

Subject: ENG 2250.001 - [REDACTED] - "No flinchy" story for Monday

Date: Thursday, December 1, 2011 9:29:19 AM MT

From: [REDACTED]

To: DrStephen GibsonUVU

The last straw is when Luke comes home from work late again – several hours late – for the seventh night in a row. After weeks of feeling neglected, Linda decides to leave her husband in the morning and move in with her mother. She pretends to be asleep when he slips into bed a few minutes past midnight. Their seventh year wedding anniversary is next month and she feels that she needs time away from him to make a final decision regarding a divorce. For his part, he has been telling her the truth about working late hours at the office – he's secretly saving up money for a trip to Europe for a surprise anniversary gift. Divorce is the furthest thing from his mind.

The summer night quickly passes and he wakes up to his first day off from work in weeks. The morning rapidly becomes hot as the Mid-Western sun intrudes through the bedroom window with unwanted rays of heat.

After Luke says, "Good morning," Linda groans and hides her head under a patchwork quilt. He sits up in bed and gently pulls the blanket of faded colors off her face. She frowns at him and says in a tired voice, "please, Luke, don't look at me, I don't know how bad I look but I feel like hell."

"I just want to feel your temperature, Linda," he says as he brushes her dark hair and places his hand on her sweat-covered forehead. She says, "I know I'm disgusting to look at but don't worry, I won't ask for much if you want to divorce me."

He softly chuckles and says, "You've certainly got a fever. I didn't even know you were sick. I didn't hear you coughing at all last night."

"I don't have a cough, but my whole body aches and my sinuses are congested."

"Do you have an appetite?"

"I think I could handle some toast without butter and some crushed ice, but I can get them myself," she says as she tries to sit up in bed.

"Not so fast," he says as he gently stops her. He very lightly slaps her butt and playfully warns, "You'll get a spanking every time you try to get out of bed – and next time it'll be harder."

"OK, you're the boss... for now," she says with a smile.

He leaves for a few minutes and returns with a tray of food and medicine. He puts a couple pills in her mouth and helps her hold a cup of cold water as she drinks. Then he feeds her tiny pieces of toast and small spoonfuls of crushed ice.

A little later he asks, "Do you feel better, Linda?" She replies, "Yes, a little bit, but I wish I didn't feel so hot and sticky."

He gets out of bed and stands besides her in his blue terry cloth robe.

"No Luke, please, I'm too tired to take a shower even if you help me into the bathroom. I'd rather just rot while lying here than get out of bed. All my muscles are sore."

"It's OK, I'm going to give you a sponge bath while you lay comfortable in bed."

"My mother will never believe this when I tell her."

"Now darling, I thought we had a discussion about your not telling your mother any more intimate details of our marriage." She smiles and he gently gives her a refreshing sponge bath. She exclaims, "Oh my gosh that feels so incredibly good." He dresses her in green satin pajamas and asks what she'd like to do when she feels better.

"I'd like to get away from this heat and go to someplace cool for a vacation."

"Me too, Linda."

Ms. Fletchman's wig had gone missing. The grouchy old headmistress of the Finishing Touches Finishing School had disappeared in the two days since. Rumor had it that a new one was being sent by coach, but we all knew it would take days to arrive.

It was odd to go an entire day without seeing her pinched face. I marveled at the little changes taking place throughout the building without her gray eyes to keep watch over everything. Curtains had been opened to let in the summer sun, turning walls I thought were gray or brown or black rich blues, oranges, and purples. I had no idea the school was so colorful! Without Ms. Fletchman's watchful eye, teachers had begun to smile and joke in classes. The youngest class of girls had started talking more, and mealtimes were full of girlish giggling and chatter.

It all started out as a practical joke, but I was starting to be glad I took it! Nobody knew I had it, so I kept quiet. I was always the troublemaker, the one with head bowed, ready for the slap of Ms. Fletchman's cane across my seat. Because of my history, she probably guessed this latest offense was my doing. The good news was she didn't have any way to prove it. I had taken it while she was asleep, and she woke to find it missing. I was as innocent as anyone, as far as her evidence was concerned. That's why I decided to get rid of the evidence on my end.

I enjoyed keeping trophies from my pranks—even something small—but I didn't want to risk it this time. I took the full-bodied golden ringlets, stuffed them in my pocket, and made my way outside once my roommates were asleep. My room was near Ms. Fletchman's chambers, probably so she could keep an eye on me, so I left my shoes off and walked quietly down the hall. I knew one of the boards outside her door creaked, so I tried to step lightly as I passed. It only made a little noise, so I crept on. I was about halfway down the stairs, my eyes on my silent feet, when I saw the bottom of a tasteful dressing gown covering feet just a few steps below mine.

Subject: English 225H.001 [REDACTED] short story fragment

Date: Thursday, December 1, 2011 12:06:23 PM MT

From: [REDACTED]

To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

"So, I don't have to kill anyone?" Ryan repeated, ease sinking into his body at this knowledge.

Barrett shook her head. "We don't pull triggers. We don't poison. We don't hang. We find suicidal people who kill themselves. Then we use them as pawns."

Ryan pursed his lips in deliberation. "I can do that," he finally said, "for twenty thousand a month."

Without saying a word, Barrett unzipped her black jacket and removed her gun. In a swift movement she cocked her gun, pressing it to Ryan's temple.

"Well?" she said, giving him the same emotionless gaze one would give a spider before crushing it. "Are you ready to die?"

Ryan panicked, the gun cold against his skin. This tiny stranger had set him up perfectly. He wondered how he could have missed all the classic signs of entrapment. "No," he stammered. "No, please."

Barrett chortled at his pleading, then slipped the gun back into her belt. "Our clients are ready to die. Don't ever forget that feeling, how it feels to have that gun there. How it feels to stare down the barrel like that. Picture wanting that, wanting the bullet to blast your brains away. That's how our clients feel."

Ryan shook out his gasp, sweating in relief. "You want me to respect their feelings," he said.

"No," Barrett said. "I want you to realize how ape-shit crazy these people are." She smoothed her hair away from her face, not even a ripple of discomfort floating through her from the unpleasant exchange.

"Tomorrow, noon. The King Cole Bar," she reminded him. "First client." She walked away from the bench into the park.

Ryan stared after her, his pulse still firing against his Adam's apple like a drumbeat. He knew he would be there tomorrow, despite the creepy factor of the position. Twenty thousand dollars a month was too good to turn down.

"Oh, and Ryan?" Barrett called back to him, pirouetting around on her toes. She blinked her blue eyes prettily. "You can stare at my ass all you want, but if you try to touch it, I will kill you."

Subject: English 225H.001 [REDACTED]
Date: Thursday, December 1, 2011 3:33:24 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: Stephen.Gibson@uvu.edu

The dark, run-down, chapel which resided in the wastes of Old Vessel City was now dimly lit with candles flickering on with fire. The witch stepped aside to reveal a coffin that laid at the center of the chapel underneath an upside-down cross tainted with blood. NightBoarder and RedScarf walked cautiously towards the coffin, both looked and gasped in horror to find a baby sleeping inside the coffin.

“You!” NightBoarder yelled, “What is the meaning of this!?”

The witch grinned and looked at the baby from where she was standing. She was so happy that the ritual was over that tears of joy ran down her cheek. Nightboarder grew angry; he quickly walked towards the witch, grabbed her by the neck, and slammed her against rusty organ pipes.

“Using children in your schemes is unforgivable, people like you sicken me!” NightBoarder said.

Red covered the baby with her scarf from the cold air surrounding the place. She pointed her arm cannon at the chocking victim, while keeping her left hand on the baby’s head to comfort the child.

“You better tell us what’s going on here, or I’ll make you wish you were dead!” Red exclaimed.

The witch, having difficulties breathing, still found reason to form a smile on her face. She then stared at NightBoarder with blank-white eyes and said, “The God of Evil has been born, but there still remains one more trail. The baby you see is normal, and will grow up as a normal child unaware of his fate. But by the age of twelve the child who was will be gone; a husk will be all that remains for the God of Evil to embody. If you want to prevent this and your city from being destroyed all you have to do is...kill him. This is the only way, the wheels are in motion, there is no other way to prevent what will happen, the choice is yours.”

Both heroes froze, silence began to fall, NightBoarder and RedScarf looked at each other then at the baby. NightBoarder felt his tight grip close in, he turned his head towards the witch to only find her gone. Taking two steps back from where the witch was he hurried over to Red. Poking the baby ever so softly with her right index finger to draw little blood, Red ran the blood through her arm cannon to find info about the baby.

“What do we do, we can’t kill a baby, but we can’t just let him grow up either knowing what will happen?” Nightboarder said, “What...what can we do?”

RedScarf read the results that turned up, and what she found freighted her. She turned her head slowly towards her partner and said softly, “Mark...this is Crypt.” He froze, stood still, and was silent. Red, unsure of what to do, saw a purple blade of dark matter form above the baby’s head. She quickly formed a red wall between the baby and blade with her right arm and punched NightBoarder with her left.

“The hell are you doing, Mark, this is a baby?!”

“Like hell it is, this is Crypt, you said it yourself, Rio! This is the baby who will grow up to torment our lives, who will kill our friends; our families...take your arm.

“That may be so, but this is a baby, not Crypt, plus you don’t kill...you just don’t.”

“Why the hell not, why can’t I, you’ve killed, you’ve broken our rule, why can’t I?!”

String of Fingers:

Red lights blinked in the black night between the tree limbs. The blue lights rotated around the trunks. Terrance looked at the mangled shell of a car, metal curled up like torn beer cans. *She was in that*, he thought. *She was in that*.

A tug on his arm. Terrance turned to an officer, nodded, and followed over to his car to let the cleanup crews get to work. The cop asked questions, Terrance watched as the metal was scraped off the road, and hoses washed over the sticky parts.

Terrance shut the car door behind him, the drive home a fog of signs. *Did I stop at the stop signs?* Terrance couldn't remember. He'd called the Manvilles, Emily's friends, before going out to the accident. The short man with glasses and his tall wife with straight blonde hair stood over the porch stoop. The wife clutched a necklace around her neck like some talisman.

"Terry," she said.

Terrance looked up at his name, eyes like a old dog's. Then his face flicked back to the sidewalk and he continued past them into the house. They followed.

"Let him breathe, Juli," the short husband said.

The first room was wood paneling and furbishing like a mahogany store, polished coffee table and book-lamp stands. A glass cabinet stood in the corner. Emily's books lined the shelves inside, titles with curling names and rigid symbols. She'd been into the occult, and Terrance had thought that made her spicy like an exotic dish that never got old.

Now the dish was empty, Terrance scraping his knife and fork on the cold plate.

Terrance sat beside the case, opened it, the scent of leather and old pages drifting to his nose. He thumbed the pages, like moth wings beating. Terrance put it back and took out another, leafing through the pages more slowly this time. The ink was sharp, each word a knife. Strange syllable groupings, consonants like faky Egyptian words.

"Terrance."

He closed the book, set it beside the chair instead of putting it back, the heavy bound tome thudding to the floor. "Yes," Terrance picked up another and opened it to the middle and started reading.

-to Tcheerom, the fourth door opened to the light of the star of Kezeb. A cherub's questions-

"Terrance," Manville walked closer, his feet padding on the hard wood floor.

-and the light. Songs of the eliol drifted up from the river. I lead the calf to the waters-

"We're here for you," Manville said. His foot steps grew faint, then the door shut.

Terrance sat in the chair in a lit corner of the wooden room, the walls glowing red from the deep burnish.

Subject: 225H.001 [REDACTED] No Flinchy
Date: Thursday, December 1, 2011 4:13:51 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

Fragment-

After fumbling around in my room for quite some time, I found what I was looking for. That damn top. It always tried to hide from me. I pulled the shirt up off the wood floor and over my messy brown hair and grabbed a few bucks from the pile on my worn dresser. That poor thing had received a beating in that U-Haul truck the year we moved in. I stood there for a minute debating whether or not I *should* actually take some money... It would be good to have if I ran into a problem, just in case. Well...

I caved. What can I say, I have little will power. Fun is fun and I desperately need some. I mean the last time me and Liz did anything remotely *fun* was when we went window shopping with her cousin Jeffery. It was summer time, and we went to the mall... Plus, Jeffery was an accountant. He could only talk about accountant things. I didn't get much of it, but Liz seemed entertained at least.

Lights and sounds still danced through my window seal. They beckoned me, come on!

I grabbed onto that old fashioned knob and gave it a good turn. I dashed down the long daunting stairwell. Lo and behold, there was our building manager.

Stopped there at the last corner, I watched intently. Making sure he didn't see me. I was like a deer in headlights. Trying to be stealthy, I shifted my body back around to the wall. I peeked back, only showing half of my face. He didn't see me, right...

"Hey! Where's my money?"

Yeah, of course he did. I stood there for a while, gathering my thoughts. Maybe I could think of something clever. Then I wouldn't have to pay tonight. He'd believe me.

"Um, it's in my room." Good one, I thought. *That was real clever.*

"Oh yeah? Well go and get it, I ain't getting any younger!"

What a sight he was, standing there in his hole-infested jeans and stained wife beater. It had to be from some sort of greasy food, I'm sure. He always reeked of onion rings and coffee.

So, now I wouldn't have any money. I'd have to give it all to him...

I turned slowly and walked back up to my room. I heard my roommate snoring five feet from our door. Grabbing all that was there and the twenty dollars I had in my coat pocket, I raced down to hurry and give it to him.

He seemed pleased, but I'm sure that job didn't leave much room for enjoyment. He had to get his rocks off tormenting us dwellers.

Finally, I could go. It was only 10:46, I had time. And I did. I left those apartments behind.

After a few minutes outside, I realized how cold it really was. That wind kept thrashing at my face, numbing it to the point where I couldn't even feel a snowflake drop.

25th of November

Trapped within infinite halls of white, I ran. Every colossal column passed brought me to another identical to it. I wept, begging the divines to free me from this hell. Unable to feel fatigue, I sprinted for weeks. All the while I heard the dreary voices of the numberless spirits that slid across the marble floor. Each one I ran through brought forth a new sensation, a glimpse into a life. Mists in my mind turned to figures depicting scenes; crimes of passion, a mother clinging in vain to a child taken from her by soldiers, monks committed to silence who knelt to forgotten gods. The chants of the spirits, these visions, and the sound of my bare feet slapping against the stone drove me closer to madness than I've ever been.

I cannot continue on like this.

There is only one man who may be able to help me although he may be resistant to doing so. People are usually not overly generous with those who stole from them.

26th of November

Walter Moarnkind did not know who I was when I went to the door but I knew him. It took but a second to jog his memory by holding up the journal I stole from him, the journal that led to the curse I now bare. He removed the whistle from his neck to summon the guards but stopped when I showed him my arm, the mark the Scryer burned into my flesh and soul. The look in his eyes when he saw the brand reminded me of my son. He was about to say something but I stopped him, saying it would be safer to talk inside. (to be continued...)

Subject: Fragment for Monday

Date: Thursday, December 1, 2011 5:08:30 PM MT

From: [REDACTED]

To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

While sitting in the lit hallway with my mountain dew, I realized how pathetic my existence was. Sitting on the hard, cold floor with a mountain dew I just bought from out of the vending machine, and this is all I have to keep me going through the rest of the day. Just a little caffeine to keep me awake, because mind-power isn't enough. I examine my fingers, the ends of my hair, the clothes I'm wearing; everything I can see that is my body. Then, I am aware of the phlegm in my throat, and then the lack of notifications from my phone saying that I've got someone to talk to. I'm alone in this white, fucking hallway. Just my phone, my now empty bottle of mountain dew, my ripped up bag, my clothes, and my body. Jesus, it's cold. I'm cold. The life I'm living is cold. It's beyond sad. It's pointless. Other people walk by me, but the natural warmth that their bodies emit does not affect me. Why would it? It's never done anything for me before. All of a sudden something changes? Why would it change for me? Changes out of the blue; I'm not worth that.

"God damn." What? A change in my routine. I'm on the floor, so I turn my head to the right and see this girl with brown hair and a seemingly normal appearance.

"God, this shirt." She stops before she gets to me, and then sees my crossed legs and sad, pathetic demeanor and stops. "Are you waiting to see him too?" She asks.

"Dr. Kilner? Yeah, unfortunately." I already hate talking to her. I hate interactions with people I don't know. Actually, I hate interactions with anything that will have some type of response to anything I do or say. Does that mean I hate living things? I wouldn't doubt that. No, I wouldn't doubt that theory.

"Paper?" She asks.

"Paper. Glad I'm not the only one that seemed to have inherently screwed up any chance of maintaining my A-average. Average. Average all of the time.

"I know, right? It's awesome. He's so good at making everyone feel like shit."

"He really is, though." I really wanted to respond with something like, "I would've felt like shit anyway without a Dr. Kilner in my life." But I probably already looked depressed enough without talking about it. Besides, she really didn't seem like the type to want to put up with my innate bullshit selfishness and lack of motivation. As much as I hate people, I always end up craving their affection.

"Lisa?" Dr. Kilner. Ugh, my turn.

"Liza." I looked at the girl I was just talking to, intending to raise my brows, but unfortunately already being met with the same expression. At least, once again, I'm not alone in this.

"Sorry I'm running late, come in." Dr. Kilner said.

Subject: Engl225H.001 [REDACTED] to Flinchy
Date: Thursday, December 1, 2011 5:58:17 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: Stephen Gibson

Aileen was so relieved she didn't care what Leli thought. She was about to turn around to face her mother when Leli pulled her and Bera close to her, shielding their eyes. A sharp sound of skin on skin cut through the air accompanied by a soft whimper. Aileen used all of her strength to pull free of Leli, and turned to see her mother holding her face, the man with the black beard standing over her.

Aileen started to run for her mother but Leli grabbed her dress and dragged her into elevator four. Aileen struggled against her grip as she watched the man roughly take hold of Mais, pulling her towards elevator six. "No! Ma!" Aileen shouted as the elevator doors closed before her eyes.

"Stop! Keep quiet!" Leli said sternly.

Aileen pounded on the doors of the elevator, her green eyes spilling over with tears causing her long black lashes to separate into chunks.

"Stop Aileen, or you'll cause us all to be dragged away!" Leli's words stung. Aileen sank to the floor, her face pressed against the cool metal doors of the elevator. Bera crawled onto Aileen's lap and tried to wrap her small chubby arms around her. Aileen looked up at Leli. From this angle she could see her eyes under the veil. Her right eye was black and blue and swollen shut, her left eye was staring straight forward. She held completely still, her face empty of expression. Aileen wondered if people could be dead standing up. "Leli?" she asked tentatively.

Without moving anything but her mouth Leli said, "Don't say a word. You're on your own in the tunnels tonight. Unlike your mother I will not be abused to protect you and your selfish behavior." Aileen felt numb. Leli had always been cold towards her, but this time Aileen knew she deserved it. She felt she deserved worse.

Subject: 225H.001 [REDACTED] submission
Date: Thursday, December 1, 2011 6:13:52 PM MT
From: [REDACTED]
To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

Swallowing past the lump growing like a tumor in his throat, Carl choked out, "Well ... the line's kind of taking forever."

Giorgio's lips twitched in what almost became a smirk. "That is the point."

"To make me stand here for eternity?" Carl demanded, impatient even in the face of this intimidating man.

"Death does not stop for anything, particularly not you," Giorgio told him, the flash of amusement gone. "You should be grateful that you're not in one long, eternal line, served by time of death rather than the manner of it."

Carl's posture straightened, facing the Italian nearly eye-to-eye. "I'm just a little pissed that this line never moves. It's like being at bloody Costco during the holidays and watching every other cashier get through people twice as fast as the lazy moron taking care of your line! All I ask is a little consideration from whatever a-hole is up there servicing Motor Accidents!"

The whole time, Giorgio never moved, like he had suddenly turned to marble. The muscles around his eyes, however, gave a miniscule contraction as if he was going to narrow them. He seemed to think better of it, instead flashing a white, insincere smile at Carl. "If you really think you are better than everybody else, then go right ahead. Head up to the front of the line."

"What? Really?" Carl asked, surprised.

"Go right ahead." Giorgio gestured. "Make your way up there. Tell them Giorgio sent you, as a matter of fact. I won't stop you." He folded his hands again, waiting expectantly.

This was better than expected. Carl hesitantly stepped out of line. Behind him, the man with half a face and the lady holding onto her head bunched up, taking the space Carl had left.

Between the lines stretched the whole expanses of space. He could see more stars than he had ever hoped to see on Earth, as if the invisible dust in the black space had been cleared away for post-mortal eyes.

Looking far ahead at the shiny elevators, Carl turned his back on Giorgio, striding forward. The janitor had only taken a few moments to get all the way up there and back with Signor Scarface. Carl would sort this whole thing out in a matter of minutes.

Threnen could hear the audience clamor.

Many had come from the far reaches of the kingdom to see the newly graduated wizards of the Arcane Order. Some were explorers looking for that last addition to their expedition. Others were dignitaries here on behalf of their lords to pick a court magician. Threnen hadn't been asked by any of them.

Threnen's various classmates had all gotten letters from someone asking for their pledge to come and work for them. Everyone had received at least one letter from the University to stay and increase the faculty or to become part of the large group of Witch Hunters. That was the only letter that Threnen had received.

The crowd quieted down as the Head Master took the pulpit. "Lords and Ladies, I, Headmaster Jones," *hack, hack, wheeze*, "have presided over this university for twenty-odd years now..."

Threnen had listened to him enough times throughout his arcane training that he already had phased out his voice. The familiar droning and wheezing made his head-bob even with the excitement of facing a crowd.

"Hey," said a voice accompanied with a smack.

Threnen snapped awake with his head shaking away the fatigue and looked at his peer. It was Justin. He had been something of a friend though more of a rival. He had been chosen by an exploration party going to the south-western desert.

"I present to you," the head-masters voice grew, "this year's class of robed wizards!!"

The curtain flew open before Threnen could fully compose himself. He was instantly blinded by the magical lights produced by the apprentice enchanters. His legs began to move of their own accord, or at least by muscle memory. They had his class march through this everyday for the last three months, often taking them away from studying or worse, dates.

Threnen ran through the program and remembered every spell to cast and when to cast it. A flare of azure here, a dazzle of pink there, conjure the bust of a naked woman *here...* wait, that's not right.

The crowd let a roar of laughter as the illusion switched from a bellowing lion to a lion-headed buxom beauty. Threnen was always quick on his feet and had the body cover itself up and shyly disappear. The rest of ceremony went off without another fiasco, though the headmaster had his rod at the ready the whole time.

The new robed wizards took their seats and their names were read off one-by-one until it reached Threnen. He had planned to use small spells from each of the disciplines but had a sudden rush of inspiration.

"Threnen Full-leaf, is our next graduate and," *cough, hack, cough, cough, breathe, hack, hack, hack*, "the only Generalist wizard in his class. He hails from the eastern woods," *hhhhhhh*, the audience waited, *sigh* "and has been a remarkable student since his induction."

Once the introduction was complete he took a bow and retrieved his wand with a flourish. He muttered the words and performed the incantations and summoned the naked lion-headed woman once again raising another roar of laughter. The lion gave a wink and then let out a breath of flame that singed the beards of those in the front row. It then winked once more and turned its back-side to the audience and let out a necrotic *toot* as it disappeared. *Yes, he thought, those bastards that wouldn't hire me are going to regret it soon enough.*

The rest of the class went and performed their acts, but none were quite as impressive. A round of applause was given as the headmaster threw the last name card away.

Subject: ENGL 225H [REDACTED] In Class Fiction

Date: Thursday, December 1, 2011 8:12:35 PM MT

From: [REDACTED]

To: stephen.gibson@uvu.edu

"Come away from the window, dear. You will catch a chill," her mother chided from her seat near the fire. Salaya smiled and moved to sit by her mother on the chaise. The wind whipped the snow against the windows and Salaya shivered. She started focusing on her embroidery to distract herself from the discussion going on down stairs. A loud knock on the door startled her and she pricked her finger on her needle. A page walked in and bowed to her mother.

"Majesty, His Highness and the Duke are requesting the Princess's presence in the reception hall," he said, still facing the floor.

The queen smiled. "Tell his Majesty that she will be down presently." The page nodded, bowed slightly lower, and backed out of the room, shutting the large door behind him. The queen turned to Salaya and patted her hand. "You best not keep him waiting." Her mother smiled again as Salaya put her embroidery aside, stood and brushed the wrinkles from her skirt. She stilled her shaking hands with some effort, turned and started walking towards the door. The page at the door pulled it open and bowed as she walked past. The minute the heavy oak door closed behind her, the chill descended and she shivered. Lady Micala, her constant companion and closest friend, looked at her. "Highness, we had best hurry or we will freeze in this hallway." They both giggled and hurried towards the stairs.

Sir Dariin sat in the large armchair looking distractedly at the flickering fire. All he could think about was his stunningly beautiful bride-to-be. She was sixteen years his junior and the image of feminine perfection. Years ago, he and her brother, the Prince, had fought side-by-side in the war, leading their respective battalions to great victory and the ultimate utter destruction of the opposing army. At their victory banquet, as they toasted each other and the King, he caught his first glimpse of the princess Salaya. She was merely twelve then and was already blossoming from a child into a stunning young woman. It had been her first banquet and she looked adoringly uncomfortable sitting at the high table in her lavish silk gown. He had toasted her then and she had blushed and stared at her plate. Later that night, after he and the prince had gotten slobberingly drunk, he had declared his intentions to marry the Prince's youngest sister. The Prince laughed and mocked him incessantly but somehow the word got back to the King. Dariin had been called to an audience with the King and he was shaking in his boots. The King had explained that he greatly liked Dariin and he thought that it was an excellent match. York was generously bestowed on him. At that point, York was a run down, non-profitable estate. Dariin was charged with repairing and restoring it; then, and only then, would the King give Salaya to Dariin for a bride. It had taken him seven long years, but he finally was able to