

# Discussion of a Decent Dream

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*FOR THE ILLUMINED*

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## Part One

### Of Saddened Clouds and Loss



## ONE

**W**e ignored the portent that crept into the countryside the day she disappeared. But in the weeks that followed, with no answers as to what had befallen her, with no assurance that she still lived, we came to understand, and most saw the worst in the blanket of mist that stopped time and shut us out from the rest of the world.

I had just turned twenty-one the summer of 1789 when Alexandra went missing. And after all our fruitless searching, in need of some direction, I snuck, under the cover of night, into the yard where her parents had laid their sorrow to rest. Falling to my knees before the stone of her empty grave I spoke with reverence, not for the hallowed ground, but for the call that brought me, as though somehow she could hear me.

“Alexandra, forgive me for avoiding this place. I had thought that coming here would be an admission of failure. So I did not join them when they assembled in your memory or hear their words that committed you to heaven. Yet now, not knowing where else to look, I have come to pray for your help.”

She had been gone for months, and in that time, only the

hunter with his hounds had discovered a single mysterious clue, a patch of bloodstained grass in a valley not far from town. But the dogs found no trail leading away from it, and everyone had agreed this was not necessarily telling of her fate, that perhaps it had nothing to do with her disappearance, maybe the work of another hunter or some predator.

I was no longer sure. For no other trace could be found, nothing in the cliffs above the valley, the surrounding forests, or her home. We even inspected the ruins atop the hill that everyone held in superstitious regard.

“Those who claim to love you have deserted me, though I no longer blame them. It was not easy for your parents to give up their hope. My own family still urges me to abandon the search. But this I cannot do.”

Everyone rallied at first, with not only the townsfolk of Ingleton, but those who poured in from the countryside as well, foregoing sleep for days on end. Then expectations fell to despair, and one by one they gave in to their doubts.

My brother Sebastian’s appeal as I set out from our manor house earlier this night echoed in my head. *She is gone, Edmond. You must let her go. You venture beyond devotion, beyond love. ’Tis madness.*

Madness indeed, for they did not understand the bond we shared. How could I give up on her, whom I had known since my youth and adored these last years?

“I remember well the day when you looked on me with that aura of wonder, as if you had returned from another world, mystical, a creature not human. You stood amongst the ruins, blue eyes piercing the unknown, striking against your pale skin, framed within those uncommonly red tresses. With a breath of magic, you lifted my soul, claimed me as your own, and I have felt your presence ever since, even when we are apart.



“Alexandra, I know that you still live. But where have you gone? What have we missed? What more can be done?” I scratched at the dirt and leaned into the cross drawn out in chalk on the stone. “God help me.”

I traced my fingers over the letters of her name, reaching out to her, but this provided no comfort. Sitting up, I took in the cool night air and looked over the churchyard.

Fitful gusts blew down from the dales, through the trees, and whisked the crisp fall leaves across the grass. Moonlight diffused through the oppressive haze and softened the edges of the night, allowing for an embrace of the tranquil scene. Cradled in these arms of the late autumn evening, I knew that I must sleep. But I resisted.

“With this mask of fog that has fallen upon us, a presence seems to have desecrated our lands. For under it no flame or lamp remains lit. As well, I have been seeing things that are not really there. They cannot be. Menacing shadows skulk about and grasp for me when they pass, only to sink back into hiding when I turn round to face them. Even now, here in the cold quiet, I can sense their taunts.”

For they gathered under the tree cover beyond the wall that enclosed the yard, spying on my entreaty. I glared back at them, if they were there at all.

“When they claw at me, they send me reeling, hurtling my mind from one place to another, flipping through space, through ideas, but the ideas are not my own. Such things are not normal, not right, twisted to where I cannot wrap my mind around them.

“Everyone in the village shows signs of some affliction, a sunken feeling of sadness. Others have seen unexplainable things in this mist that torments us. Never have we been so enshrouded. What is happening to me, to our town? And what

has happened to you?”

Bowing my head, my hair fell forward and hid from the world the weariness that shamed me. I wiped my face with my hand to rub away the fatigue, but it did not help. With my last thread of thought, I rebuked myself for such weakness, ordering myself to stay awake. But when I tried, my sight blurred, my eyes burning with tears. Having searched now for days without rest, I lay down, and succumbing to exhaustion, carried the scent of the freshly dug soil through the gloomy haze of rest.

My consciousness fell into itself until in dream, I stood in the forest on my family’s estate. Reins tugged at my hand as my horse made himself known. I mounted him and rode through the forest along the river Greta, then crossed through the village, weathered, deserted, slumped so close to collapse. The dead lingered there in mourning, and when they took notice of my intrusion, drove me away.

I retreated to the tree line along the north end of town, passed through everthickening foliage, slowed by night forces that worked against me. Crashing through the last, I bounded out of the confinement of the forest into strong winds tearing across the glen. Lightning and thunder foretold an imminent downpour.

When I arrived at the hillside that loomed over the valley where the patch of blood was found, my horse protested, refused to go on, so I dismounted and made my way on foot without a torch. Only the lightning exposed a safe path. And this light that bounced between the clouds, though revealing the hollow, caused a dizzying change, transforming night to day, then back again.

The storm’s violence increased and called for caution as I wound down the slope. Crossing the field, I lifted half my coat

to shield my face from the gusts and debris and looked there for more clues.

I steadied myself for what now came forth, something ahead near the bloodied spot, scarcely visible under the night veil, but more so under the momentary illuminations. It carried itself in a way unnatural.

Paralysis sought my limbs as I pressed onward, my whole body shook. This thing must have seen me advance yet made no move toward me, nor strove to escape. I could see nothing beyond vague movement. A man perhaps, cloaked so as to blend with the night. But then how could he hover there in that spectral manner?

Thunder trembled the earth. I smelled moisture building in the air. The rain drew near.

Then a silence took hold in the valley that stole my breath. For what I saw was no man, rather a murky substance that spun over the ground. It pulsed and flowed back in on itself, marching backward in a tight circle with makeshift feet. Awkward at first, then more fluid, till the spirit whirled over the spot and mocked me with each return forward. From within the vortex, no taller than I, a body appeared and hung lifeless in its arms. A torn ivory gown and scarlet hair brushed the ground with each pass.

Lightning overhead chased away the intruder. Ensuing thunder broke the unbearable silence, and here the raindrops fell, spotty at first but growing in intensity. And although fear threatened to seize me, to pull me away from the site, I approached the spot whence the apparition had emerged.

Was that Alexandra I had seen in its arms? And what manner of being held her? I did not know. Nothing remained but the bloodstained grass, blood that soon washed away with the rain.

When I awoke, the dirt felt cold underneath me as though I had just then come to rest next to the clawing roots of an old oak. I struggled to remember where I was or where I should be.

This was not the graveyard. This was nowhere near town.

I rose, and recognizing the path near me, knew that I stood back in the forest on my family's land. But how did I get there? I sought understanding as to the sudden transition of my surroundings but was given no time, for the mist wove round the trees, seemingly alive under the moonlight.

A shadow then snatched at me from along the roadside in a brazen manner, with a vehemence that stifled my courage. So I flew down the dirt path toward the security of home, wary for signs that I did not still sleep, did not still dream, for these things that I had seen.

The sound of hooves thudding along the earth hounded me. I quickened my steps, and glancing over my shoulder, met with horse and rider, which dispelled the possessed sheets of fog and sent the shadow back into hiding.

“Edmond, you should be more careful. I could have run you down in the dark.” Sebastian appeared as startled as I. “What are you about at this late hour? I expected you home hours ago.”

“You know what I am about, brother. I cannot forsake her.”

“Edmond, I know what she meant to you. I loved her for the love she held for you. But you can't keep this up. It's time to move on. This obsession keeps you from your duties. You exempt yourself from your life, as you are wont to do, only to chase phantoms in the night.”

“I am compelled to persist. I have to know what has become of her.”

“Stop being a fool! You are a man of Yorkshire, a noble of the House of Curtis. It’s time you act as one. Comport yourself and settle your heart. She is gone.”

Sebastian ended his rant. I was unsure if it was because of impatience or pity at seeing me so desperate. It was futile to argue with him, to try to explain the things I knew to be true, that Alexandra still lived and called to me.

Ever the elder brother he held out his arm, but I intended to walk off the strangeness of the night. I dismissed his offer, and he was on his way. The black and gray of the rider blurred with the bark of the trees and the road under the waning midnight sky, then withdrew around the bend with me lagging on foot far behind. And for some reason, I no longer feared the mist or shadows that night, the spell thus broken, and morning came.

## TWO

The Ancient sat alone amid an otherworldly flatness of sand, his legs crossed, hands resting on his knees, eyes closed. Dull, tattered clothes and a charcoal wool overcoat contrasted with his short white hair, which quivered in the breeze while he remained lost in thought.

Opening his eyes, he whispered to himself, “I know not the day or the time.”

No shadow cast from him, for a starless dusk reigned above. A foreverhidden sun beamed red over the horizon. Higher, the red mixed into blue and dissolved into a blackness overhead. But instead of occupying a particular side of the horizon, the eventide glow encircled the landscape, never rising, never falling. Twilight remained constant in this place, this preternatural state.

The knowledge of time had been lost, a dimension he could no longer know, one that persisted and moved on without him. But what troubled him in his isolation was that even though events developed in an order, when he examined them he became confused and unsure, failing to grasp a sequence outside of time here in this waiting place.

Timelessness has no beginning, for beginnings are of time. Yet he knew that an event was about to commence. He felt it in the dry breeze, an occurrence, a beginning. The contradiction brought him to his feet.

In an instant he moved to the end of a cliff that bordered the desert. Pacing from side to side, he spied across the wastes for something he could not yet see, disturbed by what presaged before him.

“I have been given a name, Vigil, sentenced to watch and wait, but for what I don’t know.” With his arms at his sides, he pointed his palms forward to catch the wind. “I can feel an intensity in the air, a building of potential energy. Electricity discharges from the friction, there, where time meets with the infinite.”

The desert rushed upon him from below and billowed his long wool coat behind him. Storm clouds gathered in his imagination, a tempest that threatened his quietude. Lightning struck, and his spirit withered before the blast, before the assault that fell him forward over the cliff.

Again moving with a thought, Vigil sat at his desk in the center of a room, cramped and dimly lit. The disturbance that had menaced him atop the cliff had quelled. There in the room, only calm remained. His hands hovered over the desk, over the open book with blank pages and the pen next to it. He pulled at the chain on the desk lamp.

A pane of glass hung on the wall before him. The glass screen displayed a scene, a hole in the earth with stone shards strewn around the rim, an old and crumbled well, about which Vigil picked up the pen and wrote. Monitoring the well, scribing in the ledger a perpetual account of his surveillance, he simultaneously transported himself outside to traverse the sands.

With his head bowed, hands tucked into his coat pockets, he wandered away from a wooden hut, the only structure in this remote corner of the underworld. He etched words upon the pages of the book at his desk as ideas invaded his mind outside, a mind lost in thought, lost in violent anticipation of an event to come, a destiny. For in anticipation, one can find hope. And for one to have hope in this..

Vigil kept his pace, though his thoughts had stopped, stuck on this idea of hope. In the hut, where he tended to his ordered observations, he laid his pen down on the page and took in the image on the display. He paused there for a step, a gaze.

His feet planted in rhythm across the sand. From far off, a quaking beat thumped in tempo with his steps. He dismissed the noise at first as merely the pulse of his own intellect. But no, he heard it, one drum beating from all directions at once.

At his desk, the low beats rumbled from outside the room. So from the desk he rose, went to the door, and donned his overcoat, which protected him somewhat from the blowing sand. Opening the door, he saw himself walking away.

Vigil turned back to the hut he had just left and saw himself in the doorway staring back.

“Interesting, the nature of this darkness,” he posited to himself, but he was too far from himself to hear it.

Disappointed by the distance, Vigil bowed his head and resumed his course. The rhythm drove his thoughts, but he couldn’t allow himself to fixate on these intrusive ideas of hope. Instead, he focused on the friction that existed between time and the timeless, and from the friction, lightning once again struck his mind.



### THREE

**A**mongst the stripped trees of late fall, in the early morning dark, a sharp wind knocked the bare limbs against each other and released intermittent wails, creating an eerie undertone to my search.

My prayer at Alexandra's grave the night before had had a profound effect, evident in the message that followed, the disturbing vision she shared with me in my slumber. I spent the ensuing day mulling over the images I had seen in the dream, hopeful that they would provide some clue. Then, after food and rest, I set back out to find her.

In my mind, I saw the haunting specter with Alexandra in its arms. I could feel the foulness that issued from it, a poison that permeated my unconscious and now spilled into my waking mind. But it was Alexandra who had called to me. She had wanted me to see this scene, wanted me to take note of the setting. A setting to which I felt drawn. So, despite the grim tone of the vision, I hastened toward the valley.

Along the River Twiss, I reached the falls where we used to meet, often engaged in discourses, that we facetiously decreed of supreme import. Nevertheless, these meetings regularly

proved a depth in Alexandra that baffled me.

She appeared there at the shore, though only in memory. That was the day I had shared with her my discovery, the source of England's grandeur.

An element saturated our home with a quality that even made the taste and feel of the air unique, a signpost no other country possessed. I first noticed this when, as a boy, I had traveled with my family to the continent, and there found this substance absent in the lands we visited. Not that they were devoid of beauty, but they did lack that sensual stirring I felt here in Britain. As if our island had been built upon some fissure that radiated a creative and animating force upward.

Upon my return home, the substance appeared evident. I had needed to see life without it in order to appreciate it, this mineral that peppered soil and stone, and even more so here in Yorkshire.

When I had shared with others what I had come to know, still young without the ability to explain, they merely chuckled and dismissed my ideas. So, only after Alexandra and I had grown close those many years later, had I considered sharing this secret with another.

She accepted my words as a challenge, wanting to know what I knew, and though prone to playfulness, there was not a hint of it that day. Down there at the shore, she caressed a stone washed clean in the current below the falls. Then plucking another from the dry side, felt the dark, dense earth that clung to it. She brought it closer, breathed in deep. Her eyes rolled back, and I knew she sensed it, this rich signature that imbued a magic, a mystery that enlivened the deepest parts of man. The only one who saw as I did, she admired the quality she always knew to be there but now understood.

She turned to me as if awaiting some order, subservient

when she had no reason to be, registering my slightest expression, and noting the tone of my response. This disposition coupled with a hint of duty I was unable to fully grasp, only added to her complexity that I found most intriguing.

All these thoughts vanished, however, as she moved to me and with earnest. “What more’ve you discovered?”

Leaning away, her back arched, she lifted her chest, pressed her waist against mine, surrendering herself to the arms that held her up. I had always thought her posture provided her a better perspective, a way of seeing more of me while in my grasp, but it never lasted. She could never remain so far away.

As she drew closer, seeming to move slower than possible, she fixed on me and inhaled my life into hers, all part of that strength I adored. There was a melding in our contact, a sharing of spirits. A mere look could join our thoughts, such that there on the shore, I no longer heard the fall of water, the rustling of the river that day, lost to her, taken by her spell.

We had just begun this life together. Even with her gone, the mere thought of her often brought a light that dispelled the gloom for a time. But not now, not here. The hollow space at the falls seemed forsaken in her absence, so I continued on the path toward town, past the quarry, then along the narrow road northeasterly toward Saint Oswald’s.

Too soon, I felt as one pursued. The back half of my body burned as if baked under the sun, a curious sensation that turned me about. But nothing showed itself, only what of the forest the half-light revealed. I remained alert, however, suspecting that some unseen presence stalked me.

Though with no further incursion, my apprehension gradually subsided, replaced with an affection for the night this time of year. With its seductive chill, harsh as it was, and the

cascade of blues washing over the hills, the setting seemed as something experienced long ago and here remembered, yet present at the same time. A momentary respite unsought, but appreciated.

Sadly, this diversion did not endure. For indeed something unwanted moved with me, beyond the road, hidden from view, but always not far behind. And I loathed the intrusion, spoiling this indulgence of nature with a return of the burning sensation, now coupled with a sense that I had become helpless prey. So, no longer on the path, I chose the straightest route to speed my passing, dispensing with all composure, recklessly darting between the trunks and low limbs.

I then froze, sizing my enemy in disbelief, for a brood of shadows set upon me in silence, letting the howling wind speak for them. Having taken on a shape, they stepped forth beside each other in line, a dozen or so, appearing as men, soldiers, formed of a slick, oil-like substance, with vacant faces. The mist settled upon them as spiritual cloaks. They flanked me, driving me deeper into the forest. More overt than ever, and what made them so? I did not remain to investigate but rather bolted in the direction in which they guided me.

Having put distance between myself and these marauders, I slowed to rest, and could no longer see them behind me. I hiked on for more than an hour, growing ever confident that I had escaped them.

The forest thinned, and light appeared ahead, which led to the presumption that I had made it all the way to Ingleton. But that could not be, for I was still miles south of town. The brilliance hinted at some sort of gathering, and I heard a hum of conversation.

I entered a glade suffused with an unusual emerald glow. And there, obscure notions lolled overhead. Thoughts, ideas

not my own, nebulous like unintelligible whispers, hung from the tree limbs as ghosts floating in the night. The source of light that I had seen from afar, these transparent tapestries discharged shimmering glints of green and blue.

The cloaked shadows reemerged, emanating a malice that stung my soul. Previously only ever seeking to take hold of me with their elongated fingers of night, they now rushed at me in an open attack and drove me into the clutch of the thoughts suspended in the trees.

These notions fell over me as suffocating translucent layers, injecting foreign yet remembered encounters of abstract experience, deathly-slow motions of wickedness, the silent haunting stillness whilst standing beside a bubbling black pool in an otherworldly space awaiting some dark change to commence. Memories not my own, they intimated a familiarity with the shadows that menaced me, knowing them in a way that man should not.

The onslaught of shared experience threw me into bedlam and shoved me to the ground as I tried to flee. Frantic, I scrambled on all fours to a nearby tree and labored to right myself, to get to my feet. I ran as far and as fast as I could, away from the fear, away from the waning night. I sought the new day sun and arrived at the ledge of the cliff that overlooked the valley.

The smell of burning peat from the cottages nearby wafted in the morning air. The fog that had concealed the entire countryside since Alexandra disappeared crept down the steep crags that bordered the basin. An outcrop allowed me to discern the easiest way down and inspect the wide valley floor, now covered with fog that shone of a predawn softened purple. The spot where we had found the patch of blood was close, roughly in the center. I could not yet see it, but I knew

the location well.

Morning broke and transformed the pale violet to silver with the luster of vegetation underneath. Moist earth clung to my boots and impeded my gait but was quickly brushed off by the thick grass of the clearing.

I saw the colored rocks left by the hunter to mark his find, but not the tarp that we had staked down to preserve the site or the stained grass. Something else lay there, something unexpected for which I held a repugnance as I had in my dream. Instead of the bloodied grass, I stood before an old abandoned well.

An impulse lured me nearer, though I remained on guard. I knelt next to it and surveyed its depth but could not see how far down it went. Revulsion then snatched at me from beneath the earth, from the core of the barren well, and I recoiled, trying to reconcile this thing that should not be here. How many times had I passed this spot? Never had there been any structure in the valley, yet now I saw it. I had touched its stones.

My mind circled about the paradox, unable to divert my eyes from the hole in the ground. I heard a young boy screaming in my head, but the screams faded, and with them the rush of panic that I had felt. I was left dazed, no longer sure of what I saw before me.

I lost myself in the dew and the mist that, though an invader, elegantly laced the valley in a gray white, as if the landscape was not yet finished being created. Almost, but not. And the incomplete possession of this display of nature, masked as it was, left in me an exquisite wanting.

But more, I felt an overwhelming sensation in the advent of some profound insight, some hidden knowledge or destiny that awaited me, a treasure of soul that beacons, oddly

planted in opposition to the morbid fright that the well contained.

Out of this non-moment, when all seemed to stop, I pulled back from the well, allowed my mind to quiet, mesmerized by the flow of vapors slithering down the slope. Had Alexandra fallen here? Had she called out to me through my dream and brought me here?

I recalled the last night I saw her, noting something was not quite right in the way she regarded me. She leaned to one side, head tilted, and studied me, unsure, unconvinced, not looking at me, but through me, and she seemed to come to some apperception, though I did not know unto what. “What do you see?”

“Something awful’s happened. I can’t explain now but do know I’ll set it right. I must go. Good night, my love.”

She had never dismissed me in such a way. And though I had wanted some hint of what troubled her, I suppressed my unease for fear of knowing. Oh, there in that last encounter was the answer I kept unsaid.

Now in my hesitation, in the pondering of events past and this aberration before which I stood, I saw that my foes had followed me. But more, I understood, deft creatures, that for my pride, my foolish need to know, I was led not by Alexandra but by these hellions. Lured here and now trapped, for they swam down the valley walls under the mist on all sides and encircled me. I began to entertain the unthinkable.

Reluctant steps, accompanied by the hypnotic distant droning of my breath, brought me back to the hole in the earth. The warning that sounded in my head only increased when I ran my hand over the wet limestone of the rim. However, I saw no other option.

And although entering seemed as a retreat, I knew this was

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a foe I had no power to fight, so I climbed down. But the stones that lined the inside were slick, and with one misstep my hands slipped over them and I fell.