

It weighed no more than a bird. Yet what a marvel. I ran a finger down the rigid spine, then spread it open, sniffing the tanned pages, the tangy scent of decomposing paper and ink. Each letter printed, perfect, precise.

Straight from the ancients' hands into mine.

I whispered the title, "*Frankenstein*," as my five teenage apprentices circled around. Normally boisterous, they stood hushed, expectant. This would be momentous for them: their first find since joining the Library. I closed the pages, sinking my nails into the lattice ridges of the cover, trying and failing to temper my own excitement. "How'd you find this?"

"Was buried, sir." Alma reached over, stroking the novel in my hands like a rescued kitten. "Ms. Bess was expanding her basement and discovered an old bin. This was inside, wrapped, protected." In the golden, late-afternoon light slanting through the tall windows, her amber eyes seemed to glow. "A new title, I think? One we've never seen before."

I flipped through the pages, unable to read them for the quickening of my heart, the tension ratcheting up around me, stretching tighter every second I waited to answer. But I couldn't hold back my grin forever. "Yes. This looks like something entirely new."

The apprentices hooted and hollered, hugging each other and slapping Alma's back. This would mean extra work. If the book was of any value, we'd need at least two copies: one for our shelves, another for the governor's mansion. Months of papermaking, transcription, and bookbinding. A delay from our regular tasks. But this evening no one cared about that.

“We should celebrate.” I pulled the whisky jug from my desk drawer and was metering it into colorful plastic cups when the double glass doors sprang open behind me, bringing a chill from the yard. With it came Tennison, panting and flushed, his shirt mottled with sweat.

Not yet fifteen, Tennison was my youngest scribe, though already tall and beefy, with narrow eyes and chubby cheeks. He should have been home by now to tend his mother’s farm (Katie would kill me if he was late again). At his arrival, the others cheered, trying to show him the new book. He barrelled past them, whetting a quill on my desk to scratch on a torn piece of parchment, then jutting it into my face.

*Come! Monster at mothers.*

“Now, Tenny. You know monsters aren’t real.” I passed around the cups, as the apprentices tittered.

It was a common problem for beginner readers: confusing reality with the fantastical world of novels, their minds filled with ghosts and witches, vampires and oceans, airplanes and spaceships. Until now, though, Tennison—mute since appearing in the colony as a baby—had proven a stoic pupil, immune to the usual hysterics.

Stomping, he moved his hands over his face, sculpting the high head of an ogre before jutting a finger at me, then swinging it to the doors.

“You want me to see something?”

He jabbed the word again. *Monster.*

I gripped Mary Shelley’s book tighter. Of all the nights for Tennison’s imagination to grow wild, why tonight, when all I wanted was to retire to my cozy alcove, close the curtains, and read? What if this was the book, the one I’d been waiting for, the one with answers.

“I’ll take Tenny home, sir.” Ezra limped forward on his crooked foot. “You should stay here with the new text.” At the kindness of his offer, the knot in my shoulders eased, my joints flushing with warmth.

My apprentices could, at times, still be a bit coarse, not fully divorced from their humble pasts. Yet they were a good sort, hard-working, generous. Sometimes I even envied their pasts: the normal, loving childhoods they’d led before injury or circumstance rendered them unfit for farmwork, leading them to this quieter (though widely distrusted) occupation. By almost every measure, I’d had the better upbringing. But far from normal. And even farther from loving. Perhaps that’s why, from an early age, I’d longed only for escape.

Burn pits, trash piles, dilapidated metal buildings. These were my boyhood wonderlands, each uniquely dangerous, perched on the edge of collapse, gravity a coiled snake poised to strike. Such sites were the dry bones of our colony, picked clean by generations of vultures, until all that remained was useless: grimy mattresses half-eaten by rats, rusty car frames, layers of dirt-filled, flattened plastic bottles. And, when I was lucky, books. Mysterious words preserved from another era, decipherable only by a privileged, royal few.

Books were always the best finds. New works for my family’s collection, each its own little escape (safer, some might think, than the ruins, though I was not sure). Sadly, mine was a solitary passion. There were few with whom I could talk about these books. Even fewer I’d have *wanted* to talk to.

Perhaps, as my arrogant family suggested, I’d cursed these young people, bringing them into our literate bubble, exposing them to that shadowy other world of the ancient texts, long extinct yet titillating in its beauty and nearness. The almost of it. So similar to our lives while, at the same time, so different. Now, though, hearing them cheer over a new find, knowing at last I

was not alone, I had no regrets.

“Thank you, Ezra. But I’m responsible for Tenny.” I held out *Frankenstein* to Alma.

“And I don’t always have to be the first reader.”

Her eyes widened into two gibbous moons. “Me?”

When she’d first come to the Library, fresh from a disastrous marriage, Alma used to skitter through the ornate rooms like a frightened mouse, as though at any moment I might realize my mistake and turn her out. Now, two years later, she stood straight-backed and confident under those same twenty foot ceilings, belonging to the place every bit as much as the cracking, yellowed portraits that dripped from the cornices.

The apprentices had been good for the Library. And the Library, in return, had been good to them.

“Of course you,” I said. “How many times have you helped Bess and her neighbors find solutions from the Library? Basket-weaving, penicillin salves, lice treatments. You showed them the value of our collection. That’s why, when she found this, she didn’t burn it for warmth or use it in her latrine.” The others laughed. “It’s because of you, Alma, that these pages will live on. It’s only fitting that you read them first.”

I meant it, too, when I said it. Though once the words were out of my mouth—her fingers snaking around the cover, lifting it away—I felt a sudden, unexplained loss.

I reminded myself that, while it tormented me, it had never been my fate to discover the great answers. New finds were rare; and, at thirty-one, my life was likely half-spent. Why would I be the one to puzzle out the truth—who we were, why we were here, and why our colony differed so much from the world of the ancient texts—when all my predecessors had failed?

There was solace, though, in safeguarding the knowledge we *did* have, knowing the seeds of learning I'd planted in my students would propagate, that one day some distant disciple *would* learn the truth. It was for that future person I needed to strive, for the assurance that *they'd* find answers, that my life's work would not have been in vain.

Tennison grunted, impatiently slapping his sides. For a child who could not speak, he could make quite a ruckus when he wanted.

"I know, I know." I snatched my woolen cape from the coat rack, slinging it over my shoulders. "I'll saddle George Washington, and we'll be off."

That odd feeling of loss remained with me as we journeyed up the steep, wooded trail. I hoped I'd shake it off once we crested the summit, the mountaintop at twilight offering a humbling view, the only spot that could reliably put my troubles into perspective.

And the vista that evening did not disappoint.

The stallion's hooves clomped, impatient, as I stalled him along the ridge, inhaling the crisp air, basking in the lush valley below, crowned overhead by coral clouds reflecting the last rays of a lost sun. None of this, however, settled my unease.

Even the colony's encasing perimeter wall—three times taller than the mountain itself, shimmering in the waning light, undulating in the breeze—could not appease me. In fact, it worsened my mood. For what was the Wall but a visual reminder of my own ignorance, another inexplicable difference between our world and the ancient texts. Who'd built it? Why? And what lay beyond? Each unanswered question a new item on my checklist of failures.

Meanwhile, Tennison clutched my back like a baby possum, sniffing, rubbing his face on my cloak. I sent up a litany of silent curses to the Eye at the center of the sky before squeezing my legs around George Washington's ribcage, prodding him onward, wondering again what might have spooked my unflappable apprentice—an odd shadow? the cackle of a barred owl? a trick played by his little sister?

In the future, I'd have to better curate his reading list.

When we arrived at the family's small farm, the world had faded into a dark, deepening blue. Katie stood outside, her triangle of curls uplit by a lantern on the ground. She sucked a cigarette, looking agitated, while the little girl, Gracie, clung to her pant leg, an overturned grain sack covering her head.

“Good evening, ladies,” I said, forcing cheer into my voice as I dismounted, approaching Katie to hug hello.

She blocked me with her palm. “What took you so long?”

My pores prickled with familiar irritation. I wanted to tell Katie about the book back home, the celebration I was missing. But it wouldn't have mattered. She never understood my obsession with smelly old paper and obscure markings that, to her, all looked the same. Plus, over the years, Katie had developed a unique talent for always being the *most* angry, the *most* inconvenienced by any situation. At times I imagined it like a game of poker. But, instead of playing with tokens or coins, Katie played with fury. Whatever you put in she'd match, and raise. As a result, she had a secondary talent, even more irksome than the first: she could always make a bad situation worse.

At the same time, choices for friends in the colony were slim, and she was the best I had. So, as usual, I swallowed her rudeness, absorbing and ignoring it, refusing to ante up in a game I

could not win.

“I did send Tenny home earlier,” I said, in the calmest tone I could muster. “But something spooked him and he came back. We’re both here now, though. His chores will get done, even if I have to do them myself.”

She turned her glare to Tennison, the orange tip of her cigarette burning circles through the air. “You didn’t tell him *anything*? You’re supposed to be less useless, now that you can write words.”

“It’s not his fault,” I insisted. “He just—”

“Go inside.” She gestured to the house, her breath forming a fog between us. “See for yourself.”

Something was different about Katie’s tone. For a second, I sensed she wasn’t mad at all, only frightened. That couldn’t be right, though. I’d never known her to be scared of anything.

I turned to the red-brick structure, glancing around the edges and seams, searching for anything out of the ordinary. But all looked normal. Or what passed for normal in these parts. Katie’s house, like the Library, was an artifact itself, patched and well-enough maintained to span from the ancients’ time until our own—if indeed it was the same house, having all its pieces replaced. A real-life ship of Theseus.

An icy wind blew as I approached the wooden door, rocks and leaves crunching under my boots. I imagined Alma back home, curled up before a crackling fire, reading. Meanwhile, I’d been called to duty on this frigid night, dealing with some dead or dangerous creature—or, worse, a bit of superstitious nonsense. A *monster*, Tennison wrote. I could have laughed at the absurdity of my life. Yet it was odd. Because even the bears and bobcats stayed out of Katie’s way. And I’d never known her to be superstitious.

At my touch, the door creaked open, the glare of multiple lanterns momentarily blinding me. Then my eyes adjusted. And I saw it.

As soon as I did, I wished I hadn't.

Choked with horror, I averted my gaze. The trash-littered floor. The smoldering logs of the fireplace. The cluttered board table swarming with flies. Finally, a drumbeat of dread pounding through my temples, my eyes spiraled back to center, where, gagged and bound to a chair, sat an angel.

Its skin—what was visible beyond its tattered, wool cloak—was no healthy shade of brown like everyone else's, but pale like death, shimmering in the lanterns' glow. The sides of its head were shaved, and a thick, bleach-white mane sprouted down the middle, fashioned into lofty spirals at least a foot high. Its eyes—so blue they appeared almost violet—flared with rage as it fought to speak through the dirty gag tied around its head.

I leapt back outside, the door slamming behind me. "What is that?" I panted, leaning over my knees.

Katie stalked over, the cigarette trembling between her fingers. "A woman."

"Women don't look like that."

"Maybe they do, on the other side." She tugged her jacket tighter. "Don't you see? They sent her to get Gracie." At her thigh, the girl whimpered through her head covering.

"You're scaring her," I whispered. "Anyway, how do you know that?"

Katie shrugged, as though the truth was evident. "She was with Gracie in the house when I found her. And why else would she come here?"

I knelt, searching the holes in the burlap bag for Gracie's dark eyes. "Sweetheart, can you tell me what happened?"

“She...” Her voice quivered. “She asked if she could touch my hair. I should’ve run, but I didn’t know what to do. I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. Sounds like you were very brave. Much braver than I would have been.” I wrapped her in my arms, providing that bit of warmth I knew she did not always get from her mother. “And no one’s going to take you anywhere, I promise. You know I’d never let that happen.”

She nodded, and I knew she’d be okay. Gracie was, after all, a little mirror of her mother, blessed with the same fortitude, the same practical decisiveness. And, like her mother, she could survive anything.

It was I who was different, lost in an indecisive tangle of my own thoughts. For me, the right answer never presented itself willingly. It emerged only after painstaking deliberations, not so much succumbing to my intellect as surrendering to the tedium of the investigation.

Therefore, as certain as Katie was about her captive’s origins and motivations, I was equally *uncertain*. Locating a hole in the nearby window shutter, I peeked back in. This time, a thick wall between us to buffer my hysterics, I could see Katie was correct. This was a person. A woman. Though not one I knew from the colony. And I would have known about a woman like *this*.

Neither, it seemed, was she an angel. Not exactly.

Like most of my generation (and those before), I’d been Taken and Returned as an infant. If I’d seen an angel during that time, I’d been too young to remember. But I’d read interviews of a few Taken later, as toddlers, some of whom remembered giant, many-eyed, many-legged beasts with color-changing, twinkling flesh. Besides this woman’s glimmering skin and general oddness, she looked nothing like that.

My mind turned, then, to the next possibility. I'd long heard rumors of humans on the other side of the Wall, fashioned by the angels into fantastical shapes and sizes and colors. As a child, I'd relished these tales. At some point, though, I'd set them aside as fiction. Had they been true all along? If so, if this woman *did* belong to the angels, what would they do when they discovered she'd been captured?

Throughout our history, the angels had been manageable (if invisible) neighbors, demanding only one sacrifice: the Taking of every infant, usually returned within a day's time. Sometimes it went wrong, of course, as it had twice with Katie, leading to the current, foolhardy trend of keeping little ones hidden, their heads bagged whenever outside, avoiding their Taking. Still, on the whole, the angels did not ask for much, considering their supposed superiority in all ways. If we erred tonight, though, and provoked their ire, the entire colony might suffer for our mistake.

"She's wearing your cloak," I mumbled, my mind racing so quickly I could only voice the most basic observation.

"She had it on when I found her. I worry she's naked under there."

I shuddered at the strange thought, noting the absence of other clothing, only the slits of her clavicles, her bare feet, bouncing impatiently on the half-tiled, half-dirt floor. I could not see her arms, as they were stretched behind her, tied to the chair with rope. Meanwhile, her large eyes looped and swerved, as though tracking the erratic flight of an insect I couldn't see.

And suddenly it hit me: excitement.

*Someone from the other side.*

Someone who knew all the unknowable things.

No one had ever talked to one from beyond the Wall. What could she tell me, if I had the courage to ask? *What was it like there? Why did they take our infants? What happened to the Unreturned? Who were the angels? For that matter, who were we?* So many questions piled atop my tongue I nearly screamed them out at her from where I stood.

Then, as if I *had* screamed, one of her eyes—and *only one*—snapped straight toward me. With a jolt of panic, I stumbled back. Surely she hadn't seen me through the tiny hole. That would've been impossible. Yet somehow I was sure she had. And I couldn't stop picturing that repulsive movement over and over: her two eyes, diverging.

She might be human. But she was not like us.

"Tell me you have a plan," I panted to Katie. "And it better be a good one."

She dropped her cigarette nub, grinding it into the leaves with her boot heel. "We could kill her."

"Are you insane?" I whisper-shouted. "If she belongs to them, we have to give her back! That's the only option."

"Not the only option." She leaned in close, reeking of tobacco. "Remember the story you read me about the men who captured an enemy soldier? They tried to trade him back for one of their own."

My stomach twisted, knot upon knot. "You can't be serious."

"What if we swap this piece of shit for my Lily and Sam?"

I stammered. "In the story it didn't work."

"Doesn't matter."

"It's a bad idea."

“You got a better one?”

In the twitch of the lantern’s light, Katie’s dark freckles danced, bouncy curls framing her head like a triangle. If not for the tightening of her muscles, a slight widening of frame and roughening of complexion, she might have been the same girl I met at thirteen. But, I had to admit, at this point I knew Katie’s face better than I knew Katie.

For she was not the same woman at all.

Sometimes I mourned my old friend—the happier, less complicated Katie who’d existed before the loss of her children. At first I’d thought she’d recover, as others seem to, that time would heal her to her former self. Instead, over the years, she’d only grown colder and harder. Yet who was I to judge? Whoever Katie was now, she remained a part of me, bonded forever by the things we’d shared and everything we’d lost.

I had to talk her out of this suicidal plan.

“You have two kids left. If this goes wrong—”

“That one,” she whispered, pointing to the tree line where Tennison awkwardly loitered, “ain’t my real kid. And now they send this bitch to take Gracie?” She shook her head. “No. They don’t come into my house. They don’t take any more from me.”

Madness.

Throughout history, there’d been no reports of conversations with angels, let alone negotiations. How would one even attempt it? Still, she was right about one thing: this was the best—the *only*—chance she’d had in the fourteen years since she’d lost Lily.

Taking my hesitation for agreement, she nodded, the uncertainty in her eyes hardening into determination. “Let’s go in. You do the talking.”