant, sailing straightly over a brackish abyss of ocean.

As unnatural and gifted as, such a pair of complementary companions might have appeared, Lazarus and Medici had yet to discover that Destiny would soon demand from them, immeasurable effort and incalculable timing to undo that, which had since been done to the world. However, that pivotal point in History had not yet happened to them—or Humanity, for that matter.

[ *End of Book I: Resurrection* ]



This literary work was created exclusively in dedication of

**Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)**

— May his legacy live on within all of us —



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