

Noumenal

## Chapter one – The last man?

Pungent smoke brought him around – something tobacco-rich, heavy, but not familiar. He tried to turn around and was surprised by the leafmould carpet – this was not his apartment furnishing. It was sopping – he was sopping. He swore, tried to get up – couldn't without support. An arm, not his own, hauled him up, button branding and blistering his stomach. Instinctively, he reached around to the shoulder and felt tattered cotton.

“Can you rise?” The voice of this gentleman kept asking, cracking. “Can you rise? Yes, I have your arm.” It was edgeless – distinctly English – with a slight continental twinge. From groin to toe was all pins and needles, above the sternum in the throes of a migraine. Another hand went under his armpit and, with difficult trepidation, hoisted him to be seated – a sharp twinge of wood grain bit into his arse and he nearly lost balance again. “You must hold still for a moment. I must make a dressing for your crown.” He looked up into the sloshy, sentimental eyes of a living portrait – it was cookie cutter Victorian portraiture. No sign of a stubble, not a pimple; creases that seemed like dimpled ivory. Even his frock cuffs, tattered and stained with God-knows-what, was stiffly turned out and greasy black hair properly combed. There'd even be a corset under all that, he knew it – he had an almost wineglass figure.

He felt a length of fabric tickle his forehead. The bandages in the man's hand had more creases than his coat – no, his entire body – and they bound round peevishly tight. Something licked his hand – of course, a spaniel. It couldn't be more thematic.

“Can you walk?”

“Where in God’s name am I?” He, the injured, looked at his stained shirt-cuff. There was a prick of rust up the arm. He lunged at the stranger’s hand. “What year do you think we’re in, lad?”

“You are in no state to discuss any such insoluble matters at present. We must move.” He was only asking the bloody time – in what world was the time an insoluble problem?

“I have an important call to make, right now! Where’s my phone?” There wouldn’t even be connection out here, anyway, but he didn’t intend to stay. He rummaged through his pockets and flinched back from the broken glass. “Son of a-!”

“It is not my wish, squire, to startle you, but we mustn’t linger. It’s fortunate I found you first.” First? A first prickle of fear came from within the bulk of frustration and caused him to notice the hunting rifle slung over the gentleman’s back. “Pray, I wholly get your predicament!” He remembered the 2 caps in the other pocket. He wrenched out a handful of Captain Cody to numb the world. Even the autumn leaves were burning fever bright. Autumn...the calendar said march seventeen! The missus birthday was in a week! Was he off his head? Had he taken too much this time? The gentleman tugged him on, but not before a few practise strides where the injured nearly fell over. His knee was always giving him hell, even in better times.

“I’m out of my depth, aint I? Tell me you’re some care-worker whisking me off to a clinic to fix me up. This is all a bad trip.” No. He felt sober, far too sober, and that smell of tobacco and damp woody breeze was too vivid. Besides, he knew he was peachy clean when he made that revelation. He was clean when he slunk off to

phone the police. He was...didn't they whack him on the noggin with something? Something clicked within him – certainly wasn't his knackered ankles. "Am I dead?" The gentleman laughed – an archaic "Ah ha! Huh-ha!" that only a man repressed or depressed could articulate.

"I wondered the same when I came upon you this morning." Of course – this man was a bloody Victorian! They were long snuffed by a combination of "consumption", bad sewage maintenance and, ultimately, World War One. Grief sets in slowly – it would take him a while to tally up everything he was now missing. It all began there, with the missus. "I cannot provide a definitive answer to your request, I'm afraid – it's forever eluding me as well. However, I can tell you mine – and his – name, if that would suffice. The dog's a Toby and I'm a Verne. And you?"

"They smashed me noggin then! I'm a goner!"

"Well, is it Percy Goner or Peter Goner, then?"

"What Goner?!"

"Ah, Watt Goner!" The newly christened 'Watt' responded the only way he could.

Verne, the dishevelled gentleman, staunchly the impact zone with his makeshift cravat.

"I am so sorry." Pleaded the so-called Watt Goner, back up from the forest floor. "I thought you were takin' the piss!"

“You din’t mean to - Hea’ ob the moment! I habn’t meant to cauj offen’.”

Verne wasn’t a man of paint after all, or at least that red coat on Goner’s fist smelled convincingly metallic. “Bray accep’ my apologiej. I mysel’ was a bit of a wolf li’ you oncje.”

“I self-medicate, I take therapy, I should’ve stopped meself!” Pills, he knew, were making it worse. Or at least the troubles of getting them. It had been a losing battle for him. “Damn, I’m going to pot!” You wake up groggy in a forest from the wrong season with a man from the past and your mobile is smashed. How else do you take the news? The more goner woke up to this impossible situation, the worse he felt. He really, really wasn’t ready for this sort of news. Roll on, pain relief! He might need the full cannister of the other stuff before the day was gone. He wanted to forget this – the concussion hadn’t knocked the past out, Hollywood amnesia style. It would be easier to travel through this forested purgatory without knowing he left his already estranged family behind. Banal plot conventions from familiar films he’d watched: they felt like an impossible luxury. “I’m going to pot.” He repeated mournfully, shame shaking the sore thoughts about his broken head.

“That’j,” Verne blew some clot into his hankey, “a very sorry state for a man to be preoccupied with here, mister...?”

“Stout...” Verne crossed fingers, hoping the stranger had supplied the right name this time. “Peter Stout. I’m ashamed t’be him.”

“I am,” Verne spoke in stilted pauses, “most glad to have been better acquainted with you, Peter, and am profusely sorry for your present paroxysm of melancholia,” Verne looked about himself uneasily, then pressed to usher Stout on.

“but we shan’t linger. I have seen less fortunate remains under this very closure and my ammunition is scarce.” Toby Spaniel was prickling and growling. Maybe because of the socking Peter gave his companion, maybe because there was something a-lurking out in the clementine foliage. There was certainly the suggestion of noise far off.

“What? Are there more poor sods jus’ like me, bemoanin’ their missus and drug dependencies?”

“My dear Peter, they are in no state to lament their own ruination, for they’ve been picked clean by scavengers!”

Peter Stout knitted his gappy black brows. A festive image flew to mind – an assorted skeleton of a finished turkey, lying atop a blanket of not-really-red-anymore cabbage and pukey bread sauce mush in the kitchen bin. It couldn’t have given him a more appropriate thrill of horror. This forest wasn’t right, he knew. The leaves scuttling beneath his leaky timberland boots were predominantly maple. The sort of rustic adornment you get on a Sainsbury’s “taste the difference” syrup bottle. Well, Peter didn’t know smack about forestry, but the trees here didn’t look like maples: oaks and elms maybe, but not maples. Around, there was an uneven rash of mounds and headstone stumps under this dripping, patchwork canopy, and a great sinister frame rising ahead – an indecisive sculpture with tarnished rungs, about twice an adult’s stature. Like with Verne, the textures and colours didn’t feel lucid – the air smelt of smoke and buttered popcorn. They were hardly consistent, either – some trees seemed plasticine smooth to touch; others contour-scarred and flaking, shadows stuttering within their gashes. Then there was that suggestion of music – phantom

piano keys tinkling here and there. This environment felt just right for uncanny valley. Stout shuddered – his sodden clothes were only making the chills worse.

“God... you got a towel about you?”

“I should grant you my bedroll to dry yourself should we reach a safer glade. I have been wanting such a privilege for nigh a month myself!”

“You-how long’ve you been here for?”

“Why...unlike you, my transition into this pickle was not so clean-cut, you see. I dare say that, for a while, I considered myself the last man alive! I shall tell you about it when we settle down.” Verne’s voice gradually dropped to a theatric whisper – the dog continued to bristle at the stuttering shadows. “Tread lightly...they’ve even been laying traps.”

“Who?”

“Hush! There’s something above!” Stout dropped to the floor like a startled blanket and Verne cocked his rifle at the ceiling. There came a high pitched, inhuman chuckle. “Binturong.”

“What the hell is a...-mother of god, what’s that?!” Suspended by tail, some fat raccoon-shaped beastie pawed at them from a branch 2 ft over. It had murky eyes, a vaguely malicious grin and a voice like a demonic baby, albeit a self-conceited one. It seemed perfectly natural to this skewed environment. The spaniel reared at it stropily. “Vicious looking sap!”

“More inclined to affectionate disposition, in truth. Get well acquainted with these chaps, for you’ll be seeing much of them – they are highly endemic in this

region.” The creature made peculiar hissing sounds as it swayed awkwardly above the barking dog, deliberately teasing it. The corny tones seemed to be oozing from its body. False alarm? “Let her be, Toby. Toby! Leave off your barking, now! Come along!” The binturong flicked its tongue, made a sound like a raspberry, and made its retreat. Verne helped the injured up from the ground – he was shivering worse now – and they pressed on through the uneasy woods, with the binturong’s Cheshire cat grin beaming at their departing figure.

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Fifty minutes later, a comfortably delirious Peter was trying to explain his Alice-in-wonderland analogy to a puzzled stranger.

“So she falls into a hole and falls for ages until she lands in a forest jus’ like this, with squiffy hatters an’ grinning cat things an’ the queen of hearts choppin’ off everyone’s head!”

“Upon my soul!” Cried Verne, leaning aside from Peter’s waving hand, “That would make a light pantomime!”

“Disney made a film on it – three films!” He wagged three fingers, index to beringed, in Verne’s face. “It’s one of the bloody classics, you’ve got to have read it somewhere.”



“My friend, the closest I’ve read is the fairy tale of Childe Rowland in *fairy* land, which I do recall entailed at least some beheadings and an assortment of mischief.”

“Come away – you’ve read original Grimm? Proper edgy, eh? They knacker Cinderella’s feet with a knife in it, aye?” Verne nodded reassuringly, not resolutely. “Ah-yeah! God, they bowdlerised it to crap by my time. Absolute tosh.” Stout shivered through, again, and kept on rambling. He was feverish, making absolutely no sense to the gentleman. He knew Peter mayn’t handle a request to pack it in very well, though. Generous soul incapable, Verne dared not betray his unease – this man was already unstable, suppose the revelations made him worse? It had taken Verne a long, long time to process it himself. If he survived long enough, someone would inevitably point it out...but at least Verne wouldn’t be the bearer of the bad news then. Besides, he might not be taken seriously. If Peter Stout saw this ‘Alice’ character step out in front of him in the woods, which was now entirely possible, then he’d truly know what his situation was, and indeed had been.

“I fear that you may be hypothermic, my man-”

“S’very bloody likely, Verne. Very bloody likely.”

“-And I should like to find a sunny glade for you to dry in before sunset.”

Verne smacked his lips at that prickly word, sunset. He glanced up at the light through the branches; up past the fleeting jays towards the suggestion of the seething, fractured mess he’d grown accustomed to ignoring. Surely Peter had seen the shadow’s missteps and wondered about the source? That was a great expectation for a man currently off his scone on contraband co-codamol, but still. Peter was lucky to

spawn in an enclosure – entitled to a little puzzled bliss before he realised just how skewed the heavens had become. “It is a great regret to have to impose upon an ailing soul’s wishes, but I would strongly advise against stargazing tonight. I have some matters worth discussing.”

## Chapter 1 elsewhere – Come before thy judge

“What was this one guilty of?” Forward gesture wasn’t necessary – they’d pilloried the alleged guilty before the decapitated statue of their village founder, a now soiled garland of silver chains rattling about his scorched neck. The accused’s lips motioned an apology to an unrepentant lad who was pinging pebbles off his head. The sheriff wiped his brow, made surprise of her question.

“Why! You can’t tell twix from a fella, sister? Why, make no mistake, he’s a fair runt, but we need somethin’ to educate gormless goobers like you. C’mower, he won’t bite none.” Twix – someone showing ‘*deviant*’ characteristics. That word had entered the grim vernacular shortly before her arrival, and she had fought uglier things perhaps more fitting of the brand. But there was always uncertainty, enough to fuel the atmosphere of fear that billowed across this blasted plane. The enforcer hoofbeat across the drizzly square and wafted the restless kids away from his exhibition. The gang instead turned their awe to the begrudging observer; this creepy vagrant with the brocade scapular, the bauta helm and the silver sword. All so different from their scrub-short, jerky-cap getup of the locals. There was none so nun-like among them before.

The sheriff squatted-near-knelt beside the messy pavingstones, beside this so-called twix. “Come now, sister. You wanna see a deviant up close? C’mower here!”

Elroia approached slowly, coming to kneel a little off with cloak carefully kept over shoulder and out of the muck. She again felt awkward gratitude for her lack of smell – not so much because of the sodden victim but the local’s turnout of them.

One of the kids invited her to cut a souvenir from the victim – she kept her hand close to her pommel. The sheriff nodded to her, locked his arm around the gibbering exhibit's nape as if he were livestock, and began his demonstration.

“Right,so, here's ya anatomy lesson. This is what a deviant's got that we aint, see? See'em great goggles,” widened and dilated with frightful uncertainty, “Them's deviant eyes – bright an' awful. Owl eyes. See how them fangs rise up from the wad – got no gaps in his teeth,” He swept his fingertip over the quaking teeth, then twiddled with the ear, “and them ears? Big an' pointy, like a wolf. Predatory, see? There's a good boy!” The sheriff ruffled the prisoner's hair, bringing up a little fuzz of loose ends and ash. “Why, come round behind now – that's the real deal.”

Alroia saw the back – bare and blanched through the tinged rags, then looked over the cuff at the bound hands; not simply discoloured by purple burns, but a rubbery blue. A faint haze of vapour swarmed about them.

“Devil claws! Don't get smokin' hands like that on folk like us. He'd curse you with 'em, if he could. Sparked the fire o'er the gorge, we bet. Lavender blaze!”

“Did he attempt to curse you here?” Alroia could recognise occult hands anywhere.

“Might've, gi'en an inch! Numbed him with some mistletoe tonic. He came-a cryin' that he was the chosen one, all smokin' an' guilty. Not worth a chance. Besides, let him speak for hisself!” The sheriff prodded a raw spot to make the victim dance to his beat. “Got a parable for this 'ere crusader nun, Christ-a-comin'? What you say, Mister Messiah?” Pre-emptive chortling from the delinquents. A few more locals stopped a little to watch from afar. The accused turned his overwide glance on

this sinister nun. This strange sylvan's face, worst on his right, was more than half ravaged by arcane flame: it had branded his cheeks crispy purple, turned his bracken hair crispy black. He looked young – not long past squire age. He fumbled about with his lips but choked the words down. He said nothing. He was within earshot still of the hammering. They were almost done with assembling the stage tomorrow. Knew nothing he'd say would help him, not now. "Finally figured Y'aint nothin'? Why, you're less th' a fool now, Ah'll give you that."

"That gibbet on the green – he's to be hung tomorrow?"

"Why! Y'aint so thick after all. Tomorra', noon. Felt generous – he'll have a quick swing on a sleek rope, real dignified. Him allowed a speech before he goes – more education there. Have ya know we're civilised folk 'ere, foreigner. We got courtesy, even for ski-thief maneatin' nonces like twixes."

"Well, you shall need a proper guard for this eve."

"Why, we awready got one. Abstainer, too – clear head. No getting' past him, sister." There was already a guard – a rather stern looking grizzle sat close by on a tripod stool, busying his firearm with tallow and toilet brush. There was no key about him, but a little silver stag-pin in his hat. It twinkled like a little star against the drizzle. He reciprocated her shady look with an earnest scowl. "Nice-a you to ask, but the guilty don't look like he's fit to bust out. That silver's blessed, y'know, an' we have him mistletoe to lock his legs. Tol' him twas medicine! Aint going to be moving, now. Ain't worth anointing this 'ere sicko tonight."

"Well, he might call upon a familiar under the cover of dark to break him out. What's one gun against two, no, many fiends?" The sheriff frowned into his sleeve,

wiped his evening stubble. The prisoner looked from Alroia to grizzle, grizzle to Alroia, Alroia to the lad who'd just lobbed a half brick at his shoulder. "Besides, I really ought to earn my stay here, as a vagrant. Could escort him away to the stand tomorrow – I'm well dressed for the ceremony." The guard reddened at the jab at his attire, eyes suspected worse of her still.

"Why, What's to say a popish foreigner like you ain't gonna break the twix out ye'self?"

"And whisk a vengeful lunatic off your hands, away from the children and infirm? Your other watchman should shoot me dead, if such an inane humour were to seize me! If he missed the roused century would cut me off before the gate. Your artillery exceeds my measly cutlery, after all." The sheriff conceded. You couldn't smite anyone with a blade at ten yards off, let alone fifty. Grizzle's cohort had a stupidly high advantage by this metric.

"You argue fair, sister. Y'aint so thick as I thought. Fine, check in at sundown. We'll pay you after the show tomorra', jus' so you know – might have the seat at our potluck too if you do well. Mind your face don't ruin our appetite!"

"It's an honour. I shall get myself ready – goodbye." Alroia had feigned gratitude at the offer. She wouldn't be eating today, nor staying for the meal tomorrow, as originally intended. The suggestion in that boy's bleary eyes a waste to squander. With a little careful treatment and maybe some coercion, she could transmute that desperation to gilded trust. Excellent fodder for her crusade – if they'd known her plan, they'd probably send her to join the chained at the gibbet anyway. They'd already suspected her of deviancy at the gates, where they'd plucked off her

face and scrutinised the shapes beneath for tell-tale blemishes. *Ugly*, they'd called her, but not *deviant*. She didn't like to be reminded of her own marks. Anyway, sundown seemed a little while away – the sky's stuttering seemed less violent today. This gave her plenty of time to brew a special mocktail for her teetotaler colleague tonight. She left her rescuee to the mockery of the rabble for now, unaware that he dreaded her company tonight more than tomorrow's noose.

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Alroia's grizzled companion decided to throw in the towel early, just short of midnight and an hour after her spiked speciality refreshments. He gave a strange sort of sigh when his legs gave way and the gunmetal clattered upon the paving stones. Froghopper yellow billowed from his mouth as he lingered on his knees, then fell supine - Alroia caught him.

"No need to repay me for the drink. You've already got what I need." She pried out the silver stag and brought her own metal to his overflowing throat.

"Let go! Let him go!" The yell and the strangled grizzle did not connect. Alroia dropped the man, swung into stance at the accuser, and found the bold voice coming from that same quivering, phlegmy mouth beneath those wide, nadir eyes – the accused. This is the first time she'd heard him speak.

"W-what are you?"

"Hush! You'll send us both to swing." There was no hue-and-cry yet, no torches lit in the square. There was, however, those low fragments of string music. The planar soundscape never slept, always knew. The prisoner adapted his question. He spoke again more softly but no less indignant.

“What are you? You...you killed him?!”

“What am I? I’m the gibbet’s alternative – I’m here to rescue you.” That was no consolation – the prisoner only shrunk further, started to jolt around wild.

“You? Save me?” He watched the man convulsing on the floor, guilty lids drooping. “He...he had the same idea. You killed your only ally.” Oh. Buggeration. Wasn’t something they could be open about. She swore she heard a regretful chime punctuate the fractured melody.

“That is...fortunate. Fortunate that I gave him a smaller dose than lethal.” She’s stopped short of airing his jugular, which she now checked with her finger. His pulse was a symphony of undeserved pain and confusion. “Well, we’ll let bygones be bygones.”

“No! Help him!”

“I lack the necessary antidote or time. The village apothecary shall see to him tomorrow and we shan’t stick around to see the outcome.” She set the man’s stag to work at the lock, the boy still transfixed on the owner and struggling. There was, Almer be praised, no alarm yet. The village seemed a bit too simple for a sophisticated system like that. A snap – a jolt. The chains didn’t shift “Drat. Broken. Looks like his plan wouldn’t have worked.”

“Y-you’ve ruined it?!”

“Don’t tense up, I’ve got spares on me.” She pulled from the pin multitude in her habit a new candidate and tried again. The stridulation started up again, then stopped. “What *did* you say, mister Messiah, to rile the locals up?” Again, he didn’t



answer, though her tone was less derisive and considerably less gravelly. This man thrived in audible elipses. “You’ve got something occult about you. Those are sylvan hands, after all.”

“Magic...so don’t try to corrupt me, freak!” Ahead of the sport – snapping at her bargain before she had the chance to ask; still watching the poor man. But that wasn’t her next question.

“Well, could you at least tell your name, ‘Mister Messiah?’” Here the third habit pin succeeded, and the first lock came loose. A heap of silver slung loose around his shoulders. There was still the pillory to go.

“The villagers didn’t even listen. You’d place a hex on it! The mask doesn’t trick me – you’re a monster under there!” He wasn’t even looking at her. Another pin, the former victor, snapped beneath her calloused fingers. Alroia rose up, a dove-wing flap from her shifting scapula. A falling sigh from her habit.

“Well, if you’d like to know this monster better,” and the unconscious grizzle disappeared behind the serene iron of the sister’s floating visage: reflecting his own face. Instinctively, he flinched up, right towards the hood of the woman, and saw in her something like himself again – scars all over, but flesh and blood indeed. “I am Alroia, Andyr pox knight, and I’ve been shunned from birth.” Horror had come to his exaggerated face on the first count, but no fresh disgust on the second. His first impressions were too asthmatic to make out, his second muffled among the cobbles as he fell flat when the pillory came away. “Ah, that is a first. Never had a man faint at sighting my underneath. Perhaps I’ve grown more monstrous with age?” Hoisting him up, she found his face pre-emptively rinsed. “Another first among adults. Beforehand,

it was mere children I made cry!” The boy’s third utterance was no clearer, but his lips made the same apologetic motions from before as mingled tears washed over his tarnished face. There was no getting a coherent name or truce from him now. Alroia removed the chains and bound him instead in brocade warmth. “Now, hush. You’ve seen what you wanted to see – come along with me, if you wish to see another day.”

He couldn’t be bidden to walk a yard. She tried to pick him up off his useless foal-legs thrice, gave up and paraded him under cloak past the gibbet where no jeering congregation awaited him, rusting up her backguard with his pathetic fluid empathy. My face, your face; those were the only utterances she could make sense of; perhaps she’d overdone it. Perhaps she’d chosen a dud for her crusade, just like those other wretches turned out to be. They’d have to see.

Soon, the planar music would crescendo into a vicious jangling orchestra of crazed bells and xenophobic choral. The first flare leapt high among the sputtering constellations – a firework displays for the lurking lunacy of the forest, Peter Stout and the binturongs among them. The sheriff called a hunt he had no intention of leading.

“Why, deviants are dangerous game. We’ll call in the cavalry!”

## Chapter Two – Leaden pilgrimage

“It hasn’t always looked like this, my friend” Added Verne, gaze anchored safely on the campfire. “And I’d recommend you keep your gaze down in future, for its sight has been known to excoriate one’s grey matter.”

Peter kept looking at the confusion above the canopy. He had counted five shooting stars that night – the last one had ceased to exist before it had even passed below the horizon. The constellations seemed to switch whenever he looked away, defying the horoscopes as they pleased. He’d seen scanline like this on overheated monitors on the job – devices pushed limits by their ungrateful cheapskate owners.

“S’like someone’s taken a hammer to the heavens. Gone and Broken it all.”  
Another strangled laugh from Verne.

“Upon my soul, it makes one doubt the infallibility of creation! It’s best not to dwell upon. Please, let us return to your meal.”

Peter Stout didn’t seem to be bothered by the sky. Fortunately for Verne, he’d taken more than five grams of painkillers already and could excuse the ethereal mess on hallucinations. If he saw any of those dreaded encryptions in the heavens, he wouldn’t believe them. Peter seemed more bothered at present about his portion of food – a sort of Bovril-like meat broth his host had produced from some rabbit bones and indeterminate autumn seeds, garnished with some granite-hard tacks fit to be the tooth fairy’s trophy board. Not your Sunday roast, for sure.

“I recall a time in my life where the skies could be as tranquil as a dutch romance painting.” Verne didn’t even make eye contact for caution of seeing the

chaos in their reflection. “It was but a few years ago that it degenerated towards this present state.”

“Apocalypse now stuff, y’think?”

“Well, that is one exegesis – certainly a grand revelation of some kind, though not by biblical account.” Verne ran his fingers through his satchel, presumably searching for his long-worn copy of scripture. He didn’t seem wholly enthusiastic about faith anymore. “Unless, of course, you consider the roving monsters here as being the spawn of Gog and Magog – a tempting conclusion.” Peter now half-remembered, through the numb apathy of co-codamol, the ghost story Verne made of the “Monsters” found lurking this enraptured land. One detail Peter had bothered to remember was that Verne’d lost a succession of three Toby dogs to them; the surviving heir was lying chin down by his owner’s side, grumbling at the suggestion of binturong in the shadows. Like the overblown tall tales of the pub, Peter worryingly assumed the gentleman was joking, mate? No. No he was not joking, my dear friend.

“We had a doomsday cult o’er back home.” Peter added helpfully, “Said some dwarf planet was gonna crash into orbit and kill us all! Ha! Said the same about Covid, too.”

“Corvid? A denotation of the common crow?”

“Bird flu, yeah. Big pandemic, but we pulled through!” Verne seemed very glad about that. The word Pandemic triggered a considerable change in his complexion.

“The aggression of the open land, you see,” Verne began, in a slow deliberate manner, “has driven me to isolation within this forest wilderness, where incursions of

such madness are seldom more than sporadic trifles. It is my sanctuary, my reclusive paradise, yet also a possessive labyrinth, forever entreating my wilful imprisonment-

“Like Alice’s wonderland.”

“I say, you are so insistent on such literary semblance, my dear Peter.” Peter shrugged.

“No visitor centres here? Nothin’? Not even a freak tea-party?”

“In my time here, I’ve occasioned upon quaint villages and lonesome shacks, but never happened upon the same hostel twice.” A sigh, textbook sentimental. “It is truly an everchanging enigma, constant only in the wooden bars around us and the binturongs about the branches – your ears would not yet believe what my eyes have seen!” Peter shook his head, no, his entire body vigorously. His bedroll fell back and the broth spilled on his lap.

“Nah, naaaaah!” He slurred with immense denial, “I’m already surprise saturated. You haven’t lived at Dunin-on-wear, mate. Bloody train derailed and ran into a church – wedding service there, too.”

“Good lord!”

“A-and three murders this Christmas alone, excludin’ that vehicular rollover ‘accident’ that killed the couple next-door, and get this – the same murderer walloped me!”

“Good grief-!”

“And! And! And the slaughtering sod’s tryna steal me missus! Kissing her behind my back, all while selling me this!” He rattled his depleted cap of illegal prescription

pills. “All last year! The last year of me life!” He was almost shouting now, less out of rage and more from sheer incredulity. He could see what drove people to phony planetary prophecies now. “That was your life, Peter Stout! God, what a bloody send-off. Binturongs and-and dogeaters are nothin’ to what I’ve seen downtown in the bleedin’ north-east.” Then, typical for a well-dosed Stout, he suddenly swapped polarity and forgot his outburst. “Why din’t you stay at the popup villages, then?”

“What? Well, my poor friend, they’re oftentimes...apprehensive about strangers such as I. As consequence, of course, of those lunatics.” Verne, though apprehensive himself about his companion’s swings, followed his forecast. “They see certain physiques as implicative of deviancy, as they call it-”

“You mean to say they’re racists?”

“I believe they call such outliers ‘twixes’ in many places.” Twix; chocolate bars. Stout could do with a Snickers bar because he wasn’t feeling himself. “Not all communities are so acrimonious, though I must say their paranoia is hardly unfounded – the legions of the corrupt do seem inclined to wear a particular guise, but one must not trust their instinct alone! After all, despite our...considerable physical contrast, we are scarcely irreconcilable!” Verne chuckled again, considerably more warmly but no less awkwardly. Stout didn’t join in on the joke. “It will be a pleasure, of course, to break the tedium to solitude with you, Peter my friend.”

“What, you comin’ onto me, like? We’ve only known each other a few hours, mate!”

“Oh, pardon me, no!” Cried Verne, “As brothers, not lovers! For all my pretentions, I am wholly at loss with romance at present, for as you may gather that

I've quite taken to widowhood." Classical Victorian. Mind, for all his antiquity, he hadn't railed off against the alternative at least. "But I shall not weary you with that tragedy now, for you are still greatly enfeebled. Thou hast a great education ahead of thee, but pray spare thyself the thought tonight."

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The rest of the night, nobody slept, nor talked no more. No further nasal contusions had occurred since daylight and though they'd ended discussion on an optimistic note, Verne could once again tell they hadn't hit off well. *Did he really want to spend the rest of his afterlife with a volatile ruffian who popped pills like Isaiah 22:13?* He didn't hate Stout – he felt sincere pity for the man, being thrust to this cursed plane on such a cruel note not wholly unlike his own. Verne had felt no real connection with anyone for years, sans Toby one through four. The first three had been too good for him. While the forest's fortunes favoured food and firewood, it withheld fellowship. Even in the spontaneous villages he restocked at, his courtesy and wit won no lasting friendships. At best, they were politely bewildered by his Miltonic references and quaint endearments. At worst...they'd lynch a man with no goosebumps on charge of deviancy. The monsters could be deceptive. Dreadful paranoia was aflood, and Verne wondered how much longer he himself would stay afloat.

Peter Stout could do worse. He had ugly vices – the twitch, the hunger, the adder's tongue. But there was virtue: malleable gold. He had proven some trust, long atrophied in other veteran vagabonds. With some nurture, his nature could be

overturned. Verne stared long into the formless campfire, half-dreaming great expectations for his lucky find. He'd make a gentleman of him. He'd teach him first to survive cleanly, then to love what remained of civilisation. He'd wean him off his dependencies through pent-up kindness, just as the old prince had redeemed Verne...Pray, what was that the earl's name again? Verne couldn't even recall his own Christian name now! Lord, What a travesty!

"Verne?" The voice of his fantasy startled him. Stout was sitting upright, bald right leg out the bag.

"My dear peter! Can you not sleep?"

"Absolutely shattered, mate. Can't keep my head up." A beat. "Of course I can't sleep, eejit! I keep hearin' music."

"Music? I say, what kind?"

"Some shoddy orchestral pieces. Listen! Keep hearing this bloody flute, fading in and out!"

"In? out? My friend, are you sure this is worth getting shaken up about?" Verne turned around slowly, listened out for the tell-tale piping. Some sinister convention had taken over of the soundscape since the sky's degeneration. Toby IV heard it too, knees bent warily. "I don't wish, my friend, to alarm you, but-"

"You're not supposed to be hearin' music out in this neck of the woods?"

"W-well, I've come to understand...that when you hear music, *mischievous is never far behind.*" Verne gingerly pulled his rifle from his back. If his oil-pastel skin



ever had follicles, he'd be a frisson of goosebumps. It faded out. He waited for it to sound up again. "Of course, it may be another false alarm."

"What? Another binturong? Playin' a flute?" For a moment, Stout misplaced his unease. He'd pay to see that. "Ha, this music's like suspense in a horror flick. It builds up and up, then some ghoul jumps out arms stretched! Rar-rar-rar!"

"I wouldn't fuel your trepidation like that..." The woodwind returned suddenly, mid note and louder than before. There were other accompanying instruments, but they were too vague to make out. He slipped a shell into his magazine. Another. "Do you hear drums, Peter?"

"Drums?" The beat was out of sync with the now crescendoing flute. It was the worst drumming Stout had ever heard, not discounting Malcolm Beardsley's butchery at the pub Kiss night. In fact, it sounded a hell of a lot more like...rapidly approaching hooves. "...Oh. Lawks."

"Did you say horse?" Verne whispered.

"Horse? No, I said lawks – wait! Horse! **Horse!**"