

SLEEP AND THE SOUL

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Greg Egan is currently working on a new novel, *The Book of All Skies*. His latest tale is an alternate history story that reveals the consequences of . . .

SLEEP AND THE SOUL

1

Jesse mopped up the gravy with the last of his bread, gulped down a final mouthful of tea, then took his mug, plate, and utensils into the cooks' tent.

Henry looked up from the dishwashing tub and nodded to him amiably. "What have they got you on now?"

"Rubble," Jesse replied. "Just changed me from spikes."

"As good as a rest," Henry joked.

Jesse strode away from the tent, past the campfire, across the moonlit ground. Gage, the foreman of the blasting team, spotted him and called out impatiently, "Where have you been, Sloss? Your meal break finished five minutes ago."

"If the Lord had intended us to work all night, He would have put a second sun up in the sky," Jesse suggested.

Gage was unmoved, and parried with his own cracker-barrel theology. "And if He had wanted us to slacken, He would have rendered us as helpless as the brute animals."

Jesse grunted resignedly and found his shovel. The latest blast had thoroughly demolished the slab of granite that had stood in the way of the track, but the pieces strewn across the ground were still about the size of a man's fist. He joined his teammates filling the cart, soon falling into the rhythm of the labor. The truth was, so long as he remained well fed, and his shifts alternated between tasks that put demands on different parts of his body, he had no real difficulty maintaining the pace. And how would he have passed the nights in this forsaken place, if they hadn't kept him working? Staring into the campfire ruminating?

He didn't need a fire for that; he could conjure images from the gloom as he shoveled, picturing Felicia on the day he returned. They'd find plenty of work for each

other's idle hands, once he was wealthy enough for the wedding.

When the cart was full he called to Clegg, and they wheeled it toward the edge of the embankment. Lifting it up to empty it, Jesse felt a muscle in his shoulder protesting, but he caught himself in time and shifted his posture just enough to spread the load more evenly, sparing himself a sprain that could have cost him who-knew-how-many days' wages.

"Now I know how Sisyphus felt," Clegg declared dourly as they dragged the cart back.

"When the track's done, it will be done," Jesse replied. "Ain't nothing eternal about that."

"When Sisyphus had rolled that boulder a thousand times, was his punishment eternal? A million times? Once you've lost count, what's the difference?"

Jesse scowled. "We haven't emptied this cart a million times. At a guess I'd say three thousand."

The current layer of rubble was looking sparse now; it wouldn't last until dawn. Gage and his fellow powder monkeys were already drilling into the next boulder; at the pace they'd set the whole track would be complete before the snow set in. There was nothing to be pessimistic about.

"I'm getting married in the spring," Jesse said. He shook off his sense of annoyance and got back into the work, relishing the tension each shovelful's weight induced in his shoulder, easing away the knotted sensation that lingered after his near-mishap with the cart.

"Stand clear!" Gage yelled.

Jesse looked up, but the blasting crew were twenty yards ahead; he had nothing to worry about.

As he resumed shoveling, he heard a whistling sound close by, then the skin of his temple began to sting. He raised one hand to his forehead, and felt a dampness on his fingers. Maybe a speck of gravel had come all this way from the blast. He rummaged in his pocket for a handkerchief, then noticed that the sense of vertigo he felt was not a derangement of his perceptions, but a consequence of the fact that he'd lost his balance and was toppling to the ground.

* * *

2

The darkness smelled of dirt. Pine and dirt. Jesse was afraid to move, but the longer he put it off, the less of a gulf remained between the thing he feared would be revealed, and the fear he felt regardless.

He started to raise an arm, but he'd barely inclined it before his knuckles met wood. That was exactly what he'd anticipated, but his lack of surprise did nothing to lessen the shock.

So he was dead. Whatever hopes he'd held for the afterlife, he hadn't expected his sojourn in the grave to be like this, with him thinking on the fact of it, and even moving around a bit. Was he expected to lie here patiently until Judgment Day?

The air around him was beginning to grow stale, not so much in its odor as its ability to satisfy his lungs. If he were dead, why would he still need fresh air?

But if he wasn't dead, how could he have no memory of his journey from Cavendish back to Haverhill?

Deep in his lungs, the dissatisfaction took on an urgency that pushed all the bemused philosophizing out of his mind. Jesse was prepared to apologize to Jesus if his etiquette in this claustrophobic purgatory fell below the expected standards, but

none of his Sunday School teachers had prepared him for a post-mortem endurance test resembling the breath-holding competitions he'd held with his cousins in the swimming hole when he was nine years old.

He placed his palms against the wood above him and strained. He could feel the boards flex a little; at least his parents had honored the request in his will that his hard-earned wages not be squandered on anything so vain as inch-thick mahogany or a plush velvet lining.

But if the pine was thin, the soil remained obstinate. Jesse had shoveled enough earth to be certain that a six-foot-tall, coffin-wide column weighed many times more than he could hope to lift.

Conceding the futility of his initial response, his body redirected its desperation: without thinking, he found himself kicking hard against the nearest wall of the box. With more play in his legs than his arms, he could deliver more force, and though he had no plan as to how he could benefit from an aperture in such an inconvenient location, for want of any alternative he persisted, with increasing vigor.

The panel yielded a little; it felt as if he'd forced the nails keeping it in place at least partway out of their holes. Jesse kept kicking, wishing he could have been buried in his work boots, but grateful that he'd never really worn any holes in his church shoes.

The square of wood came entirely loose. Soil trickled into the coffin, piling up around his feet, but the tidal influx he'd feared did not eventuate.

Was this progress? The box that held him was open, but the way remained blocked by an enemy less solid but more treacherous; at least his wooden prison had kept his nostrils unclogged by dirt.

Jesse slid down a few inches toward the exit, until his knees struck the lid. He could not come close to touching his laces, but by pressing his left heel hard against the leather behind his right ankle, he managed to force that one shoe off. Repeating the act with his stockinged right heel took longer, but once he was unshod he felt a new kind of freedom. He'd climbed the tallest tree in Haverhill barefoot, and that had taken him much more than six feet from the safety of the ground.

He wiggled the severed panel with his feet, allowing more of the sand behind it to enter the coffin so he could push it backward, pursuing it with his body as it retreated. Once he'd moved far enough that his arms were almost fully extended when stretched toward the opposite panel, he began striking the wood with the heels of his palms. The blows were awkward, with his elbows tucked against his chest, but the extra room gave them some force, and eventually the second panel came free.

His breathing was less comfortable than ever, but he tried not to dwell on that. He dragged himself toward the new opening and reached up above the rim. The soil around his fingers was cool and a little damp, but as it had been freshly dug there were no roots entwined in it to hold it together, and when he scooped out a handful it was instantly replaced from above.

He needed to think this through. Any earth that descended fully, leaving a hollow in the ground above, would rob him of space he could never hope to reclaim. But any earth that fell in a contained fashion from the ceiling of an air-filled cavern to its floor would take nothing away, and would actually raise the cavern a little higher.

So, how to contain the fall?

He reached out and gripped the dislodged panel at the sides, then managed to prop it up, one edge resting on top of the coffin, so it formed a kind of porch. Still supporting it, he wriggled out awkwardly, thrusting his head into the dirt in fits and starts until his shoulders were free of the box but his nose and mouth remained sheltered. Then he pushed up on the panel so it tilted, sending soil flowing down over it, into the coffin.

As the dirt claimed ever more space around his body, he forced the panel upward, keeping the earth above from subsiding. By the time his arms were fully extended

his chest was almost covered in soil, but it lay upon him loosely, not heavy enough to impede his breathing.

Jesse rested for a moment, conscious of the precariousness of the hollow he now inhabited. But whatever doubts he had about the wisdom of his strategy, it wasn't as if he was in a position to concede defeat and walk away.

He proceeded to wriggle further backward, while raising his shoulders as much as he could, so that some of the soil that fell ended up beneath him, propping him up. His arms ached almost beyond endurance, but he kept them rigid; if he let the panel drop, that would be the end. By the time his waist emerged from the coffin, he was reclining at a considerable slope, with his back halfway to vertical.

He let the panel tilt more sharply, so the soil slid over it faster, and found he could push it up more easily. The weight above it was surely much less by now; his hands might well be halfway to the surface. His mouth and nostrils were full of grit, but the panel was still shielding him well enough to let him inhale without choking.

He worked his knees past the top edge of the box, then strained to straighten his hips. Loose soil cascaded down, but the panel bit through the dirt ceiling, letting him rise, until the soil had found a new home around his thighs and buttocks, supporting his stance and granting the muscles in his legs some respite.

He was giddy now, and the rest did nothing to assuage that; the air around him was all but exhausted of its potency. Jesse hesitated, but he could see no other way: he drew his arms down, lowering the panel, keeping his face beneath it but allowing the soil above to collapse into the space in front of him.

The avalanche that would decide his fate was so soft he barely heard it, but the darkness changed abruptly from black to gray. As he dropped the panel, a few handfuls of dirt fell onto his face, but the air already smelled a thousand times sweeter. He looked up, and was puzzled that he could see no stars, but then he reasoned that the moon was just out of sight, drowning out their light.

With his face no longer buried, he was tempted to spend a while just recovering his strength, but then he noticed the sand trickling down around him. He found the panel again and reached up with it, embedding it into the side of the pit to give him purchase. Then he heaved himself up, pulling his feet out of the coffin, almost raising his eyes above the ground.

His next moves floundered, to a point he was almost willing to think of as comical; he did not believe he was at risk of suffocation any more, and the mere indignity of thrashing around in a hole in the dirt rather tickled him by contrast. But then the whole business just became tiresome, and he wasn't inclined to accept the further humiliation of bellowing for assistance.

He was also, he realized, more desperately parched than he'd ever been.

His efforts to ascend had twisted him around. He reached out reluctantly to grip the stone at the head of his grave; like the coffin, it wasn't extravagant, but it was weighty enough not to yield completely and slide down into the hole on top of him.

He got his shoulders out of the pit, and then dragged the rest of his body up onto the ground. He lay there for a while, coughing, snorting, and spitting until he was able to take a breath without immediately finding another particle that needed expelling.

When he rose to his feet and looked around, he knew exactly where he was: Horse Meadow Cemetery. His sister Charlotte was buried nearby. Jesse had been too young to have been told more than the barest details when she'd died, but now he fervently hoped that the poor child hadn't endured anything akin to his own experience.

Though there was no one in sight, he walked over to the shelter of a tree that would hide him from the road, before disrobing and shaking the dirt out of his clothes. As he dressed again, he thought about his shoes, but decided they could wait until morning, and a penitent undertaker's assistance.

Resolved on that final point, he set out for his parents' house.

* * *

3

There was lamplight showing from the sitting room window, which likely meant guests were present. Jesse hesitated, unsure if a witness from outside the family would render the shock of his reappearance harder for his parents to deal with. But he could hardly pass the time wandering the streets until they were alone, and whatever he did, everyone in town was going to have to learn the truth eventually.

He knocked firmly three times, then waited. When the door opened, his father's expression of stunned disbelief was exactly as Jesse had expected, but the only cure for that was a proper account of the situation.

"Looks like I got written off too soon," Jesse explained. "Got some blow to my head that caused all this confusion, but didn't come close to finishing me off."

His father stood gaping at him, as if he was a talking dog. "It was all a mistake," Jesse emphasized. "I ain't never died. It just looked that way."

This still brought no reply. Jesse was beginning to feel uncomfortable standing on the doorstep; he eased his way past his father and entered the house.

As he approached the sitting room, his mother was already rising from her chair, no doubt having overheard everything he'd said. But like his father, there was no hint of joy, or even relief, in her demeanor.

"I'm fine, Ma," Jesse assured her. "It was a struggle getting out of that box, but . . ." He spread his arms and invited her scrutiny. "I must look a sight, but there's nothing wrong with me a few cups of water won't fix."

His mother glanced off to the side, as if seeking someone else's guidance. Jesse came closer, and saw that her companion was his fiancée.

Felicia gazed at him with a kind of astonishment that struck him as at least a little less morbid than the variety he'd experienced so far. Jesse was tongue-tied for a moment, though that was more due to the presence of his parents than any reticence she herself induced.

"I missed you sorely," he declared, with awkward sincerity. Then he wondered if his choice of words, right at this moment, risked evoking some macabre image of an unnatural, tomb-shattering devotion, and added in clarification, "Every day in Vermont, I was waiting for the day I could get back to you." A little romantic talk was fine, but no respectable woman wanted to hear that she'd lured a man right out of his grave.

Felicia opened her mouth as if to express a reciprocal sentiment, then caught herself. But if she wasn't quite convinced yet that his post-funerary manifestation was entirely mundane, she seemed much further along that road than his parents.

"I'll fetch some water," she said.

Jesse moved further into the room to let her pass. As he turned, he saw his father eyeing her with disapproval.

"Aren't you glad to have me back?" Jesse asked. He could sympathize with anyone confronted with a shock like this, but if he'd returned from a battlefield after a mistaken report of his demise, he would have expected a tearful embrace or two by now.

"If you didn't die," his father challenged him coldly, "then tell me about your journey." "My journey?"

His father nodded. "From Cavendish."

"They put me in an oxcart," Jesse replied. There'd been one at the work site that they'd used to bring in supplies. "I was resting my eyes to try to ease the headache from the blow, so I didn't see a whole lot else."

"Resting your eyes? For three whole days? And when the undertaker stripped you naked to put you in that suit, you didn't feel it was time to complain?"

Jesse had no answer to that, but he was sure of his present state. "You know what a properly dead man smells like, after three days?" He offered the back of his hand, and when his father declined to sniff it, he did so himself. "Not like this. I might be due for a bath, but I ain't putrid like spoiled meat."

Felicia stood in the doorway with a pitcher of water and a cup. Jesse walked over and took them from her, then drank until his stomach was bloated.

"A demon has seized the body of my son," his father proclaimed, with an air of grim resignation, as if he'd been resisting this conclusion, but run out of alternatives. Jesse glanced at his mother, hoping she might choose the side of sanity in this debate, but she began to wail.

"That's not what happened!" he said. "Just because I don't recall one wagon ride in every last detail doesn't mean I'm not your son!" *Hadn't he said he'd come in an ox-cart?* But for a thirty-mile trip, when the cart was needed back at the site—

"The soul is like a silken thread," his mother declaimed wretchedly. "Stretching unbroken from birth to paradise."

"Well, I know that's in the Scriptures," Jesse conceded, "but what if the thread's just a little worn? You mend what's frayed, you don't throw it out."

"So you were dazed by the blow," Felicia suggested, "but you never lost track of your sense of yourself."

"Absolutely," Jesse affirmed. Whatever else he'd been unsure about, he'd never had any doubts about his own name, or his own history . . . except during the period in which, apparently, he hadn't been thinking anything at all.

He turned to his father. "I know who I am. Ask me any question about my childhood. Ask me anything that only you and I could know." He struggled to find an example to offer. "Didn't I make a fool of myself when you tried to teach me fishing? That trout got right out of my hands and I fell flat on my face and started bawling."

His father gazed back at him with a look of revulsion. "A demon pillaging a dead man's memories doesn't raise a man from the dead."

"I never died!" Jesse insisted. "Did you listen for my breathing? My heartbeat?"

His mother said, "The life of the soul is not the life of the body."

Jesse looked to Felicia. He could see that she believed him, but she was afraid to speak directly against his parents.

"I was dazed, and now I've recovered!" he pleaded. "When cousin Nathaniel became so drunk at his sister's wedding that he lay down for the rest of the afternoon, did anyone declare he was a demon and banish him to Hell?"

His father's face took on a hint of tenderness, but he wasn't meeting Jesse's gaze, he was staring past him. "I already buried my son. I don't have it in me to mutilate his body, but the other townsfolk won't be so reticent."

Jesse was speechless. He'd survived an ordeal that should have garnered him at least a little admiration for his stubborn resilience—and his reward was to be threatened with a mob intent on his decapitation?

He strode out of the sitting room, and went to see the state of his own room at the back of the house. He didn't need a lamp to find his way around; the moonlight through the window was more than enough to see by. His belongings had not yet been discarded. He packed a bag with clothes and a blanket, put on his work boots, then headed for the kitchen.

He took some bread, and a flask of water. He was still angry, but a part of him with a cooler head was wondering: perhaps his parents were looking out for his safety? Whatever stance they'd taken, they could not have fended off a throng of zealots intent on sending him back to his grave in pieces. Perhaps the only way to save his life

was to shun him.

Jesse reached into the hole in the wall beside the pantry and pulled out a wad of bills. The railroad company didn't seem to have cheated his next of kin out of the wages they'd owed him, and his funeral had clearly been suitably miserly, but he still felt reluctant to take too much. After thinking on it, he divided the sum fairly in two, and placed his parents' half back into the hole.

As he turned, he saw Felicia standing in the doorway, the backs of her eyes catching the moonlight. She stepped forward and took his arm.

"I'll come after you," she whispered. "In a week or two."

"You'll need money for the journey," he replied, holding out the bills he'd retained.

"I have enough. Just tell me where you'll be."

"New York City." No one would know his face there, let alone that he'd clawed his way out of the ground.

"How will I find you?"

He thought for a moment. "I'll look for work on the Hudson River Railroad." Though he couldn't bring a letter of recommendation, perhaps they'd give him a trial anyway, offering him the chance to demonstrate his skills. "Even if they don't hire me, I'll get lodgings close by."

Jesse heard his father approaching. He had no stomach for a confrontation now, let alone putting Felicia in danger for taking his side. But as he retreated he caught the look on her face: she was every bit as resolute as he was.

On his way out of town he stopped at the cemetery and cleaned up his gravesite as best he could: straightening the tombstone and scooping dirt from the mounds he'd created back into the hole. Then he stood for a while at Charlotte's grave, praying that she was—and had been—at peace.

He left the cemetery and headed south, walking in shadows wherever he could, turning his face to the ground and raising the collar of his coat against the chill, hoping that anyone seeing him pass would take him for a traveler and make no effort to recognize him.

Once he'd reached the open countryside, he moved more freely. He glanced up at the Moon: three days skinnier than he recalled it on the night of the accident. Those days were lost to him; he couldn't deny it. But what did that mean?

As a child, when his teachers had caught him with his mind wandering and told him that the Devil was tugging on his soul, he'd taken it as nothing but censorious nonsense. But he believed the Gospels, and when Jesus had roused the insensate whose grieving families had left them for dead, they really had been dead. Summoned to life again, they had described their journey to Heaven and back, leaving not a single moment unaccounted for.

And when Jesus had endured three days upon the cross without so much as closing His eyes, until His shamed persecutors took Him down to recuperate in the arms of His mother, He proved through His suffering that the soul could not be divided. He could have ascended into Heaven and seen His wounds healed in an instant, but instead He had stayed to show the world that whatever torment was inflicted on the flesh, the thread of consciousness itself remained unbroken.

Jesse had no memory of any trip to Heaven, nor reason to believe that the Lord had intervened to revoke his death. Of all the things his parents had been praying for, their son appearing on their doorstep had clearly not been one of them.

So what explanation remained? As far as he recalled, the Bible didn't actually address his particular circumstances. Jesse couldn't swear that a silver-tongued preacher might not have swayed him into believing that a man whose burial he'd witnessed with his own eyes could only have risen by demonic means—but with the shoe on his own foot it was considerably harder to take the proposition seriously.

Could he actually *be* a demon pretending to be a man, and not even know it? Could he have stolen this body, and the dead man's memories, with such diabolical efficiency as to deceive even himself?

Jesse gazed at the long road stretched out in front of him. Even if that were true . . . *who would be possessing whom?* Because whoever he was, he had no intention of living an evil or dissolute life, or doing any harm to anyone. Whether he was the real Jesse Sloss, who'd risen from the grave out of sheer tenacity, or some abomination that had merely clothed itself in his flesh and his history . . . Jesse Sloss's history had somehow won the battle to dictate the terms of Jesse Sloss's future, just as surely as if he were alive.

He knew what his plans were, and he knew Felicia would be there beside him. That was what mattered. To Hell with everything else.

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4

Jesse was weary, but he took the stairs two at a time to complete the ascent more quickly. If he let himself grow sluggish, he just found himself resting on every landing, and the whole business lasted three times as long as it needed to.

When he entered the apartment, the only light was the glow from the wood stove; Felicia stood beside it, ladling broth over a simmering stew.

"That smells good," Jesse told her. In fact, it smelled so glorious that he was ready to swoon from a mixture of hunger and gratitude.

"I'm going to have to leave as soon as I've eaten," Felicia said. "They want me back at the workshop for a second shift."

"You should have said no."

"And lose the job completely?"

She lit a lamp before serving the food, which struck Jesse as an odd extravagance until he saw a copy of the New York *Sun* laid out on the table.

"Something here you want to show me?" he guessed.

"I don't know if it will amuse you, or make you angry," she said. "But I didn't want you to learn about it indirectly."

Jesse skimmed the front page, but failed to detect anything of interest. "Where is it?"

"Page six. Third column, halfway down."

He found the piece and read it aloud. "The *Vermont Phoenix* reports that several witnesses in the town of Haverhill, NH, have spoken of their encounters with a recently deceased railway worker, Mr. Jesse Sloss. While known in life as a restrained and taciturn young man, Mr. Sloss was observed *post-mortem* acting wildly, brazenly and licentious, causing a nuisance to many citizens, who were forced to drive him away with whatever implements lay to hand. His grave remains empty, but townsfolk believe their firm actions have succeeded in discouraging further visitations."

"No mention of sulfurous breath?" Felicia joked.

"I must not have left things as tidy as I thought at the cemetery," Jesse concluded glumly. Or there'd been some subsidence after he was gone that filled in the coffin and left a hollow above it, prompting some busybody to investigate further.

"It's not worth fretting over," Felicia said. "With no portrait, and no one here knowing you as Sloss, I can't see it causing any trouble."

"Except that everyone in Haverhill will harbor suspicions about *you* now, wondering if you're in cahoots with a corpse. And you can't lie to your parents forever."

"I never lied to them," she insisted. "I've just omitted a few details from my letters."

“They’re going to want to visit here, eventually.”

“Not if I visit them first,” Felicia retorted. “I’ve made it plain that I’d have no room to accommodate them, that my job keeps me busy, and that there’s nothing at all pleasant they could do to pass their time here.”

Jesse could see that he was beginning to annoy her, so he let the matter drop. When they sat down to eat, he confined his remarks to compliments about the meal.

“Sarah’s been told to come into the workshop, too,” Felicia said. “Would you be able to watch her son while she’s away? He’s been poorly, and she doesn’t want him left alone.”

“Of course.” Jesse liked young Robby, and though he was too tired to face the prospect of playing games all night, if the boy was unwell he wouldn’t be intent on that either.

When Sarah let them in, Robby was lying on the couch, and even from the doorway Jesse could hear the rasping of his lungs. “That ain’t good,” he said quietly. “Has he seen a doctor?”

“Not yet,” she replied. “When I get back, if he’s no better I’ll take him to Dr. Harlow.”

Sarah looked harried, and Jesse didn’t want to add to her burden. “I’ll sit with him,” he said. “Don’t be worried.”

He bid the two women farewell, and settled in an armchair facing the couch. Sarah had left a lamp to keep her son’s attention from flagging; Robby’s face and neck glistened with sweat, and his eyes swept the room restlessly, not seeming to fix on anything.

“Would you care to hear a story?” Jesse offered.

“Sure.”

Jesse was stuck for a moment; he wanted a cheerful diversion, not a tale where the protagonists died horribly for the sake of the audience’s moral improvement. “In the town where I lived, there was a cat,” he began. “He walked on his hind legs, he wore a pair of fine britches, and he was as talkative and well-read as any of the townsfolk.”

“In your own town?” Robby asked.

“Absolutely. This cat’s name was Solomon, and everyone admired him for his lively conversation. He only had one vice: from the middle of the morning to the middle of the afternoon, he’d curl up in the sunshine and fall asleep.”

Robby laughed softly, then spluttered for a bit. Jesse was smiling himself, but then he wondered why he found the idea amusing. Of all the animals, cats had the eyes that most resembled a person’s. If a cat talked, you might be tempted to take its opinions seriously. But if it was, still, truly just a cat, it really would close its eyes and grow dead to the world for hours on end, every single day.

“One morning,” he continued, “Solomon was walking down the street when he came across two neighbors arguing. Mr. Parfitt had built a fence between his property and that of Mr. Truss, but Mr. Truss believed it took some of his own land and placed it on Mr. Parfitt’s side. The three of them discussed the matter, and after a while Solomon came up with a suggestion: Mr. Truss could build a fence of his own, on the line he believed was the true boundary. In between the fences the land would still be unreachable from both sides, so he wouldn’t gain any land for himself, but if he placed the fence correctly it would prevent Mr. Parfitt from retaining any ill-gotten acreage.”

Jesse paused. The boy’s eyelids were fluttering and his rasp was hoarser than ever. “Robby?”

“Hmm?”

“How are you feeling?”

That elicited no reply.

Jesse rose and walked over to the couch. Robby’s eyes had fallen entirely closed,

and when Jesse touched his shoulder he didn't stir. "You need to speak, or nod your head," Jesse urged him. "I know you don't feel well, but you need to speak."

Jesse lifted him into his arms; he was limp, but he was certainly breathing: the sound was like a saw hacking through a log. His head lolled against Jesse's shoulder, and the fever in his cheeks was palpable.

Jesse paced the room, torn between one instinct that told him to treat the ailing child gently and allow him as much rest as possible, and another that instructed him to rouse the boy at any cost. "You're still with me, aren't you?" he said. "When your Ma comes home, you can tell her the story of Solomon and the fences, from start to finish, as proof that you never been gone."

The sound of Robby's exhalations was growing more alarming: each breath was accompanied by a viscous gurgling, as if his lungs were pushing against something much thicker than air.

On a winter's night, when he was barely six years old, Jesse had heard his parents arguing over his sister Charlotte's crib. His father had wanted to call for the doctor, but his mother had begged him not to.

Why? Jesse had never understood before, but now it seemed plain: Charlotte had lost consciousness, and his mother was afraid that if the doctor saw her in that state, he'd insist on burying her.

So the doctor never came. But Charlotte had died anyway.

Still carrying Robby, Jesse walked out into the corridor and banged on the nearest door. After a moment Samuel Wilkinson emerged, looking annoyed at the disturbance.

"I'm watching him for his mother, but he's ailing," Jesse explained. "I'd be obliged if you could fetch Dr. Harlow." Jesse kept the boy facing away from his neighbor, concealing his precise condition as much as possible.

"Of course," Wilkinson agreed. "I'll get my coat."

Jesse returned to Sarah's apartment and waited, walking with the boy, rocking him gently. He muttered soothing nonsense aloud and offered confused prayers from his heart. But if he was dead himself, a demon walking around in stolen flesh, why would the Lord heed him? And if Robby had already gone to Paradise, what point was there in willing him back?

When the knock came Jesse hesitated, suddenly fearful that he'd made the wrong decision, but he'd left the door unlatched. Dr. Harlow entered, and swiftly took charge of the situation.

"Put him down on the couch," he said.

Jesse complied, then stood back while the doctor made his examination. He started rehearsing lies in his head: *The boy was speaking until a minute ago. He's surely just tired of me pressing him for conversation.*

"Can you heat some water?" Harlow asked. "A pint or so. Not to boiling, but as hot as you would for a bath."

When Jesse brought the water into the sitting room, Harlow added something to it from his bag, then he held Robby up so his face was above it. "Drape that over him, like a tent," he said, nodding toward the blanket lying crumpled on the couch. The scented water smelled like peppermint oil, but there was something stronger too; Jesse could practically feel his own sinuses dilate as he backed away.

"He's going to be fine," Harlow said. "This will clear his lungs, and his own body will do the rest. He'll just need to lie quietly for a while."

"Thank you."

Harlow scrutinized his face; Jesse knew his eyes were red from weeping, and he averted them self-consciously. "You're a friend of the family?"

"Yes, sir. My name's Jesse Cole."

"You were right to call me, Mr. Cole. This treatment will ease his distress."

Jesse didn't know what to say. There was no talk of putting Robby in the ground just because he'd grown unresponsive, and no suggestion that his mother should recoil from him in horror if he emerged from this state of animalistic dormancy and tried to convince her he was still who he had always been.

"In my home town," Jesse said, "the practice has sometimes been to rush to judgment on the question of the soul's departure." He looked up, wondering if he'd been unwise to raise the matter; if he forced the doctor to take a position, he might grow nervous and shift his ground.

But Harlow remained steadfast. "I have read the Bible, Mr. Cole. There is no verse I can recall that commends the premature interment of children. Or grown men and women, for that matter."

Jesse could already hear the boy's breathing growing more regular. "You won't get no quarrel about that from me."

Harlow laughed. "I wish every colleague and member of the public were as easy to persuade as you, sir."

"I don't claim to understand the whole business myself," Jesse confessed. "But after eighteen hundred years of Christendom, why can't people be settled on this?" Arguments over the finer points of theology might continue to the end of time, but that was no excuse for leaving the question of *burying a person who might yet be revived* down to local custom, or some layman's opinion.

"Aristotle thought it was the absence of sleep that most clearly elevated man above the animals," Harlow mused. "He believed that the continuity of self-awareness was crucial for the development of the rational soul. Galen, however, was quite relaxed about the matter, and believed that whenever sleep was curative it should not be discouraged. Many cultures have taken the same view; in much of Africa, there is no shame or ostracism associated with a temporary loss of consciousness.

"But in Europe, a tradition arose in which the Passion of Christ—with His eyes wide open, and His senses unflinching—was viewed in opposition to the 'abomination' of sleep. The Gospels themselves say nothing about sleep, but the convenience of this stance seems to have proved irresistible."

"*Convenience?*" Jesse held his anger in check. "How is it convenient to bury our children alive?"

"We don't, for the most part," Harlow replied. "More often, we just keep quiet about the lapse. But since there are other cultures who make no secret of experiencing this condition—no more common to them than to us, but less hidden by shame—that offers us a pretext to question their humanity. To subjugate them, to steal from them, to enslave them."

Jesse was not convinced. He could accept that greed and hypocrisy had the power to shape people's beliefs—but weren't there genuine questions of theology that remained, regardless?

"If we lose consciousness without dying," he said, "then where is the soul for the duration of that event?"

"The Scriptures say the soul is *unbroken*," Harlow replied. "They never say that it can't, itself, sleep."

"But when Jesus roused the insensate," Jesse protested, "they all told their families that they'd been to Heaven!"

"They did indeed. But why would He have bothered rousing anyone who was, in fact, merely asleep, and would have woken of their own accord?"

That did make some sense, but it only left Jesse more frustrated. "You have an answer for everything. But an awful lot of folks see it very differently."

"We understand many things imperfectly," Harlow conceded. "But however contentious a matter might be, my own counsel would always be to avoid taking a position

that justifies barbarity.”

He motioned to Jesse to approach and take the blanket away. Together they set the pan of water aside and eased Robby onto the couch.

“What do I owe you?” Jesse asked.

“A quarter. That will cover these drops, which you can administer the same way again if the congestion recurs.”

Jesse handed over the payment, and Harlow insisted on writing out a receipt.

“What should I tell the boy’s mother?” Jesse asked.

“Just tell her about the treatment I administered, that the child is recovering, and that I recommended rest. The less emphasis you place on the nature of that rest, the less it should trouble her—but from the dealings I’ve had with her in the past, I doubt there’s anything to fear in that regard.”

As Jesse closed the door, he felt as if he’d spent the last half hour in an entirely different world, where every malign force that had upended his life since the accident could be banished through nothing more than the application of reason and moderation.

It was an appealing place to visit. But it was not the world he inhabited.

* * *

5

“Mr. Cole?” someone shouted. “A very good evening to you, sir!”

Jesse turned to see a carriage moving down the street beside him, with a well-dressed but burly looking man leaning out the window.

“What can I do for you?” Jesse asked, unsure how this stranger had come by his name. If he worked for the railroad company, Jesse had no memory of ever seeing him there.

“My employer would like to meet you, to discuss a business proposition.”

Jesse could only think of one thing that singled him out from the other workers heading home from their shifts. He shook his head apologetically. “Thank you, but I’m satisfied with my present position.”

The man was undeterred and continued with a firm cheerfulness. “Can I ask you to reconsider? My employer only wants a few minutes of your time, and the outcome could be very profitable for you.”

Jesse smiled politely. “Please give your employer my regards, and my humble thanks for his generosity. But I’m expected in my home for dinner, and my wife will be concerned if I’m tardy.”

“Just a few minutes, Mr. Sloss,” the man insisted. “Sorry, my mistake—of course you’re going by Cole now.”

Jesse stopped walking, and the driver brought the carriage to a halt.

“What do you want from me?” he asked.

“Exactly what I said. Just meet this gentleman and hear him out. Do him that courtesy, and you won’t be troubled again.”

Jesse considered asking what the cost of him refusing would be, but thought better of it. “Very well,” he said.

The man opened the carriage door and Jesse joined him.

“My name’s Stang.” He shook Jesse’s hand firmly then banged the roof of the carriage, and the driver set the horses trotting again. “Don’t worry, it’s a short trip.” They turned into Broadway, heading south.

“What is it you do, Mr. Stang?”

“Me?” He gave a puzzled smile, as if the question was one he’d never been asked

before. “Mostly, I look into things. Get to the bottom of them, so to speak.”

“So you’re a philosopher?” Jesse said dryly.

Stang was amused. “I believe I am. I should have that printed on my business cards: G. C. Stang Esquire, Practical Philosopher.”

Jesse felt no need to inquire exactly who had sought Stang’s aid in getting to the bottom of the strange reports out of Haverhill. He’d had a suspicion from the start, and the direction of their journey was doing nothing to dispel it.

They pulled up outside the Museum on the corner of Broadway and Ann Street. Dusk had fallen, and the building’s white façade was already a dazzle of limelight.

“It is painful to the eyes this close,” Stang conceded, shielding his own as they disembarked. “But it does catch the attention from quite a distance.”

Jesse could see a stream of enthusiastic customers filing into the street entrance, but Stang led him around the building, into an alley. He fished a keyring out of his pocket and opened a gate that blocked their way, then a door that gave admittance to the building itself. The hubbub of the crowd, approaching and within, could still be heard, muted, as they took three flights of carpeted stairs, with gas lighting flickering on every landing.

They walked down a short corridor to an antechamber, where a young man glanced up from a ledger he was writing in and nodded to Stang. “He’s expecting you.”

Stang knocked on the office door, and a voice replied, “Enter!” But after holding the door wide open, he hung back, leaving Jesse to go in alone.

P.T. Barnum rose from his desk and approached to shake Jesse’s hand, then ushered him into an armchair. “I’m so pleased to meet you, Mr. Sloss!” he enthused.

“Likewise,” Jesse replied, seeing little value in denying his identity. It was hard not to be distracted by all the garish posters plastered over the walls; even through the corner of his eye, the foot-high rendering of FEEJEE MERMAID! and GENERAL TOM THUMB! forced their way into his attention.

“I shall get directly to the point,” Barnum said. “As soon as I heard your story, I knew it could be the basis for a highly educative and entertaining performance. We would commence with a dramatic portrayal of the events leading up to your accident, followed by a live reenactment of your escape from the grave. A tank full of soil, with one side built of sturdy glass, would allow the audience to observe every detail as you burrow your way to freedom. I have even procured the original coffin, for the sake of ensuring the utmost authenticity.”

Jesse doubted that, but it was the least of his concerns. “To what end would I involve myself in any of this tomfoolery?”

“I’d pay you fifty dollars a week, Mr. Sloss.”

“And what good would that do me, once I’m recognized on the street as a dead man? As a corpse animated by a demon?”

Barnum laughed. “This is New York! No one will come after you with pitchforks! People will be scandalized, or moved to pity, as their own temperaments and beliefs dictate, but no one has ever died from the public’s fascination.”

Fifty dollars a week. Jesse sat staring at the carpet, wondering if it might actually be the right thing to do. Once people tired of the act, he could grow a beard and change his name again. He and Felicia could buy a house in a small town somewhere; she’d write poetry and he’d farm hogs, and their children need never have an inkling of his history.

“After the thrill of the escape,” Barnum continued, “you would have the opportunity to address the audience directly, and solemnly recount your experience of death. The blinding light, the pearly gates . . . whatever details you feel comfortable disclosing.”

“There are no details to disclose,” Jesse replied. “That time was a blank page for me.”

"Then I'd be happy to help scrawl a little ink on it," Barnum offered. "I'm sure we could agree on an account that respects all of your own religious sensibilities, while offering the customers something to appeal to their hunger for both wonder and piety."

Jesse glanced up at the posters of Barnum's past attractions, then recalled the precise source of the unease that had been lingering at the back of his mind.

"I don't see one for Joice Heth," he said. He'd only been a boy when he'd heard his parents discussing the exhibit, but their disgust for the man behind it had been clear. "The Greatest Curiosity in the World.' Wasn't that what you called her? Surely she deserves a place on your wall?"

Barnum shifted in his chair. "That was fifteen years ago. These days, I'm serving a more refined clientele. In a few months, I'll be bringing the most renowned singer in Europe to these shores, for the very first time—"

Jesse cut him off. "You *bought* an old, blind slave woman, pulled out all her teeth, and paraded her around as General Washington's nursemaid."

"I *leased* her," Barnum corrected him tetchily. "Look, the whole business was a youthful misjudgment, I admit that."

More of the story was coming back to Jesse now. "Then you *cut her up!* When she died, you cut her up, and took money to let people watch!"

"A reputable surgeon performed the autopsy," Barnum stressed. "Purely to settle the question of her age. Having benefited from her claims to be one hundred and sixty years old, I owed it to the public to resolve the matter, openly and honestly."

Jesse rose to his feet. "Forgive me, sir, but I think our business is concluded."

"Don't be such a hypocrite," Barnum said sharply. "In a perfect world, we might all be ardent abolitionists, but no one's principles are quite as firm as they pretend them to be. For example, I'm told that your wife works in the garment district."

"What of it?" Jesse demanded.

"You don't know?" Barnum cackled. "Whose clothes do you think she's making—those crude things whipped up in five minutes? Poor folk make their own, gentlemen use tailors. So whose bodies do you think she's cutting her cloth for?"

Jesse turned and walked to the door.

"Sit down!" Barnum said impatiently. "If you agree to my proposal, it will make you a small fortune. But either way, your secret's coming out. Either you'll see your portrait on a poster—knowing that it's drawing customers who'll contribute handsomely to your livelihood—or you'll see it in the papers, and know it's doing nothing but bringing suspicion and ire down on your head. That's your choice, Mr. Sloss. What's it to be?"

* * *

6

Jesse was spreading ballast when the foreman, Stephenson, came and drew him aside. "Put your shovel in the tool shed, then go to the office and collect your wages. You won't be needed any more."

Jesse glanced back at the rest of the work gang for support, but no one would meet his gaze. These brawny, stalwart men who'd worked and joked beside him for months now looked like a gaggle of grimy-faced urchins who'd broken a window but lacked the courage to own up to it. "Why? What have I done wrong?"

"Nothing," Stephenson replied. "But the office hired a few too many hands, and you're surplus to requirements."

"You know that's not true." They were at least a week behind schedule. "Are you going to look me in the eye and tell me you believe I'm some kind of spawn of Hell?"

Stephenson winced. “Don’t mistake me for a Bible-clutching spinster. You’re a hard worker, and you never gave me any trouble; I don’t care if you were buried in New Hampshire or not. But most of the men think you’re bad luck. We’ve had three accidents since you joined—”

“And how many in the same time before that?” Jesse demanded.

Stephenson shook his head. “It’s out of my hands, Cole. Collect your wages.”

As Jesse headed home, it began snowing gently. If anyone on the street recognized him, they showed no interest, let alone fear or revulsion. Most people had more important things to worry about than foolish stories in the newspapers. He’d find another job, where his fellow workers were less prone to childish superstitions.

When he arrived at the apartment, he saw that someone had attempted to paint an extensive passage of text on the door, but they had lacked the skill to execute such detailed work while preventing the letters from running, and the result was an incomprehensible blur. The smudge at the lower right looked like it might have been a reference to chapter and verse, but however much Jesse squinted at it, it refused to resolve into anything decipherable. He fetched rags and a bucket of water and set about scrubbing off the mess.

When he was done, he made himself useful, starting a meal cooking so it would be ready when Felicia arrived home.

“What’s this?” she asked as she entered the apartment, pleased for a moment, but then wary. “How did you find the time?”

Jesse hesitated, contemplating an equivocal answer that would spare her from worry, but then he realized how transparent any lie would be and explained what had happened.

“Never mind,” she said, though Jesse could see her brow furrow and her shoulders slump. “I’ll go back for another shift.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“We need to pay the rent,” Felicia replied.

“If no one will hire me in New York, we can move to another town,” Jesse suggested. “Surely even Barnum can’t afford to get my picture into every newspaper in the country. And once his Swedish nightingale is here, he’ll be busy with her and have no more time to waste on me.”

Felicia said, “I’m famished. Will you let me serve dinner?”

After Felicia left the for the workshop, Jesse sat in the dark. Maybe he’d done the wrong thing by digging his way out. Maybe God had intended him to surrender his pride and die in that coffin, after all.

And every sick child, as well? But perhaps the innocent never woke in their graves; they just slipped away untroubled. He must have sinned, and been tested, and failed that test. But if this was his Purgatory, what had Felicia ever done to be forced to share it with him? Was her love and loyalty toward him a crime against God?

Someone pounded on the door. Jesse remained still for a moment, unsure if he was fit for company, but then the urgency of the summons shook him out of his self-pity. If a neighbor was sick, he wasn’t going to skulk in the dark, refusing to acknowledge them.

But the caller had already grown impatient. “We know you’re in there, Sloss!” a man’s voice bellowed. “It’s time to return to the grave!”

Jesse’s own morbid rumination on the subject suddenly lost its appeal; the jolt of vigor to his blood that these threatening words induced did not feel sinful in the least. He swung the door open, fists balled, prepared to beat some common courtesy into this insolent stranger’s jaw.

A dozen men stood before him in the corridor, all of them holding wooden clubs. As the nearest approached, Jesse grabbed him by the lapels and flung him back against his comrades, unbalancing them. Then he stepped back inside and bolted the door.

He ran to the window and looked down, but there was a group of men idling on the street below—too many to be gathered by chance for some other purpose. He wondered if the whole mob might be a ruse that Barnum had contrived, to frighten him into seeking the protection of a wealthy benefactor; in that case they would be under strict instructions to do him no actual harm. But it seemed more likely that the spiteful exposure of his secret had summoned up genuine antipathies in a small group of citizens who were oblivious to Barnum's schemes and quite prepared to destroy this sideshow freak without the least concern for his potential earnings.

"Come out, you coward!" the same man taunted him. There was an impact, less harsh to the ear than the pounding of a fist, that nonetheless made the door rattle in its frame; Jesse suspected one or more shoulders brought hard against it. The insult rankled, but if he was serious about purging himself of pride, pretending he could fight his way past twelve men with clubs would not be much of a step in that direction, let alone a successful strategy for deferring his demise.

Jesse took a dining chair and placed it beneath the hatch that led into the roof; he moved the cover aside, but then climbed down and put the chair back in its proper place, so it would not guide his persecutors' gaze.

Then he stood beneath the opening in the ceiling, muttered a short prayer, and sprang up as high as he could.

His fingers caught the edge of the hole. He pulled himself into the roof, brushed the hatch cover clean with the unsoiled back of his hand, and carefully replaced it.

The roof space was dark, but after a few seconds the grayness resolved into an orderly arrangement of wooden beams, coated in dust and draped in cobwebs. The Lord hadn't put a second sun in the sky, but there was no denying that He had given his children the eyes of a nocturnal hunter.

Jesse knew it would be unwise to linger, but he was unsure exactly where to go. If he tried to lift the tiles above him, he'd risk making a noise and drawing attention to himself, and he doubted he could reach the ground safely from the rooftop in any case. He pictured the apartments directly below; Sarah and Robby were around a bend in the corridor, out of sight of the mob gathered at his door.

He moved as quietly as he could, keeping his knees and forearms supported by solid beams as he made his way across his neighbors' ceilings. He could have sworn he'd heard rats and other animals up here in the past, but if they were present now they were doing their best to hide from the intruder.

When he reached what he hoped was the right hatch, he paused to listen. He heard Sarah speak, though her words were muffled, then Robby replied. Would they cry out in alarm if he emerged before them? Jesse hadn't spoken to Sarah since the newspapers had done Barnum's dirty work; he had no idea how she would receive him.

He lifted the cover and lowered his head into the room, with a finger to his lips. Robby saw him first and laughed with delight; Sarah looked up, startled, but then recovered her composure and bent to shush her son.

Then she fetched a chair and Jesse descended into the room.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"It's the least I can do," she replied. "I don't know where those louts came from, but I promise you we're all on your side."

Jesse lowered his eyes in gratitude, though he wasn't sure just who that "we" encompassed.

He walked over to the door and listened. He could only hear snatches of shouted curses and commands exchanged within the mob, but it sounded as if they'd breached his apartment and were making a thorough search.

"You can stay here as long as you like," Sarah said.

"That might not be safe for any of us," he decided. "Better that I move on, and do it

quickly before they come looking.”

“They left people posted at the entrance,” Sarah warned him. “You can’t just walk out.”

“I see.” Jesse moved to the window and looked down; he was on a side of the building now different from his own, and there was no one in the alley below.

“That’s too dangerous!” Sarah protested.

Jesse glanced back at her, a little annoyed by her solicitousness, but on reflection he had to admit that she was probably correct. “What, then?”

“I have friends, two stories down, who might shelter you,” she said. “And if you don’t want to stay, it’s a much smaller drop from there.”

“Very well.”

Sarah bent down and kissed Robby on the forehead. “I’ll be back in a minute. Just stay here quietly.”

Jesse followed her out. The ruckus from his apartment was growing louder, the tone of the exchanges more confused and resentful. As they approached the stairwell he was afraid they’d find yet another group of lookouts waiting, but the way was clear.

When Sarah knocked on her friends’ door a man answered; a woman and three young children were visible behind him.

“William, this is Jesse Cole,” Sarah explained. “He saved my son’s life, and now those ruffians are after him.” She gestured upward, as if that was enough to make the source of the danger clear; apparently everyone in the building was aware of the men’s presence, even if the news hadn’t traveled quickly enough to alert their actual target.

William shook Jesse’s hand and gestured for them to enter. Jesse nodded to the man’s wife, who regarded him with suspicion.

“I apologize for the imposition,” Jesse said. “I’m only here to ask leave to depart through your window, so as not to end the night with my skull in pieces.”

“The kitchen would offer the easiest exit,” William said, leading the way.

“You’ll look out for Felicia?” Jesse asked Sarah. He wasn’t sure he’d get a chance to meet up with her before she returned.

“I’ll make certain she’s out of harm’s way,” Sarah promised.

William opened the kitchen window. There was a drainpipe beside it; Jesse took his boots off and dropped them into the alley, then clambered out. There was only one story further to the ground, but he clung firmly to the pipe and moved down slowly all the way, knowing that if he so much as sprained an ankle it might be the death of him.

In the alley, he got his boots back on and crept to the corner of the building. As Sarah had warned him, there was a group of six men waiting outside the street entrance, and while some were intent on watching the doorway, others were glancing idly in all directions, understandably bored by their task.

Jesse looked around the alley for anything he could use as a club of his own, but then he set aside the urge to teach these men a lesson and forced himself to be content with the prospect of slipping their net. He waited until the lookouts least interested in the doorway were occupied with the sight of an approaching carriage, and then he strode out of the alley onto the street and turned away from the building. He proceeded at a brisk but dignified pace, confident that no one had seen him emerge from the alley, and hoping they were too distracted to reason that there was nowhere else he could have come from.

That proved too optimistic. He had not gone far when he heard heavy footfalls approaching; as they drew closer he glanced back and saw that two men had split from the group to investigate his identity. Jesse was still disinclined to flee; the published likeness had been imperfect, and there was a chance that if he kept his nerve and merely scowled with annoyance at these fools, they would retain enough doubt to

hesitate before bludgeoning a stranger on a public street.

"Jesse Sloss?" one of the men asked breathlessly as he came alongside Jesse's shoulder.

"My name's Stephenson," Jesse replied, without stopping.

"I don't think so," the other remarked, flanking him. Both clutched at his arms; he broke free, stepped back, spread his arms across their shoulders as if in a brotherly embrace, then pushed the two men hard into each other. They both lost their balance and fell to the sidewalk; Jesse skirted around them and walked on, then glanced back to see that the other four were now running toward him. Reluctantly, he broke into a run himself, his face burning at the prospect of onlookers attributing his undignified haste to guilt or cowardice.

After two blocks, only two of his pursuers remained in sight, but they were gaining on him, and both were carrying clubs. Jesse cursed himself for his half-hearted start to the race, and redoubled his efforts to lose them, but willing himself more speed was not enough to attain it.

"Mr. Cole?" someone called from the street. "Can I assist you?" Jesse looked toward the carriage, imprecations ready on his lips, sure that it could only be Stang or some other lackey sent by Barnum to scoop him up like an animal cornered by hounds. But after staring angrily for a moment, he realized his mistake.

"Dr. Harlow?"

Harlow signaled to the driver to halt the carriage. Jesse approached, still suspicious.

"Did you just chance to find me here," he asked, "or did someone send you?"

"Half the neighborhood is talking about the commotion at your building," Harlow replied. "I did come by to see if my services were needed, and then I saw you fleeing." He poked his head out of the carriage and glanced down the street at the two men approaching. "You might want to get in now, sir, if that's your intention."

* * *

7

"Is there somewhere I can take you?" Dr. Harlow asked, once the shouted curses had receded into the distance.

"The garment district," Jesse replied. "I need to find my wife."

Harlow conveyed these instructions to the driver, then settled back in his seat. "I was surprised to see the papers all latching on to your private affairs in such detail," he said. "These stories are usually curiosity pieces, with third-hand reports from unreliable witnesses."

Jesse described his encounter with Barnum and his suspicions about the aftermath.

"What an unpleasant fellow," Harlow commiserated.

"He's cost me my job and a roof over my head, at least for the moment."

"Do you have friends you can stay with?"

"The ones I trust are all in that building, where I'd just be bringing danger to them."

"Hmm."

They reached the place where Felicia worked. Jesse was in two minds about entering the premises; he didn't want to poison Felicia's reputation with her fellow workers. Then he spotted one of her friends, Jane Sewell, whom he'd already met previously, departing from the building. He left the carriage and approached her.

"Miss Sewell? I beg your pardon, but could I trouble you for a moment?"

"Mr. Cole." She paused, smiling, then guessed his intentions. "You're looking for

your wife? Felicia left half an hour ago; she wanted a full shift, but it hadn't been arranged for her, so the foreman was only able to give her some odds and ends."

Jesse thanked her and returned to Harlow. "She'll be home by now," he said. "But I'm hoping one of my neighbors will have taken her in." Much as he wanted to ride up and sweep her away, his presence back at the building would risk the louts seeing her in his company and do nothing to make her safer.

"Where to now?" Harlow enquired.

"Do you know of any boarding house where the landlord doesn't read the newspapers?" It was snowing heavily now, and Jesse wasn't keen to spend the night huddled in an alleyway.

Harlow said, "I know a place where you'll be safe, if you don't mind sharing a basement with another guest."

"I'd be grateful for any kind of shelter," Jesse replied.

"It's not too far," Harlow assured him.

Jesse leaned back and closed his eyes, listening to the steady clop as the carriage made its way north, trying to be grateful for his blessings. He might have died at the hands of the rabble, but he hadn't. Felicia would be safe with Sarah. Things seemed bleak, but it was surely only temporary.

"We're here," Harlow said. They'd stopped beside an alleyway, and he pointed out the stairs leading down to the basement's back entrance.

"Who owns this place?" Jesse asked.

"Friends of mine," Harlow replied. "They're always happy to offer temporary accommodation. But they're busy folk, so I hope you won't mind if I don't make introductions."

"So long as I'm not trespassing, I'll take your word for it."

Harlow told him where he could find the key, and Jesse bid him farewell. He moved quickly through the snow, wishing he had fled in warmer clothes and wondering if anything remained of his possessions.

Harlow had mentioned that there might be another guest present, so Jesse gave a warning knock first and called out, "I'm an acquaintance of Dr. Harlow. He believed the building's owners would be agreeable if I lodged here for the night." There was no reply, so he unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The room was entirely unlit, so Jesse left the door open until he'd apprised himself of the layout of the furniture: a table, a couple of chairs, a tattered couch, and a wooden cabinet. A man was seated in one of the chairs, regarding him warily.

"Good evening," Jesse said. "I'm sorry for intruding."

"Good evening," the man replied. "Could you close the door, lest we both freeze to death."

Jesse obliged him, and introduced himself.

"My name's Joshua," the man replied. "You want me to light a candle?"

"It might help me avoid breaking my neck." Jesse had finally realized that the basement wasn't just poorly illuminated by virtue of its architecture: the windows had actually been painted over.

He waited, listening to Joshua move about, then he heard the flint strike and a candle flame appeared. Joshua placed the candlestick on the table, then motioned to Jesse to take a seat.

"There's some bread and fruit if you're hungry, and some water," Joshua said.

"Thank you, but I ate not long ago."

"Hmm." Joshua had a few days' growth of beard, flecked with gray, and from the look of his clothes he had been traveling for a while. "You heading to Canada, too?"

Jesse wasn't sure if this was meant as a joke, though he supposed there might be a handful of white men who'd been caught out aiding fugitives, and sought to escape

their punishment that way. "I hope not," he replied. "I ain't done nothing that requires that kind of remedy, unless I'm suffering from some seriously misplaced optimism."

Joshua laughed. "So can I ask what you did do, if that ain't impolite?"

Jesse hesitated, unsure of the wisdom of risking being seen yet again as a bearer of bad luck. "I fell asleep," he said. "For so long that they put me in the ground. And now that word's got out, a few folk seem to think I need to go back there."

"Hmm." Joshua showed no sign of any particular opinion on the subject.

"You have friends who made it to Canada?" Jesse asked.

Joshua nodded. "I only wish I followed them sooner, before the whole thing got harder." Jesse took a moment to catch his meaning: the new Federal law meant that even in the free states, the authorities were obliged to assist with any fugitive's return. It was illegal to own a slave in New York, but it was also illegal *not* to send a man back into slavery.

Jesse had been a child when he'd first heard a pastor preaching about the wickedness of the world, when a man could own another as if he were an animal. But at the time, it had all seemed as distant from his own life as stories about Moses and the Pharaoh. The few freed slaves he'd worked beside later had never spoken in his presence about their past, and he'd let that lull him into a kind of indifference.

But now he was sitting three feet away from a man who could be seized off the street and dragged away in chains, with the blessing of the law. Moses was dust in the desert; Joshua was flesh and blood, right before his eyes.

"I'll tell you one thing," Joshua said. "I seen men work so long and hard it almost killed them. But some of them, when it came to rest, fell into a deeper rest. For an hour or two, for half a day, they might have been dead. But then they stood up and walked among us, like nothing ever happened."

"And how did that strike you?" Jesse asked. "Did you fear them?"

"Fear them?" Joshua shook his head. "Only thing I felt about that was envy."

* * *

8

Around four o'clock in the morning, someone knocked on the door and spoke a phrase that Joshua said he'd been told to expect, and he departed on the next leg of his journey. Jesse found a blanket in a corner of the basement and wrapped it around himself, then he sat in the dark trying to decide what to do next.

An hour or so later, just as he was thinking of braving the cold, there was another knock. "It's Harlow, Mr. Cole. Could we speak for a moment?"

Jesse relit the candle. Then he let the doctor in and offered him a chair, as if the basement were his own front parlor.

"I've been thinking about your situation," Harlow began. "Barnum has made you notorious, in the hope that you'll allow him to exploit that for his own gain, but it occurs to me that you might choose to turn it to your own advantage instead."

"In what way?"

"I would suppose that you wish to be able to live a normal life again, with no need to conceal your identity. If you embarked upon your own speaking tour, to clarify for the public the true nature of your experience, you might succeed in winning them over."

"Winning them over?" Jesse laughed. "Just like that?"

"Not everyone," Harlow conceded. "But you have the opportunity to exert a considerable influence on the way the phenomenon of sleep is perceived. It's not absurd to hope that events like last night's hostilities could be reduced to rare exceptions."

“Or I could choose a new name,” Jesse proposed, “find a small town, cook up a good story, and invest in some elaborate sideburns.”

“Then nothing changes—and the next man or woman who gets a blow to the head is left to take their chances trying to dig their way to the surface.”

Jesse didn’t reply. Since leaving Haverhill, he’d done his best to pretend that his awakening beneath the ground was as rare as his emergence, though every trace of common sense told him that the latter could be a rarity even if the former was happening daily.

“How am I meant to organize a speaking tour?” he asked scornfully. “I don’t own anything but the clothes I’m standing in.”

“I can help you,” Harlow replied. “I can make introductions to other abolitionists who would be eager to see your message disseminated.”

“Abolitionists?” Jesse was bemused. “You think my story is going to win anyone over to that cause? If they ain’t been moved by hearing Mr. Douglass, what will they care about a white man from New Hampshire who spent a few minutes in a coffin?”

Harlow said, “The abolitionist movement, and the wider populace, have a complicated patchwork of beliefs. Some people have convinced themselves that they can justify slavery through the tenet that sleep implies the absence of a soul, combined with the myth that every child in Africa catches an endemic disease that robs them of their consciousness. But there is also a strand of vehement abolitionists who nonetheless cling to the very same tenet, and choose instead to insist that *no one* on God’s earth ever sleeps. And since there is ample evidence that they’re mistaken in that belief, they waste their time and energy trying to refute the irrefutable, undermining the credibility of the movement.”

Jesse couldn’t argue with him about the second group; his own parents, while abhorring slavery, had clearly reconciled that abhorrence with their congregation’s uncompromising attitude to sleep. And though they’d tied their beliefs into a strange kind of knot, it might not be beyond untying.

But the first? “You really think there’s a single slave-holder who’ll come over to the light, just because I can convince an audience of waverers and ditherers that I’ve still got a soul?” he asked. “If a plantation owner can’t acknowledge that trait in the people in whose company he’s spent his whole life . . .”

Harlow said, “The house that needs demolishing has planks running in every direction. If someone wants to find a pretext to keep slaves, when we kick away the planks about sleep, they’ll take their support from some other nonsense about the shape of people’s skulls, or some Biblical passage about the Children of Ham. Believe me, I don’t imagine for one second that you hold the match that can burn the whole thing down. But if you can help weaken it, even slightly—while aiding your own situation, and discouraging other premature burials—what is there to lose?”

Jesse snorted. “I might just aggravate a whole lot of people, while making it harder to escape their attention. What’s to stop the kind of zealot who tried to kill me last night from using this for a second try?”

“You think Mr. Douglass doesn’t attract rather more numerous and fervent critics?” Harlow replied. “We know how to protect our guests.”

“And how am I meant to make a living while I’m gallivanting around?”

“We’d feed and shelter you,” Harlow said. “And your wife, if she wished to accompany you, or we could help find her somewhere safe to live in New York if she preferred to stay.”

“This is just like Barnum’s offer,” Jesse grumbled, “except I don’t end up a rich man at the end.”

Harlow smiled. “I think you know that’s not true.”

Jesse said, “If you’ll excuse me, I need to talk to my wife.”

He declined the offer of a carriage ride, and made his way on foot to a corner that he knew Felicia would pass. When he spotted her approaching, she was with Sarah, who went ahead and left them to talk.

"There are still people outside the building," Felicia said, as they took shelter from the snow beneath an awning. "Lurking about, trying to look as if they're doing something else. But I've been back to the apartment and moved most of our things to Sarah's." She held up a bag she'd been carrying. "There are some clothes of yours in here. A warm coat, a scarf . . ."

Jesse took the bag, and tried to read her face. "Do you want to be rid of me?"

"No!" She took his hand. "Don't ask me that again, or there'll be trouble between us." "Do you want to leave town?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "I still have the job, and I don't think they're going to dismiss me. A few of the workers recognized the man in the papers as being my husband, but most of them are my friends, and the others don't seem all that interested in making trouble just for the sake of it."

Jesse described Harlow's proposal. "If I agreed, it might be for two or three months."

"I'd be fine here," Felicia assured him. "Sarah would be happy for the company, and someone to share the rent."

"All right." Jesse had half wished she'd given him an excuse to abandon the idea. "Do you think it's wise, though? Me blabbing my mouth off about the whole thing?"

Felicia said, "If it had stayed a secret, all the better. But it didn't, and we can't undo that. If you can't speak up for yourself against the nonsense people are spreading about you, it might never go away. So if you have a chance to set things straight, why not take it?"

* * *

9

"It was like stepping out of an impenetrable fog," Jesse said. "It was dark inside the coffin, but I could see myself in my mind's eye, plain as ever. I could feel the wood against my back. I could smell the pine boards, and the dirt around them."

He looked out across the pews of the small church hall. In the front row, someone coughed.

"At first, I thought I might be dead," he confessed. "But then I got so desperate to breathe fresh air, that didn't make any sense. So I did what it took to free myself."

He went on to describe the events of that night, as truthfully as he could without speaking ill of his parents or dragging Felicia into the story. He sketched his journey into exile, his life in New York, the offer from Barnum, the mob at his door.

"I ain't no physician," he said. "And I ain't no theologian. All I know is, I'm the very same person as I was before the accident. Our Lord didn't close His eyes for the three days He hung upon the cross, but I don't recall one word in the Gospels saying that if we sinners fall short of that divine endurance, we are damned. All I'm asking for is the right to keep living the life that God's grace allowed me to resume—and for every decent Christian to think twice before they consign their child, or their mother, or their brother to the grave, without asking if that grace is being offered to them, as it was to me."

Jesse lowered his eyes and stared at the lectern. There was a smattering of polite applause. Harlow joined him, and clasped him on the shoulder. "Does anyone have a question for Mr. Sloss?"

The cougher in the front row cleared his throat, but not to speak. Jesse looked up at the unsmiling faces, trying to guess which of them were gazing at him sourly

because they seriously doubted that he possessed an immortal soul and which were merely skeptical that he'd spent a single moment six feet underground.

"Mr. Sloss," a red-cheeked man in a velvet waistcoat began, "can you explain to us how you know you are the same person as you were before the accident?"

"I don't get your meaning, sir."

"When I think back over my own life," the man replied, "I can always follow the thread. I can recall the events of yesterday, and the day before, and so on. Far enough back, the fine details might be lost in the mists of childhood, but I know who I am because I have always been here, keeping watch, without interruption. If I ask myself, 'Am I myself?' the answer is indisputable. Because a dutiful sentry knows when no one came, or departed, beneath his gaze."

"And if a sentry looks away for one moment," Jesse replied, "if his mind wanders, should the house he was guarding be burned to the ground? If his neighbors look inside and find no enemy, but just the same old furniture and keepsakes as ever, what harm has been done?"

"But is that all we are, sir? Furniture and keepsakes?"

Jesse was starting to get a headache; these amateur philosophers always introduced some clumsy metaphor of their own choosing, and then he fell into the trap of adopting it himself, as if he had agreed that it captured the truth perfectly.

"I have the same memories and dispositions as ever," he said. "And the same soul watching over them. If you doubt that, tell me: who is it you think you're addressing right now? Do you believe that some unholy spirit would stand before you in the Lord's house, and hear the Lord's word without flinching?"

"Perhaps not," the man conceded. "Perhaps I am addressing no spirit at all. A dog or a horse, though it sleeps, retains memories of its training, and persists in its disposition, waking to perform the same tasks that it learned long ago, with the same meekness or stubbornness as ever."

"Does your dog debate the nature of its spirit with you?" Jesse retorted.

"No. But it never housed an intelligence capable of that skill. Your body may have learned the reflexes of rational speech while a soul resided within it. That those reflexes remain proves nothing—unless your aim is to convince us that those reflexes are all we are."

Jesse's patience deserted him. "And can you prove to this gathering that you possess any aspect of humanity yourself, beyond the reflexes you acquired years ago? Or do you demand the benefit of the doubt, afforded to you out of common decency, but resting in the end on your assurances alone?"

The man laughed, perplexed. "But I am not the one *boasting* of the absence of a soul, for three whole days in succession! If you had been accused of that, and angrily denied it, I would indeed have given you the benefit of the doubt. But instead you are touring the country, eagerly affirming everything said against you. That clearly shifts the onus onto you, sir."

Jesse just wanted to strike him now. Harlow must have sensed this; he stepped forward and announced that the talk was finished, thanked the audience and bid them good night.

"There'll always be good days and bad days," he said, as they left the hall and headed across town. "And remember, it's often the people with nothing to say who are taking you most seriously. They don't need to be sobbing in the aisles to be thinking about some relative who might have been buried too soon, or making an oath to themselves that their own child will never experience what you went through."

"Maybe," Jesse replied. He didn't doubt the doctor's reasoning, but the hope was too abstract to offer him much encouragement. He was starting to wonder if he would have been better off giving in to Barnum's extortion; however despicable the

man, he knew how to whip up the crowds and incite their passion. Jesse had never imagined himself to be any kind of orator, but if he was just a carnival strongman who had kicked his way out of a box in the ground, why had he held himself up as too high and mighty for Barnum's menagerie?

"Mr. Sloss? Dr. Harlow?"

Jesse turned. A man had followed them from the hall, no doubt intent on pursuing the subject of the talk further. "My name's Morton," he said, approaching. "Forgive me for troubling you on your way to your lodgings, but there's a matter I hope to discuss with you, that I had no wish to disclose to all and sundry."

Harlow said, "That's quite all right, sir. I'm sure you'd be welcome to join us for dinner."

While in Hartford, Jesse and Harlow were staying at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Betts and their three children, and they obligingly set an extra plate for their new guest. In response to their polite inquiries, Morton revealed that he was from Massachusetts, and described his profession as dentistry, but throughout the meal, and in the conversation that followed, he confined himself to vague pleasantries. Eventually, the members of the family made excuses to depart to other rooms, allowing the three of them some privacy.

"I believe you have persuaded me that a man can succumb to unconsciousness without damage to his body, or his wits, or his immortal soul," Morton proclaimed.

"Well, good," Jesse replied, gratified to have won a convert, but a little annoyed that he couldn't have said this a couple of hours earlier.

"To any other man, this might be a source of profound philosophical reflection, and, I would hope, a resolve to do no harm of the kind that was done to you, Mr. Sloss. But in my case, the import is far greater. Greater than most men could imagine."

Harlow exchanged a forbearing glance with Jesse, and inquired, "And why is that, sir? If you can trust us to do our humble best to stretch our own imaginations toward the same lofty endpoint."

"For the past four years," Morton explained, "I have been investigating the matter of sensitivity to pain, and developing a substance, which I call Letheon, that I have shown to be capable of rendering dogs, cats, pigs, cows, and horses all equally insensible to suffering. Under the influence of this substance, these animals can endure not only the removal of teeth, but all manner of surgery that would otherwise be painful in the extreme. When administered Letheon, they fall into a state akin to their ordinary sleep, but far deeper. It's well known that the slightest noise from an intruder, let alone a sharp jab to its body, would easily wake a faithful hound. With the aid of Letheon, I have cut into a dog's skin an incision six inches long, and then sutured it closed, all without the animal stirring, or uttering the faintest whimper of complaint. What's more, upon regaining consciousness, it showed itself no less amiably disposed toward me than it had been prior to the surgery; what would have been an act of the utmost cruelty, leaving the animal cowed, surly, or dangerously aggressive toward its tormentor, made no impression on it at all."

Jesse's annoyance had not entirely vanished, but after looking to Harlow for any sign that Morton's account might have struck a fellow medical man as implausible, he was prepared to concede that the invention's significance might excuse a degree of portentousness.

"So this would be better than opium?" Jesse asked.

"For surgery, certainly!" Morton replied. "Opium would likely remain the superior remedy for ongoing pain, where the patient needs to maintain some degree of activity. But if I were to have a tumor carved out of my body, I'd rather be absent entirely than merely looking on through an opium haze."

Harlow said, "You mention a variety of animal subjects. But have you tried it on a human patient?"

“Not as yet,” Morton admitted. “Until now, my philosophical qualms have held me back from that final step. That’s precisely why I chose to attend your lecture: to hear the testimony of a man who willingly confessed to a lapse in consciousness, but showed no sign of impairment as a consequence.” He turned to face Jesse squarely. “Sir, I do not perceive you as some kind of plaything of the Devil, nor as a man reduced to a brute beast. I believe you have provided an honest account of your experience and its aftermath, and that has given me the courage to make this request.” He turned to Harlow. “Dr. Harlow, I would be honored if you would agree to cut this wart out of my hand with a scalpel, while I am under the influence of Letheon. That is: while my soul is absent, and the pain cannot touch me. And then I hope to return, as intact in every physical, moral and intellectual faculty as Mr. Sloss, so I can add my testimony to his own—and embark upon the enterprise of making Letheon, in good conscience, the first choice of every surgeon in the world.”

* * *

10

Morton had insisted on fasting for a day before the three of them met in his lodgings to conduct the procedure. “Many of the animals would vomit up their food,” he’d explained, “which would be neither safe for the subject nor pleasant for any of the participants.”

“You seem anxious,” Jesse told Harlow as they ascended the stairs of the boarding house.

“No surgery is without risk,” Harlow replied. “This man could die from gangrene, when he had no need of the operation in the first place.”

“But you’re not troubled by anything else?”

“Oh, the concoction he’s devised might yet prove dangerous, but if he’s been honest with us about its effect on all those animals, I see no reason to suspect that he will fare any worse.”

Jesse was uneasy now. “Do you believe that a horse, or a dog, has a soul?”

“I believe many animals can suffer grievously, and exhibit genuine devotion,” Harlow said. “They are not clockwork mechanisms, merely pretending to those things.”

That didn’t answer Jesse’s question, but they’d arrived at their destination. Morton answered on the first knock and admitted them excitedly.

“This is history in the making,” he declared. “I hope you are both keeping diaries, and will write letters to your wives and colleagues recording the event for posterity.”

“Can you show me the agent you want administered?” Harlow asked.

Morton handed him a flask that was sitting on the table. Harlow removed the stopper and took a cautious sniff. “It needs to be kept well away from any flame,” Morton warned him. “But I have constructed an inhaler that will mostly contain the fumes.” The device was a glass bulb with two apertures, one spouting a flexible tube that terminated in a mask.

Harlow unpacked his own bag of instruments, laying them out on the table. Morton removed his coat and took a seat, regarding Jesse with a solemnly fraternal gaze, as if about to follow him into battle.

He filled the bulb of the inhaler with Letheon from the flask, then closed the first aperture and placed the mask over his mouth and nose, held up by loops of string behind his ears. Jesse was standing a few feet away, but he caught a trace of a sweet, pungent odor wafting out of the apparatus.

At first Morton scowled with displeasure, plain enough to be seen in the uncovered parts of his face, and he coughed several times with considerable vehemence, as if

his lungs were violently opposed to the reeking vapor they were being forced to take in. Then his face relaxed, his eyelids came together, and his body grew limp.

Harlow put an ear to Morton's chest, then held his wrist between thumb and forefinger. The sleeping man's arm dropped back to the table with no more hesitation than a scarecrow's. Harlow removed the mask and summoned Jesse to hold Morton's right hand still, the palm facing up, over a cloth pad. When he made the first incision into the skin beside the wart, Jesse tensed, instinctively expecting the patient to struggle and require forcible restraint. But Jesse's entire job consisted of steadying what might as well have been an inert object against the disturbances Harlow himself was creating.

He turned to examine Morton's face, and tried to discern some emotion in it. But it was not peaceful, or distracted, or resolute; it was entirely vacant. Even Robby, limp in Jesse's arms, had grimaced now and then with discomfort. *Was this how he had appeared himself, as he traveled the bumpy road home to Haverhill?* But if God had chosen to restore Jesse's soul in the wake of that misfortune, would He show the same mercy when the parting of soul from body was entirely self-imposed?

Harlow emitted a satisfied grunt and placed the severed wart aside. The wound he had made was bleeding copiously, but it was shallow, and once he'd put in the sutures to pull it closed and applied a bandage, the flow was stanching.

"It should be kept elevated," he muttered. He took out a longer strip of cloth and formed a sling, holding up Morton's hand and freeing Jesse from the task of keeping it from sliding off the table.

"Are you sure he's not dead?" Jesse asked anxiously.

Harlow checked for a heartbeat again, and held his hand beside Morton's nostrils. "He's not dead. The question is whether he'll recover from this state—preferably faster than you did, but every bit as hale and quick-witted."

"If Letheon is a cousin of whiskey, he might not be hale and quick-witted for a while."

Harlow laughed. "True. But it can't be too close a cousin; the amount of alcohol needed to render a man insensible to a scalpel blade is scarcely less than would kill him. And I'll thank you not to raise the comparison with our hosts, who are firmly devoted to the cause of temperance."

Jesse was happy to distinguish Morton's endeavor from wanton drunkenness, but he was no clearer as to what it actually entailed. "Where is his soul?" he asked.

"Where it always is, I suppose. But resting, as his body is."

"So these fumes have affected it, as much as they have his flesh?"

Harlow seemed to grow uncomfortable. "They have certainly affected his brain, which I believe mediates all conscious activity. But why are you asking me these questions, when you're the one best placed to answer them firsthand?"

"I don't remember anything from that time."

"Then that's your answer," Harlow replied. "If you remember nothing, there is nothing to remember."

Jesse wasn't satisfied. He didn't doubt that he was the man he had always been; what he wished was that he truly understood what that meant. The soul was aware of itself; it knew itself to be. Wasn't that quality alone what raised humans above the animals? But then, once awareness was gone completely, how could the soul still exist at all? It was like claiming to possess a body that had lost its power to tip a scale, register to the eye, or impede any object. If *those* properties vanished for a time and then returned, no one would declare that the body had *just been resting*.

Morton groaned and raised his head, then opened his eyes slightly. "Have you started the surgery?" he asked hoarsely.

"I'm entirely finished," Harlow replied.

Jesse moved the bucket into place just in time; Morton might have fasted, but his

stomach still found something to expel.

“My head is throbbing,” Morton complained. Harlow had him sip some water, then splash his face. After a few minutes, he was lucid enough to converse normally.

“You don’t remember anything since inhaling the fumes?” Harlow asked.

“No,” Morton confirmed. “It’s not that I was there, waiting in darkness to become reacquainted with my senses. There was no thought at all. When I look back across the fissure . . . there is the clarity of the events prior to administering the Letheon, then a brief jumble of confusion, and then my emergence into the present.” He glanced down at his bandaged hand. “It’s as if that stretch of time has been excised from my experience—and yet I’m no more divided by its removal than I am by this excision of the flesh.”

“Is the wound painful now?”

“It is,” Morton conceded. “But it’s tolerable, and nothing like the pain I would have felt had I been present for the surgery itself.”

“I’d call that a success,” Harlow decided.

“So I might join your tour? And repeat the demonstration alongside your talks?”

“How many warts do you have?” Harlow asked in jest.

“We can omit the surgery,” Morton clarified. “Though I’d be happy for any reputable physicians in the audience to come to the stage and examine me—prodding my skin with a needle, or such like, to satisfy themselves that the treatment really does have the desired effect.”

Jesse remained uneasy, but he had no good argument against Morton’s proposal. If Letheon continued to work in the same fashion, with its after-effects no worse than a mild emetic, such demonstrations might well persuade people that integrity was possible across the gulf of unconsciousness. And if the Lord hadn’t chosen to punish this man, here and now, for willfully extinguishing his awareness, surely He would continue His forbearance when the act was repeated in aid of the discouragement of ignorance, slavery, and burying children alive.

* * *

11

When Jesse and his companions arrived at the home of their host in New Bedford, he was surprised to find a letter waiting for him that was not from Felicia, but from a Professor Jackson of Marquette, Michigan. He opened it and read it twice before taking Harlow aside and consulting him on the contents.

“This man is claiming Morton stole Letheon from him, and he’s threatening to sue all three of us.”

Harlow was unfazed. “He wrote to me earlier, and I gave him short shrift. I suppose that’s why he’s taken to bothering you instead.”

“He says he taught Morton chemistry at Harvard, where they discussed his own experiments with something called ‘sulfuric ether.’”

“Which might well be the same thing as Letheon,” Harlow admitted. “But if the two of them want to argue about patent rights, that’s not our problem. I’d rather none be granted, so everyone can use the substance freely.”

“All right.” Jesse hoped that the talk of a lawsuit was bluster; he could not afford to get mired in anything of the kind, whatever the outcome.

When they returned to the parlor where Morton was seated with their host, Mrs. Edgecombe, he announced some correspondence of his own. “There’s a Mrs. Helen Williams here who has read reports of our previous demonstrations,” Morton explained. “She has volunteered to have me extract a troublesome molar—in public,

under the influence of Letheon!"

Mrs. Edgecombe, an elderly widow, nodded approvingly. "I know Mrs. Williams quite well. She would not make an offer like that frivolously, or insincerely."

"Perhaps we could call on her together," Harlow suggested to Morton. "We should be satisfied first that her health is robust, and explain the necessary preparations."

Jesse was dispatched to find a suitable chair for the demonstration. The town's dentist proved unwilling to part with his, but Jesse was able to come to an arrangement with the barber.

That night, the hall was almost full. Jesse gave his usual testimony, and the audience listened politely, but he knew they were impatient to see for themselves what he was merely describing.

Harlow took Jesse's place at the lectern. "Tonight," he said, "it will not be Mr. Morton experiencing the effects of Letheon. Rather, he will keep his wits about him, and practice his craft of dentistry on a willing volunteer."

Morton, Mrs. Williams, and her husband, who had been waiting to one side, all walked into view. A murmur of disquiet spread throughout the crowd, and then, as Mrs. Williams took her place in the barber's chair and Morton wheeled a trolley bearing his inhaler and dental instruments beside her, a dozen or so people stood up and began shouting.

"Quiet, please!" Harlow implored them. "This lady has graciously offered to have an infected tooth removed in your presence, to demonstrate both the absence of pain and the harmlessness of the treatment itself. Please show her some respect."

"I'll show no respect to murderers!" a man retorted. He was already on his feet; now he left his pew and approached the front of the hall.

Jesse moved to intercept him. "Sir, you need to stay seated, or leave," he said. "We can't allow any disruption."

"Stick to reciting your third-rate Poe," the man replied contemptuously. Other men, and a few women, were coming forward now, jostling to try to reach Morton and his patient. Jesse looked around for the volunteers who had offered to help guard the visiting speakers; they were joining the fray, but they were outnumbered.

"You need to leave," Jesse said. When the man tried to brush past him, Jesse took his arm and forced it behind his back, then spun him around and marched him toward the exit. A few feet from the door the man recovered from his surprise and began to offer resistance; Jesse twisted his arm toward his shoulder, and he dropped to his knees, cursing. A short while later, he agreed to depart.

Jesse turned toward the front of the hall. While the guards were doing their best, a phalanx of impromptu assistants had emerged from the audience to help them, blocking the way forward for the people shouting accusations of "murder!" and "debauchery!"

Jesse steeled himself and approached the line of objectors, trying to persuade each one to retake their seat, before seizing them and dragging them out. He could feel his blood rising, but he forced himself to be as calm and civil as he could, even when he was struck or spat upon.

When the last of the troublemakers had been expelled, and the doors locked, a few lingered outside near the entrance, bellowing threats and insults. Jesse saw that most of the guards had torn clothes and scratches or bruises on their faces. He supposed he looked the same; when he put his hand to his forearm, he felt a trickle of warm blood beneath the cloth, where a woman had stuck him with a hat-pin.

Harlow returned to the lectern, and glanced toward Mrs. Williams for her assent. "I have not changed my mind," she announced resolutely.

As the procedure began, the audience in the hall was silent, though interjections from outside continued. Jesse wondered if any of the protesters would have behaved

in the same fashion if it had been Morton volunteering to be “murdered” in public, for the seventh time. Had they all assumed he was a humbug, feigning sleep and pretending not to notice the doctors poking needles into the soles of his feet? Or was the crucial difference that Mrs. Williams was a respected member of their own community, to whom they felt some duty of protection, and through whom they would henceforth be reminded of the unsettling truth?

Mrs. Williams seemed to have fallen into Letheon’s embrace, but Morton pinched her hand several times to be sure. Her husband stepped forward and aided in the procedure, holding her head firmly while Morton worked on the tooth with his pliers. The yelling through the doors had died away, and Jesse was sure he heard the root of the molar tear free. Mercifully, the tooth emerged whole; if it had fragmented, the operation might have lasted an hour. When Morton dropped the bloody object in a metal dish with a satisfying clink, half the audience exhaled in unison.

“I have visited the same blank landscape as this brave lady inhabits now,” Morton assured the onlookers as they waited for her to be roused. “I would not otherwise have dared subject another soul to that strange exile. And Mr. Sloss, before me, paved the way and gave me courage. One by one, we can explore this territory, and though we return with no maps, or sketches, or diaries, it is our safe return itself that we mark upon our charts. *Here, there be no dragons.*”

Had the performers in the night’s drama been conspiring, this would have been the perfect time for Mrs. Williams to stir, but she remained motionless. Jesse saw people bowing their heads in prayer.

“God will not be mocked!” a man screamed from outside the door. The loudness of this cry finally roused the sleeper, who coughed and opened her eyes.

Morton and her husband attended to her, offering her water and speaking to her quietly. After a time, they helped her to her feet and supported her as she stepped forward to address the hall.

“My name is Helen Elizabeth Williams,” she said. “I was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, on September 7th, 1812.”

She proceeded with further details of her biography, along with professions of faith and devotion for her family. Jesse wasn’t sure if she had planned the whole recitation in advance, or was extemporizing, but though he could see that she was still suffering a degree of nausea and disorientation, there was a lively, unrehearsed sincerity to her words. *Might he have won his parents over, if he’d been as eloquent in his own defense?*

When she was finished, the audience applauded, but the mood seemed more somber than celebratory. This woman, whom many of them knew and admired, had returned, safe and uncorrupted, from the void—and in doing so had turned their minds to all the loved ones who might have done the same, given the chance.

* * *

12

Jesse was late arriving at the hospital, and though Morton had arranged for a seat to be reserved for him in the front row, by the time he entered the operating theatre, someone else had taken it. He was about to turn around and leave when a gentleman near the back gestured to him, indicating an empty chair beside his own. Jesse nodded to him in thanks, and squeezed his way in.

Morton was already speaking, heaping praise upon the powers of Letheon in his customary grandiloquent fashion. When he was done, Dr. Warren described the patient’s condition and the course the surgery would take. His language was aimed at his fellow surgeons, but Jesse had been given the gist of it earlier by Morton and

Harlow: the man on the table had a tumor in his neck, and Dr. Warren was going to cut it out.

"Cuthbert, from the New York *Sun*," the man who'd shown Jesse the seat whispered. "I'd swear I know you, sir, but I can't place you exactly."

"My name's Stephenson," Jesse replied. "I'm married to Dr. Warren's niece, and he was kind enough to offer me a chance to witness this demonstration."

Cuthbert shook his hand. "Lucky your wife's uncle isn't a Virginian." Seeing the confusion on Jesse's face, he added, "Their bill passed into law yesterday. 'Loss of consciousness, induced by any method or agent,' is now legally equivalent to death. That makes seven states where the activity we're watching right now would be classified as murder, and the instigators liable to hang."

"Hmm." Jesse turned away from him to concentrate on the proceedings, hoping his once mildly infamous features really had vanished to the edge of even this muck-raker's recollection. With new sleepers to write about every day, their journeys along the river Lethe witnessed by hundreds of good citizens, some laughable tale about a railway worker climbing out of his grave would soon be relegated to its proper place among the ghost stories given credence only by the gullible and the morbid.

The operation took close to an hour, with Morton administering more Letheon at regular intervals. When the sutures were in place, and the patient had recovered consciousness, Dr. Warren asked the man how he was.

"It feels like I got a little scratch," he replied. The physicians and journalists assembled, having seen the gory truth for themselves, rose to their feet and cheered.

Back at his lodgings, Jesse sat in his room, sorely tempted to pack at once and take the next train out of Boston. But it would be rude of him to disappear without a proper farewell to Morton and Harlow, who remained busy with Dr. Warren and his colleagues. He could leave in the morning, and still be beside Felicia before dark.

There was a knock on the door. "Who is it?" Jesse asked.

"Anderson."

Jesse let him in and offered him a seat. Mr. Anderson had helped guard the speakers throughout the Massachusetts leg of the tour; he was probably eager to return to his family in New Bedford and, like Jesse, was saying his goodbyes.

"I was hoping for your help in extracting a favor from Mr. Morton," Anderson said.

"What favor?" Jesse asked. "I don't know what sway I have with him, but I'll do what I can."

Anderson said, "I need half a dozen doses of Letheon."

Jesse was confused. "Do you have six friends with toothaches? If you do, Morton could give you the full service, not just help you avoid the pain."

Anderson was silent for a moment, then he asked Jesse to swear to keep what he was about to disclose a secret.

"I swear," Jesse replied, resisting the urge to add, "on my own grave."

"We've made a plan to cross into Virginia," Anderson confided. "There are ten of us, including two men who escaped from the same plantation we got in our sights, so they're well informed on all the particulars."

"You might need something stronger than Letheon to protect yourself," Jesse suggested.

Anderson smiled. "We got arms already, but we aim to use them as little as we can. The thing is, if we send the owners to sleep, not only can we bring a few of our brothers and sisters to freedom, the proof of what we done will make a better kind of mischief than any carnage. We'll have made that family of slave-owners dead by law, without spilling a drop of their blood—and captured it all in a nice daguerreotype for the papers."

Jesse wasn't sure just how much good that would do. "Won't their so-called property just be inherited?"

“Sure. They got cousins we won’t be able to reach. But do you s’pose the dead ones will sit happily by while their poor relations walk away with all their wealth?”

“Making fools of everyone, the law included.” Jesse had to admire the plan, and though it was heartbreaking to think of the raid doing anything less than freeing the whole plantation, he’d gleaned enough about the difficulties escapees faced to realize that such a large group, trying to travel in secret all at once, would not get far.

“But you want me to ask Morton for the Letheon, without telling him what it’s for?”

“Would you trust him to keep quiet?” Anderson asked. “Or to grant the request, once he knew the purpose? He’s not a bad man, but I have a feeling this wouldn’t fit with his intentions for his beloved child.”

Jesse mulled it over. “You’re probably right, but I don’t know what other story I could feed him to convince him to hand it over.”

“You can’t tell him you want to demonstrate it in New York, while he’s busy here?” Anderson suggested. “Spreading the good news farther and faster?”

Jesse shook his head. “He’s so jealous of anyone else getting their hands on this potion—” He caught himself. “But maybe we don’t have to ask him at all. Maybe there’s another way.”

“What other way?”

Jesse didn’t want to raise the man’s hopes without reason. “Give me half a day,” he said. “I might be mistaken, but it shouldn’t take long to find out.”

Harlow had mentioned that sulfuric ether was one of the ingredients of a popular remedy known as “Hoffman’s Drops.” Jesse spent an hour walking around Boston, until he finally came across a pharmacist willing to sell him, not the compounded drug, but a bottle of the crucial component in its pure form.

One sniff of the contents told him that Letheon contained the same substance, though that didn’t quite prove that there was nothing else in Morton’s formulation. Prof. Jackson had insisted that sulfuric ether alone could send an animal safely to sleep, but Jesse wasn’t going to hand the bottle over without verifying its effectiveness.

In his room, alone, he sat on a chair in his shirtsleeves, and took one of the bath towels his hosts had provided. He soaked the cloth in ether, and held it over his face.

The fumes were sickly sweet, but irritating beyond the most cloying perfume, leaving his eyes watering, his nose running, his throat stinging. He started coughing, and it was all he could do not to cast the towel aside and spit up every trace of the odious residue trickling down from his burning palate.

At the same time, he felt his head growing light, and the unpleasant sensations, without changing in any detail, lost their oppressiveness, leaving him curiously happy and carefree.

Don’t bury me, he thought, unable to speak the words, wishing he had written a note in case someone found him in this state. He tried to decide if his spirit was merely loosening its ties to his body, or if the Letheon was leaching into his soul and diminishing its capacity, but then he concluded that his struggle to settle on an answer was the answer itself. Even the preternatural bliss that had accompanied him as he receded from his senses now cut itself loose and drifted away, a smear of white light falling into darkness.

* * *

At first, the oddness of his posture was all there was: a brute fact connected to nothing else. Then, like an ice crystal growing around a speck of dirt, other aspects of the situation accreted. His body was twisted, slumped in the chair. The towel had fallen across his lap. His throat was dry and his stomach tight.

Jesse opened his eyes and groped for the bucket he'd left beside the chair. When he was done, he checked his pocket watch. He had been gone for more than half an hour.

He felt cold. He fetched a basin of water and splashed his face, but a dull ache remained behind his eyes. The dust in the room, on the sideboard and mirror, seemed thicker than he remembered, or at least more prominent.

For the second time in his life, he had stopped being himself, and then started again. But now he had no struggle for air to distract him—and no cheering crowd to laud his feat, nor solicitous friends to offer their opinions.

He had stopped, and he had started. The furniture and keepsakes of his memory and character had survived beneath the drop cloths while the house fell silent, but he hadn't borne them away for safekeeping elsewhere. Everything was, and always had been, contained within his skin. His soul was simply the way his body felt, when it was capable of feeling. When he slept, it was absent. When he died, it would be gone forever.

Jesse put on a coat, tidied the room, gathered his thoughts. Anderson returned, promptly at five as they'd agreed.

"Any luck with your plan?" he asked.

"Yes. I have it." Jesse handed him the bottle.

"You stole this from Morton?"

"No." Jesse explained what he'd bought, and how he'd tested it. "The secret won't last long; every dentist and surgeon in the country will know soon. Morton won't end up a rich man, though perhaps he'll retain the glory of being the first to reach a few milestones."

"Hmm." Anderson had other things on his mind.

"This raid into Virginia," Jesse began. "Could you use an extra pair of hands? I ain't no military man, but I'm not bad with my fists if it comes to that."

"You want to end up hanged?" Anderson asked dubiously.

"Not if I can help it. But now I got my life back, I can't just sit around wishing and praying that everything else will make itself right."

Anderson laughed. "You don't sound like the usual firebrand for the cause, but I won't hold that against you. I seen you handle yourself all right when it mattered. We got six more days before we leave, and if the others are agreeable, we can get you acquainted with the details."

Jesse wrote to Felicia, trying to walk a line between his wish not to deceive her and the risk of implicating her in the conspiracy he was joining.

Morton's demonstrations, and most especially this last one in Boston, look to have set things on the right course for us, and I am hopeful that I will be restored very soon to sufficient respectability, or at least anonymity, to have no trouble finding employment again. But there remains some further business that I am obliged to attend to, that will prevent me from returning for two or three more weeks.

Until then, know that you are in my heart every minute of the day. All my strength and comfort comes from knowing that we'll be together soon, and all my worth from recalling that you stood by me when no one else would.

Your devoted husband,

Jesse