

The Patron

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Detective Gilbert Hayden fumbled with the cigar. Trapped between the vice-like grip of his leather clad fingers, it could not escape no matter how much the carriage bounced. In his left-hand Hayden held an old bronze lighter, battered by time and use. Idly he thumbed the lid of the lighter, letting it flick open. With a bored and apathetic motion, he flicked the lighter to life. Hayden waved the flame below his cigar, watching as the orange flame touched the corners of his cigar, igniting the tobacco into the smallest plume of smoke.

'I'd request that you not smoke in here, Detective,' tutted the portly fellow in front of Hayden.

Casting a sardonic eye over the man, Hayden flipped the lid back on, and extinguished the flame. 'Of course, sir,' Hayden drawled, returning his gaze to the carriage window. Outside the city lazily ran by. Grey cobblestones, other carriages, beggars and nobles picking their way carefully round each other as if both had the plague, it was a tiring sight.

'Don't look so damned bored, Detective!' the portly fellow hissed. Hayden dragged his eyes slowly over to the man as he pulled a handkerchief out of a breast pocket to dab at his forehead. Beads of sweat began to run down the man's forehead and onto his fat nose.

'There isn't much excitement to be had right now, Purcell,' Hayden drawled again, drawing out the word excitement to uncomfortable lengths.

'Sergeant Purcell!' Purcell piped, dabbing his head more rapidly. Hayden didn't bother to look at Purcell this time, merely arching his eyebrow, which he knew Purcell could see.

'Sergeant Purcell,' Hayden said slowly, as if testing out the words for the first time.

Purcell nodded, his pride seemingly restored. Looking out the window Purcell grimaced. At an intersection the carriage was approaching stood a man. Bedecked in rags, for they could not be clothes, the man feebly waved at the carriages trotting by.

'Bloody beggars,' Purcell spat. 'How these stone sleepers have not been piled together and pushed off into the ocean I don't know.'

'Poverty tends to be a resilient phenomenon,' Hayden offered, tapping his cigar.

'Not under the duress of honesty and hard work,' Purcell countered, leaning back in his seat and not finding much room.

'Which, I am sure you know all too well of,' Hayden said, smiling.

'Why of course!' Purcell huffed. 'I am Alexander Purcell, third of his name, born to Alexander Purcell the second, owner of the Heffington Woods, esteemed gardener of-'

Hayden waved his hand placidly. 'Yes, yes, Sergeant Purcell. I am well aware of your lauded ancestry.'

'As one should of their superiors,' Purcell said, straightening his collar. 'Only right to know what they've achieved so you might rise up to the occasion.'

Hayden cast a glance at Purcell's bloating midriff under lidded eyes. 'Yes. I must certainly rise to the occasion.'

Purcell smiled. It wasn't pretty. 'There you go, Detective! Starting to come out of that sardonic and stale attitude you always wear. I am heartily glad to know I could inspire you,' Purcell said proudly, face beaming.

Hayden chuckled at Purcell. 'Yes.'

The two watched as the streets continued to run by. Squat buildings that had been held up by wooden beams and shoddy bricks soon gave way to smoother architecture. Streets straightened up and the sidewalks became less populated. Shops with windows and doors cluttered the street sides. People lounged in white chairs outside restaurants and cafes. A woman strutted across the street, hounds sniffing at her backside.

Purcell inhaled deeply. 'Ah,' he breathed 'the scent of society.'

Hayden's lips twisted in an ugly sneer. 'Doesn't Lunner's street belong to Mortimer and his division? I see no reason for us to be here.'

Purcell nodded. 'Mortimer asked for help, a special favor from myself.'

Hayden looked at Purcell disgusted. 'So, you've sold me like a whore to a man who can't do his job right?'

Purcell waved his hands emphatically. 'No, no, no, Detective. Merely an interdivision exchange of resources for mutual benefit.'

Hayden rolled his eyes as Purcell's eyes glazed over, probably trying to remember the line he had so diligently practiced in the mirror beforehand. 'What about the Limick case? That family has a lot more to deal with than anyone here.'

'A single-family reporting extortion is nothing, Detective. Just hearsay, and from unreliable sources if I'm to be honest.'

'But their testimony lines up with others who have experienced the same threats in different districts. It can't be a coincidence. I could catch this man easily if I wasn't here,' Hayden said, frustration creeping into his voice.

'Hayden,' Purcell said, rubbing his eyes. 'Some people are simply more important.'

Hayden sat back in his seat, glaring at Purcell. 'True, but that doesn't change my job.'

'And what is your job, Detective?' Purcell asked with mounting annoyance.

'To solve crimes in the Mirsh district, which I'm quite good at.'

'No,' Purcell stated. 'Your job is to go where District Command says, and by extension where I say. There's no argument here, only the facts.'

Hayden threw his head back, letting his eyes close so he could escape this nightmare.

'That won't keep the truth out, Detective.'

Glaring behind closed eyes Hayden lifted his head back up. He hated it when Purcell stood his ground. Someone that soft shouldn't have a backbone that strong. 'Perhaps my frustration could be sated if I knew anything about why I'm here,' Hayden hissed, breath leaking out like steam from a kettle.

Purcell stopped dabbing his face. Eyes focusing on some far away point behind Hayden's face. 'It's... not pleasant, Detective,' Purcell relented. 'Mortimer wouldn't share anything with me, which is enough for me to pull our best detective away from his rabble centric duties.'

Hayden frowned. 'I... well that does sound serious.'

Purcell nodded. 'Indeed. Mortimer is not a man privy to overreaction.'

'Purcell,' Hayden began, leaning forward, 'don't take this the wrong way but considering your...'

Now it was Purcell's turn to arch a particularly thin eyebrow skyward. 'Interests,' Hayden continued, 'have you not uncovered any details for me to use?'

Purcell laughed, just a breath from his nose and a quick smile. 'Of course.'

Hayden looked on, expectant. 'Our victim is an artist,' Purcell said.

'Victim,' Hayden interjected, 'so they've been robbed, or extorted, blackmailed, or-

'Murdered, Detective.' Purcell stated flatly. 'Rather brutally so I'm heard.'

Hayden frowned. 'A murder in Lunner? Doesn't sound even remotely true.'

Purcell nodded. 'I thought so too. No rabble here to cause chaos, just the genteel courts.'

Hayden pressed a finger into his cheek but found no solace. 'True.'

'His landlady found him,' Purcell continued, leaning forward on his knees. 'Or what was left of him.'

'Wild animal in an apartment?' Hayden asked.

Purcell shook his head. 'Mortimer conducted an investigation soon after he was called in. All their preliminary checks found no such signs.'

Hayden frowned, lips pursing together. 'How long ago was this death?'

Purcell grimaced. 'A few days.'

'That's an awfully long time to call for help.'

'I thought so too,' Purcell sighed. 'Nothing we can do.'

'How am I supposed to help with what's most likely a ransacked crime scene?'

Purcell threw his hands up. 'Damned if I know, Hayden!' Purcell rubbed his face with his hands, something akin to anger bubbling in his voice. 'They called and I had no choice but to help. Mortimer is a creature of the courts and the courts want this one figured out and so High

Command wants this one figured out and no one in Lunner is particularly good at their jobs because there are no jobs for them to do!' Purcell roared.

Hayden slowly leaned back with a smirk. 'You should get angry more often, Purcell. I like you like this. More professional, actually concerned with your job.'

Purcell stuck a single sausage finger out at Hayden. 'Sergeant Purcell.'

Hayden gave a dirty smile and turned back to his window as the carriage clattered on. Lunner Street kept rolling past the two men. Hayden honestly thought it was the longest single street in the city, its sides packed with cafes and restaurants dedicated to the elite. The few apartments available on the influential street were mostly converted into multiple story shopping outlets. Filled with frills, suits, and jewelry it was gaudy in the extreme. The final very, very rare apartments used for actual living were often inhabited by artists paid by patrons.

'I don't know if this will help,' Purcell said glumly, watching a woman enter a dress shop, 'but the artist was a musician, specifically.'

'Thanks,' Hayden replied, watching the same women push past the door to give the shopkeeper a dainty kiss on the cheek.

With a lurch, the carriage came to a stop next to the dress shop. 'Come on, Detective,' Purcell said, dabbing his head again as he exited the carriage. They made their way inside one of the vapidly aesthetic apartments, Purcell saying something inconsequential.

Hayden tuned Purcell out as they walked towards a set of stairs and began to climb upwards. He'd never been in a Lunner apartment, but he'd expected something more well kept than this. In contrast with its pristine exterior, the wooden floors were dull, dark, and creaked with even the lightest touch. The walls were peeling to reveal what looked like mold behind them. The rail alongside the stairway had been broken halfway up. Large splinters and chunks of wood still dotted the steps as Hayden carefully moved around them. Everywhere, dust coated the surfaces and Hayden lifted his scarf up to cover his nose and mouth.

Purcell began to cough, hand covering his mouth unsuccessfully. 'God in heaven. This place is unforgiveable.'

Hayden nodded slowly, he'd have to agree. Upon reaching the second floor, the two men were greeted by a large painting on the wall in front of them.

'Family?' Hayden asked, pointing at the painting.

Purcell shrugged. 'I'm not sure honestly.'

The painting itself was of two men and a young girl. They stood in front of what looked like the moon with each member wearing purest white. Hayden had difficulty discerning the people from the moon as even their skin and hair had been painted like ivory. Only their eyes had any real color; all of them had been painted a faint purple. They blurred in and out of focus, at once individuals, and at once parts of the moon. Only their eyes stared out at Hayden.

'Creepy,' Hayden said.

Purcell nodded, busy tying a dry handkerchief round his mouth like Hayden's scarf. Leaving the painting behind, the two men continued down the corridor. They were two doors in front of them, one on the right wall and one directly ahead, standing ajar. Hearing voices coming from the room, Purcell nodded at Hayden before making way.

'Detective Hayden and Sergeant Purcell! Good that you've come,' boomed Mortimer, his left-hand fiddling with a large and bushy white moustache. 'Come this way, immediately, we have need of your eyes detective.' Leading them into the room, Mortimer gestured towards a body splayed out on the floor. Hayden could only gawk as he took in the sight. Mortimer grimaced. 'Yes, a frightful sight.' Lying on its back, the corpse had a massive gash across its chest and stomach. A wound so large and gaping that it slipped over the edges of the corpse's sides and fell to the floor.

'You alright, Sergeant?' Mortimer asked as Purcell began to heave behind them.

'Didn't he already see this?' Hayden asked as Mortimer patted Purcell's back.

'Sir,' Mortimer stated firmly without taking his eyes off Purcell.

Hayden sighed. 'Didn't he already see this, sir?'

'Yes, and we managed to catch the majority of it in Private Ainslie's hat over there.' Mortimer pointed to a pale young man in the corner, clutching his large steel cap in his hands brimming with Purcell's vomit. 'Most men at service would have the same reaction upon seeing

this atrocity,' Mortimer continued, 'even veterans I brought over could not stand the sight. Who I have left to look over this scene are certainly not whom I expected to stay.'

Following Mortimer's hand with his eyes, Hayden looked over the other police officers in the room. With the very young Private Ainslie already accounted for, there were only two others in attendance. A man with a strikingly ginger beard that threatened to consume his whole face and a woman with an ugly scar across her mouth. 'Corporals Annie and Birch,' Mortimer offered as Hayden took their hands in a proffered shake.

'How do you do?' Hayden asked as they shook hands.

'Quite alright, Detective, sir,' the bearded man, Birch, said cheerfully stepping back next to the body.

Annie merely grunted as she stepped back into position.

'They're certainly a reliable bunch, Detective,' Mortimer said happily. 'If you'll excuse me, I'm going to take Sergeant Purcell outside where he might heave more productively.'

Turning back to the corpse as the two men left, Hayden crouched beside the body. 'Have you all found anything of note?' he asked.

'Nothing much, Detective, sir,' Birch answered. Scratching his beard, he appraised the room. 'Whence we came here, there wasn't much around to be honest. Just old broken boy lying on the ground and then the rest of the day was cleaning the chum off the floor.'

Annie grunted in disgust while Ainslie looked into his helmet and then back up, eyes watering.

'Then why did it take three days for me to be brought here?' Hayden asked incredulous.

Birch scratched his chin through his beard. 'No idea, Detective, sir.'

Sighing, Hayden stuck his fingers in the wound. 'What are you doing, Detective, sir?' Birch asked, eyes going a little wide.

'Since none of you did anything, I'm trying to figure out how deep this thing is,' Hayden grunted as his whole hand slid in. Hearing the sound of liquid falling, Hayden turned around to

see Private Ainslie had gone even paler and dropped some of Purcell's stomach content on the floor.

Glaring at the boy, Hayden returned to the body and pushed further. With his elbow only just jutting out of the body, his gloved fingers found something to touch. 'Corporal Annie, lift the torso up.'

Nodding, the woman crouched and pulled the body into a sitting position. 'I'm wiggling my fingers; can you tell me where they are?' Hayden asked.

'Detective, sir, your fingers are literally poking into his skin,' Annie replied in possibly the most monotone voice Hayden had ever heard.

'Christ Almighty,' Hayden swore, pulling his arm back out. 'The man's empty.'

'Of life?' Birch asked.

'Of everything,' Hayden said looking down incredulously. Reaching forward he studied the face. Nothing remarkable, the man wasn't handsome or ugly just plain. His chin wasn't chiseled enough but didn't sink into his neck. His nose was unobtrusive. Eyebrows not too thick or thin. His hair was a light gold, slicked back in the fashion of today. Reaching forward, Hayden rubbed the man's lips. He found them to be very malleable.

'I swear...,' Hayden whispered as he pinched the lips and drew them apart. Peering into the dark cavern of a mouth he found nothing.

'Empty?' Annie asked from her standing position.

'Yes,' Hayden replied simply. Moving upwards, he poked the eyelids, which were closed. They collapsed before springing back. Gripping the lashes, he lifted one open and was greeted by a red hole. 'Also, empty.'

Rocking back on his heels, Hayden scribbled notes. Standing up, he appraised the whole body. Reaching with the toe of his boot, he lightly kicked the flap of skin up to uncover the man's clothing.

‘White suit,’ Hayden murmured. Covered in blood, the fabric had once been purest cream but was deeply stained. ‘At least it wasn’t a bloodless death,’ Hayden said aloud. That would have been too impossible to consider.

