

V a p o r
&
D a r k n e s s

BY
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Lyndon knew that the historical archive was off limits; that there would be consequences if he were caught, severe consequences in fact, but damned if he hadn't entered anyway. Slipping in between shifts he now found himself in the twilight of the archive, gently padding his way between the stacks. The hair prickled on the back of his neck, his blood surged in his veins and his eyes ran over the brass numbers at the ends of the shelves. The room was oblong perhaps five hundred feet from end to end with hundreds of dark wood shelves packed with an eclectic mix texts deemed by the Twin Crowns to have historical value.

He had just reached one of the central junctions when a low metallic clanging resonated throughout the room. *Was there someone else up here?* Lyndon picked up his pace as he zig zagged his way down to the area for mythology texts. The whole floor had been shut down for months, a quick in and out he thought would have been no problem.

At last, his eyes spied the book he came to retrieve, a huge blue leather bound volume. *Vetus De Natura Animalium* shown across the cover in silver lettering with a queer three sided symbol Lyndon did not recognize beneath it. He hefted it down from the shelf, the weight of it far more than he had imaged it would.

“Are we sure that old stamper wasn’t just cracked?” said a voice beyond the shelf the book had just been removed.

“No,” replied another deeper voice, “but she has never made claims before.”

“Be that as it may, my old nanny would start seeing things when it was night. Start carrying on to visions of her children, as if they were right there in the room with her.”

“It’s not night. She ain’t your granny.”

“Well it might as well be, night I mean. Night for the long haul. Aren’t we the lucky generation? To have that great fat planet blot out the sun for a whole year?”

There was sarcasm in the first voice, and Lyndon recognized it. It was Isaac; one of the new guards hired to patrol the Bookworks. A stubbly faced little fellow whose hooked chin almost reached up and touched his hooked nose. Lyndon detested him ever since he had watched him stomp a nest of rats to death one afternoon. Some people had cruelty to spare.

Lyndon backed up, his spine instinctively rigid with fear. If they caught him here he would be finished. Not just reassigned to some lowly post in the Bookworks, but prison. The thought of spending the year of

darkness in prison was more than he could bare. He turned to put the book back, attempting his best impersonation of a church mouse. He heard the rustle of paper as the jacket of the book failed to slide back into place.

“Did you hear that?” said the deeper voice.

The following silence seemed to last an eternity, with Lyndon too frightened to move a muscle and the two guards presumably listening for confirmation of prey.

The clanging noise he had heard earlier then resurfaced in Lyndon’s mind and his stomach knotted. They had sealed the iron security gate at the starwell, sealed him in. His whole plan rested on the hope that he would be able to slip in and out quickly, but no longer. His eyes gazed upward toward the murky red sky through the domed skylights. Around the rim of the ovaloid ceiling the carved faces of the great bygone scholars scowled down. Then he saw it, behind the scornful figure of a robe clad statue there was a iron handle along the side of one of the sky lights. It was a hatch to the roof, an escape. Lyndon took the book back under his arm, moving slowly now towards the center of the room. There must be some sort of ledge behind the statues; his mind raced with ideas on how to

ascend, then struck upon one. The brass ladders affixed to rails on the shelves at the perimeter of the room.

“Blessed be, that old hag wasn’t just dancing with bats,” said Isaac stepping out from a nearby row, his eyes narrowing on Lyndon.

“Hey now, you’re Issac right?,” said Lyndon as calmly as he could, backing towards the far wall as he spoke, “this clearly isn’t what it looks like.”

“Oh no? You mean to tell me this isn’t the last desperate act of a failed statesmen?”

Lyndon hated the fact that people saw him as that, hated that his failures preceded him. “I just came up here to get a look at the last few rays, you know,” he said gesturing upward.

“Like hell it is, you need a book to take a gander at the sky?” a wicked grin opened between the hooked nose and chin of his face, “I’m going to make sure your fat ass never sees the light ever again. Not a year from now, not ever.”

Lyndon felt anger heat him. He wanted to fight, to feel the nightstick strike him and in turn feel that hooked nose crunch beneath his fists as they

mashed their way into the guard's face. But instead he ran. If there was ever going to be a future for him he knew he had to escape.

Isaac cackled and bolted gleefully in pursuit, his club was drawn in a flash and his smaller agile frame closed on Lyndon's huge one in a matter of strides. Beating the weapon against his quarry's broad frame he worked to come around and get a shot at his face. If he was lucky, Isaac thought, he might even be able to gauge out an eye. Isaac had always wanted to try and gouge out an eye.

They raced toward the edge of the great room. Lyndon, shoulders squared and focused, Isaac hooting and battering madly as they ran. The guard anticipated that there would be an opening at the end of the row, a chance to bound forward. What he didn't anticipate was the great blue leather bound brick whirling around at him.

With a wet thump the spine of the book hit squarely in Isaac's face loosening several teeth and sending his mind hurtling into unconsciousness.

Lyndon tucked the book back under his left arm, a little blood wouldn't diminish the price he hoped. Just up ahead he could see the brass

of one of the ladders. He would have to push it around to a position near the-

“Stop right there!” shouted the deeper second voice.

Lyndon turned to see a constable racing toward him, his flashlight streaking across the floor before him with each swing of his arm.

A tussle with Bookworks security was one thing, but if he was caught after a fight with a constable, he wouldn't even be able to hope for prison. He reached the ladder and began to push, its wheels screeching and rattling in protest.

“By the Crowns, I order you to drop to the ground,” the voice behind him shouted again, closer.

Lyndon climbed as fast as he could and upon reaching the top of the ladder tossed up the book to the top of the shelves. Feeling a steely grip seize his right ankle and he knew he would have to muster up the strength or else.

A heavy kick shook free his leg from the grasp, and he held tight the rail with both hands and hoisted himself up. Or at least halfway up. His right leg had made it over the rail, but the cracking of woods and the whine of metal forewarned the imminent collapse of the thing. With a roll and a

prayer Lyndon flopped up onto the top of the shelves, now a full fourteen feet above the floor below. The constable below shouted as Lyndon scrambled for the book and to his feet. He would still have to climb up still higher to the statue adorned ledge, but at least his heft had put the ladder out of commission and bought him some time.

“Stop now or I *will* shoot,” said the voice below.

Lyndon saw the man swing a rifle up from its place on his back and draw a bead on him.

“Thieving from the Crowns is a sterling offense, no one will care if you die here or below the courts,”

Taking a deep breath Lyndon pushed away the thoughts of his death, the disappointed face of his brother, the headline his fate would write on the papers the next morning. Lyndon was not going to stop.

It felt like he had held up his index finger to the struck end of a match. Only a few sluggish seconds later did his ears register the thunder of the shot. The book had absorbed the lethal impact of the shot, of that he was thankful, but not before tearing its way through the end of his finger. The pain steadily grew as he wrenched himself up onto the upper ledge, his bloodied grip faltering on the robes of one of the statues. A second shot

rang out showering him with glass as he ran along the circumference of the great room.

An explosion of splinters and the decapitation of one of the figures was the parting attempt of the constable below as Lyndon threw open the great glass hatch and scrambled out onto the roof.

Wind swirled around Lyndon as he staggered onto the tapered slats of the roof adjacent to the great domed skylights of the archive. The city around him, nearly six stories below silently bustled in the waning light of the red crescent sun. Only three more days of light Lyndon thought as he stared down at it all. He wondered where he would be in three days.

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“Whatcha doing up here then?” a hoarse voice barked to Lyndon’s right.

Lyndon whirled around, nearly losing grip on the book as he did so. “Who said that?” His eyes darted around until they found the source. Upon the flat top of the roof next to a ramshackle little structure sat the shriveled form of a woman.

“I said it, and you better answer,” she said taking hold of an old walking stick from a great leather pocket on the side of her chair.

“I do not mean to alarm or offend you madam,” Lyndon said putting his hands up as best he could while still holding the book, “I am, or rather I have a need to get down from this rooftop.”

She rolled her head and emitted a strange little cackle, “They’re scared of the Gloamin’, can’t get em to bring me hardly a scrap these past four days. Then blessed be, a rolly polly man pops up.”

“Yes well,” Lyndon really didn’t know what to say to that,” “I really shouldn’t be here you see. I’m going to be in rather hot grease if I don’t find a way down and away from here.”

“You have money Mr. Rolly Polly?”

“Um,” Lyndon fished around in the breast pocket of his jacket and found a set of three silver crowns, the last of his money if he didn’t get paid for the damn book under his arm, “I’ve got three silver,”

The old woman gave him a toothless pink smile, holstered the walking stick and beckoned him over.

He handed her the coins. Closer now he could see that she was dressed like a beggar, and covered in the fluff and excrement of the cooing

birds in the coop beside her. He was about to ask her why the Bookworks kept a pigeon coop on the roof, but was hushed by the old woman's clawlike hand before he could ask.

"Jingle jingle, they's a comin' for you rolly polly man," she gestured to the far side of the rooftop where stood the main stairwell door and the squat eaves that framed it. "You pay me and them clompin' boots won't find you."

Upon the door handle there hung a bundle of little christmas bells, and a faint tinkling sounded on the wind.

"Better make yourself some feathery friends," she said hobbling over to the side of the coop and pulling back a crusted door.

"My god no," said Lyndon reactively covering his mouth, "I said I need to get off the roof you old crone not wallow in-"

"No refunds. You either hide, get nabbed, or learn t'fly," she said, her tongue clicking in her toothless mouth as she spoke.

A garbled mix of exasperated expletives left Lyndon as he bent low and scrambled into the smelly shit encrusted space of the pigeon coop. The birds, uniformly startled by the bulging invader squawked flapped angrily. A moment later through the thin wood he could hear voices and the heavy

footfalls of the men looking for him. The floor of the coop seemed to hold a great many haphazardly piled cages, which proved dangerously noisy as Lyndon shuffled into the farthest recesses of the space, sliding on his hands and knees in the muck as he did so.

“Ask the flying-rat fancier,” one of the voices said.

More thumping steps. Lyndon pinched his nose stifling both the chance of sneezing and of smell and held his breath.

“You there, woman,” said another voice, “My name is Sergeant Direkirk. A criminal of the Crowns has come up onto this roof. Which way did he go?”

“Down the drain sir, gave me quite a shock he did,” said the voice of the woman.

There was a shuffling sound, then another voice more distant, “You expect me to believe some pudge ape’d his way down here then? I beg your pardon Sergeant, but not a chance.”

“You lying to me hag?” said the voice of Direkirk, “aiding a criminal is a good way to find yourself in your own little cage.”

“Not lying sir, wouldn’t lie to the Crown’s men. Went down over t’edge, had the face of a man possessed he did.”

“I want a man posted back in the archive,” Direkirk shouted, “the rest of you are with me, I want all patrolling constables with a picture of the thief within an hour. If he did go over the edge, and his body isn’t pressed into the cobbles below, he hasn’t gone far.”

The footfalls and the voices retreated to the far door again. Leaving the windy rooftop to the hobbling old woman, Lyndon, and the squawking birds.

“I’m sure they would have paid you more than three silver,” said Lyndon with a grunt as he made his way back out of the cage, “why didn’t you just turn me in?”

“Called me a hag, didn’t he,” she said spitting on the ground, “now you’d better go. My birds didn’t seem t’take a shine t’ya,”

Lyndon looked back at the angry ruffled birds, feeling mutual. He was sure that the building below would be crawling with people looking for him, or at least able to recognize him.

“How is it, or rather, how do you make your way up here?” he asked, knowing that no one without a badge was ever allowed through the front doors of the Bookworks.

“Chimney board,” she said

“Excuse me?”

“Chimney board,” she repeated planting herself in her seat and gesturing to the bank of chimneys on the far side of the roof.

“I see” said Lyndon, not seeing.

He made his way to the ugly set of vertical pipes, most of which were quiet but two on the end belched dark smoke in intermittent puffs. They looked like pipe organ tubes, he thought, except for the little flat caps above the ends anyway. He was about to turn back to the pigeon keeper for clarification when he saw what she must have meant. Along the back side of the pipes was a long loose board, nearly twelve feet in length. Several leather loops had been hammered into the roof to keep it in place, pushing it one could extend it out over the gap between the Bookworks and the rooftop next door. He pushed it, and when it was across the gap he stepped back and regarded it. It was the most precarious, terribly anchored, flimsy bridge he had ever seen. He doubted it would even hold his weight. A part of him was thankful that the sun was hidden as it was, for if he could see all the way down the the bottom he wasn't sure he would be able to muster up the nerve to cross it. Or at least attempt to.

Three weeks ago his life had settled into a sort of normalcy, the cupboard they had called his new office had even begun to feel like his own. He had grown quite good at his menial tasks of cataloging and processing the influx of materials, and had even worked out which days were best to head down to the state cafeteria. It had been when he went to the communications office that evening that everything changed. A slip of paper stamped for him rested innocuously in his locker. The strange little note that read as follows:

10:21:42 | TRANSMISSION#ZH-86122; RECEIVER#LGIBBS-7554; PAYMENT•FOR•MATERIALS•RENDERED•500,000CRWNS•TITLE-VETUSDENATURAANIM
ALIUM•DELIVERABLE•TO•LOCAL•AGENT•RESPONSE•REQUIRED

There was no way anyone would pay that much money for a book in the archive that wasn't cataloged as valuable he had thought. He had kept it with him all through his walk home, imagining a wealthy life. How he could finally afford to have time to himself, a house of his own, and clothes that didn't reek of ink remover. He dreamed of these things, but he did not

take it seriously; and by the time he walked through his front door the ticker paper was tossed out.

The flimsy beam cracked like an ice sheet beneath him as he slowly stepped out across the divide between the two buildings. He had compensated for the wind as best he could, but had not considered how his legs would turn to lead halfway across. Lyndon urged them forward with all of his willpower, and inch by inch he progressed across. An open window beneath a grime spattered gable lead him to the vacant Harbel House for Deranged Women. His mother had spent time there before they shuttered their doors. Its grey peeling walls remained unchanged and ugly as ever, although the vacant corridors and cavernous atmosphere it now possessed was preferable to the wails and strap laden rooms that haunted his childhood. He descended the main staircase, unbolted a rear window and before he knew it Lyndon was out, amongst the bustle of Harbor street with his ill gotten gains still safely tucked beneath his left arm.

He knew that the authorities would be about, not only in uniform, and so he headed toward the thickest crowds and kept his head down.

“Glow shrooms sir? Keep your house lit throughout the great dark, we have greens and a few blue ones left,” said a spectacled young man with a great sack of bulging white mushroom caps slung over his neck.

“No, I’m afraid not right now” said Lyndon picking his way through the bustling shoppers that lined the sides of the street. He had to make his way to the rendezvous point, a saloon not too far from where he was now called the Boxing Foxes. On a normal day Lyndon wouldn’t have given the walk to the saloon a second thought, having become quite familiar with the streets and the quirky way they slanted around the Libromo river. But in the dark of the Gloaming everything seemed to take on a different aspect, and his usual landmarks failed to present themselves as readily. Even the fatty smell of the street vendors selling his favorite oysters, affectionately called Donkeys on Horseback, seemed soured.

The adrenaline was fast fading in his veins, replaced with the fatigue of one whose life is normally far removed from rigorous exercise and death defying stunts. He wasn’t out of breath necessarily, but when he came to the great crimson sign of the Boxing Foxes Lyndon felt as relieved as an old dog coming to its bed in the evening. He patted the brass fox head at the crest of the signpost as he entered.

The saloon was a gritty dive, no doubt it would have been a gloomy place in the full light of day. As it was it was almost pitch black inside except for the bouquets of glowing long stemmed fungus that had been placed on the tables. The some of the faces of the clientele looked at him, reflected in that greenish glow with disapproving faces, the dim light magnifying every crease in their leathery aspects. He walked in and approached the bar, trying to will his eyes to adjust quicker. He needed to find the woman, the one who had sent him the first note, who had met him and convinced him that the deal was real.

Lyndon seated himself at the bar with the book on his lap, fairly certain after having scanned the room several times that the woman was not there. It was a little before five still, and he figured perhaps she simply hadn't arrived yet.

"What'll it be?" said a square jawed and buxom woman from behind the counter.

"Got anything with sunspice in it?" Lyndon asked, "figured it might be the last chance I'll have to taste it in a while,"

"I've got Wallowmead, not top shelf mind you."

"Perfect,"

The sour honey wine and spice might as well have been ambrosia and Lyndon drank it eagerly, recalling the sequence of the last hour or so. He couldn't believe how lucky, or unlucky he had been. He examined the book on his lap as he sat, running his fingers around the rough hole in the back cover from where the bullet had penetrated. He hoped that whoever wanted the book wouldn't mind the wear and tear.

"You Lyndon Gibbs?" said a broad shouldered and aggressively balding man from the far end of the bar. His round face was cheerful, and put Lyndon in mind of the moon in the green light of the bar.

Lyndon half turned toward the man, trying to conceal the book on his lap as best as he could. "No friend, you must have me mistaken."

"Really?" the man sidled up to the adjacent seat as he spoke, "so you wouldn't have a particular book with you? And would have no interest in a heap of sterling I may or may not have in my pocket then?"

Lyndon felt uncomfortable. He had been told specifically that he would be meeting the woman he had met before. "You're not who I was expecting," he said holding the book more securely, in plain view. "But if you have my money..."

“Yeah well the plan changed,” the man said, his large moustache bristling with his animated face, “your meeting with me now. Once I’ve inspected it, you’ll be paid.”

“You understand my reservation, I’ve been through a lot getting this book,”

“Believe me, I understand. We understand. Here,” he patted the bar top between them, “let’s both take a look at it, make sure you’ve got the right one. Authentication with these sorts of things is not a subtle thing. In a few short minutes we will part ways and you will never see me again.”

Lyndon liked the sound of that, and set the book on the counter. It’s blue cover seemed a dark grey in the light of the mushrooms.

“Ahhh, look at that,” said the bald man running a finger over the silver lettering on the cover, “even the author himself had no idea how important his work would become,” the man gently opened the tome, gingerly turning the pages like a holy book.

“Is there some sort of private collector?” Lyndon asked, “it’s rare, I know that. But its classification did not infer value.”

“Yeah, a collector,” said the bald man, his moustache widening across his face, “I think I’ve seen all I need to.”

“Excellent. Now are we-”

The familiar scent of perfume drifted through the air, and the flash of a large knife caught Lyndon’s attention. A woman with blond hair was standing behind them, a blade held rigidly to the back of the bald man.

“I thought I told you to meet *me* here,” she said, her eyes narrowing on Lyndon.

“Zoria, I didn’t think you were going to be making this meeting,” the bald man said, stiffening.

“Eiser, I can’t say I’m surprised. Lyndon, collect the book,” she ordered

Before he could collect the book however the man at knife point swiveled on the seat, his meaty hand swiping the bottle of Wallowmead from in front of Lyndon and bringing it shattering against the woman who slashed a glancing blow.

Lyndon stumbled off his stool, then obediently lunged for the book. The rest of the patrons of the Boxing Foxes murmured and stared in the gloom. This was a rough part of town, fights met with annoyance or amusement, not alarm.

“Let me make your options clear to you, you either give me that book and you live, or you don’t and die in the gutter,” Eiser said gripping his side with his free hand where Zoria’s knife had bit through to his flesh.

The woman backed to the door with Lyndon, her left arm bleeding but the right steady and still holding the knife. “Do you know where the Seahark trolley stop is?” she whispered to him.

“I could probably find it on a map, but I’ve never-”

“Go there as fast as you can, and get on a southbound rail. I’ll be right behind you.”

Lyndon wished that he could just pass her the book right here and then, collect his ill-gotten gains and just run off into the night. But one look at the snarling face of the bald man foretold of the fight to come, and Lyndon ran out the door.

There was a crashing sound as the great red doors of the bar closed behind him, as if several tables were being overturned within. The urge to flee surged through him but he could not bring himself to do so. There was no way he could see the woman winning that fight, even with a vicious looking blade in her hand. His eyes scrouged through the surrounding street for anything that he could use as a weapon. A fragment of a loose

cobblestone looked promising. He pried it up from the mud and hefted it in his hand before the doors burst open and the woman and bald headed attacker came swinging out into the street.

The man now wore a rather deep looking cut across his face, but wielded a heavy fragment of one of the chairs.

“Be damned, I told you to run!” she shouted at Lyndon, doing her best to remain out of range of her attacker.

Lyndon hurled the heavy fragment of stone in his hand, which sailed wide of its mark, and clanged loudly against the brass fox head of the sign.

The bald man swung his splintering club again, forcing them into the street. Zoria grabbed Lyndon’s wounded arm in a steely grip and they began to run.

Weaving their way through the high spoked wheels and clattering horses of the thoroughfare they moved south. The huffing of their bald headed attacker could be heard in hot pursuit, and despite their erratic route seemed to be gaining. Then Zoria pulled sharply to the right, heading them into the narrow alleyways of the seaside buildings.

“You’re going too slowly,” Zoria shouted over her shoulder as she pulled him along, “just give me the book. I’ll make sure you get paid,”

Lyndon wanted to stop, to catch his breath and be done with this whole ordeal, but he wasn't about to give up his meal ticket on a promise. Up ahead he could see the the alleyway open up to a courtyard that overlooked the great shipping docks below. The cry of the sea birds and the stink of the oyster carts seemed strange in the twilight, and Lyndon began to feel as if the whole world had become a nightmare parody of itself.

There was no doubt in Lyndon's mind that if left to her own devices Zoria would have been able to navigate the crowds of the court easily, her small frame padding noiselessly would have easily slipped from view in the din and close quarters of the crowd. Lyndon by contrast felt like a horse being lead through a teahouse, barging through groups of people and leaving anger and bewilderment in his wake.

Something heavy then came crashing down on Lyndon's shoulder and an explosion of pain brought him ungracefully to the ground. The bald headed man loomed above him, frothing beneath his moustache. He pointed the fragment of chair he still wielded down at Lyndon's throat like a sword.

"The book if you please, Mr. Gibbs."

Lyndon looked for Zoria in the crowd, for help among the cowed heads of the fishwives. He could hear the double bell of the trolley as it made its way along the embankment that separated the upper market terrace from the lower docks. He had come so close, and he was ashamed to have failed.

The bald man pressed his weapon into the soft flesh of Lyndon's neck, the splinters threatening to break the skin. There was little doubt in Lyndon's mind that the man would have killed him right then and there had there not been so many people to watch him do it.

With shaking hands the book was offered up and taken.

"You pencil pushing bobolyne, it would have been easier if you had just given me the book back in-" Eiser said, stopping abruptly. From the crowd a small figure stepped forward, and with both hands heaved the contents of one of the boiling pans of oil from a nearby oyster cart.

The bald man reeled and gagged in the deluge of stinking boiling grease, the book clattering to the ground beside Lyndon.

"Move!" Zoria shouted sliding the book to within Lyndon's grasp as she stepped forward and with both hands brought the iron pot down into the man's knee.

Only slightly stung from the spray of oil Lyndon was back up on his feet with the book in a flash. He pressed his way forward towards the stopped trolley, fishing in his pocket for his coins. He stopped as he got to the waiting conductor, remembering how he had given away the last of his money.

“Quarter silver,” said the uniformed trolley conductor in a practiced tone clearly oblivious to the altercation that had just occurred on the other side of the square.

Lyndon stared dumbly at him, and then back to the crowd in the square, “Umm, I seem to have misplaced my coins,” was all he could manage.

“It’s a quarter silver to ride sir,” said the conductor, his voice growing a bit sharper, “currency of the realm only, we have no space for-” he fixed Lyndon with a harsh look noting his bird droppings and grease stained suit, “beggars.”

Zoria then stepped from the crowd with all the swagger of a victorious gladiator. The crowd parting before her, the iron pan still gripped in her right hand.

“I can pay,” she said dropping her improvised weapon and smoothing her hair as she approached, “he’s riding with me.”