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Fragment-

Eight-thirty had drained the day light from our house. Night fall brought a cold wind that swept up the silence like a thwarting thief. Blackened shadows crept across, enclosing the gray dingy house. Shadows enveloped my small room. Creeping across and crawling into the crevice of distant cracks. Reaching across, capturing every shine of light that tried to escape. They encroached the dim light emitting from my night lamp. Unable to sleep, I felt my bed caving inwards, my back straining at the unnatural curvature of the mattress. I tossed to my side, consequently smearing my face along one of many tears in these faded sheets. The faint aroma of dust and left over greasy french fries trespassed across my nostrils. I remembered that I hadn't eaten with the rest of my family. My stomach tossed and turned at the enticing smells, *I really need something to eat*. Trying to avoid the feeling, I sat shivering as I reached to reveal the stained window from behind paisley sheets. I peered outside the cylindrical window. The narrowing nature of its architecture allowed for the vision of only one object, our old swing set. I began to reminisce of the times my sister and I spent on that swing set. How bright, shiny and new it was all those years ago.

Praed's Cave

By: [REDACTED]

"Mysteries abound here; many could be resolved with a mere glance towards the shrouded corner, or a simple act of introspection when a fleeting shadow runs wide across the corner of my eye. But even in the physical world, where magic is merely something conjured by cracked, feeble minds. This experience, this Cave in which my men and I have been swallowed up, is truly something of the most dangerous magic. That scholarly fool, seeing such a cave his excitement grasped a hold of him and carried him into this dark Cave. Now he is gone, and we are lost wandering these passages calling out his name."

"Our madness abounds, I am scribbling these verses down hoping they will give me peace. I have read the opening passages in which we are not trapped, in which my mind is allowed to run free in which I am able to pour my soul onto the page using stanza's and lines. We were but idealistic militia men sent to capture a fool who's taken to collecting horrid treasures or the utmost heresy. This Cave is dark; I am only able to see the page because of the sickly blue-green glow that has been following us since we passed that grand monolithic piece of stone. I fear we have moved passed a mere Cave and entered Limbo itself. The purgatory, which does not give me hope that we are still in this existence. I pray, but the spirit that burns in my bosom does not respond. I fear we have been cut off... from man, from nature, from family, and from God himself."

"Perhaps, if I were to reflect upon poetry from my favorite authors I can find peace."

"Our legs are shaking from the constant march along the uneven greasy floor. A mighty wind seems to push against my back over and over. My ears ring for no reason, as though someone has been screaming into them. I have fallen down to my knees so many times; they have soaked my leggings through with blood. I feel my humanity slowly dripping from every pore in my body. I took time to stop the mind numbing waltz, to gather my men around me. So we might partake in something I had written before this utterly rotten forever-march we seemed to be doomed to pursue."

"I read my men such words. The beauty of poetry concerning the outside world stunned me. I had never felt so deeply about anything like this before. The Cave gave me a grand desire to lay sprawled in the grass surrounding and simply cast my love towards the Earth, sky, and all that clung to its breast. For if anything, we were deep within the bowels of the Motherly Earth. The poetry I read distraught some men. They no longer wished to show that they were men of Sword, Shield, Axe, or Bow."

They only wanted escape, and this want ravaged their mind. Audible sobs could be heard as I sat upon a slick blackened stone, and read the lines, admonishing nature, admonishing the pearline beauties we were so fond of gazing at in the Temple courtyard... This great stony throat would not spit us up. It was going to dive us downward, ever downward, into the gaping maw of digestion and finally ejection as mere waste, the shells of our former selves perhaps... Even now, the poet inside me wishes to create lines of rhyme and rhythm. I will contemplate finalizing my thoughts and wills in this manner, for it would give me comfort having died whilst completing the work I so longed to finish before my aged old body gives way to Limbo."

"Hope everlasting, I have not written in what seems to be an age. But our spirits were uplifted when we finally stumbled upon a sign that the end draws nigh. A sound of trickling water can be heard audibly, and later we stumbled upon a spring that gushed from the wall of the Cave. We had long since abandoned our armor, weaponry, and gear not necessary to our survival in this great stone prison. All our water had been drank away. And the men started taking to sucking the slime from off the walls. Even I, of high birth, had taken great swills from a tepid pool of water on the Cave floor. The spring flows downward, perhaps towards a deep well, or even towards an underground lake. The men, who have long forgotten about each other's presence, begin to talk amongst themselves again. It is a sign, a hope that more luck will come. "

"I was a fool, a simple minded beast of a man. We followed the trickle of water down to its source. But only God knows the evil contained within those cave systems. As we reached a great opening the foul green hue began to brighten. Ahead us the cave seemed to end, and open into a grand cavern, so large, so smooth, and dry. That I had concluded I had finally gone mad, and taken to imagining a new home for my men to exist in, even if it was under the Earth. I reached the edge before the slouching husks I lead could realize what lay ahead of them. But to my utter horror, the tunnel ended and dropped hundreds of feet to the floor. The taste of Death lingered on my tongue, I stood in awe, and my heart began to beat against my chest, like a wild hog thrashing to be free of its cage. Again I became aware of everything all at once. The humid smell, the rotting state of my clothing, the sour taste of mold, on my teeth, the blood dripping down my leg and pooling within my boots, the sounds of men so weak they no longer were aware that they were mere animated husks of humans walking forward because a great wind blew hard against their back. As I motioned for them to look I noticed a glint of light. A droplet of water rose up past my eyes. I followed it upwards. My breath caught in my throat, the ceiling was nonexistent. Instead, a great lake rippled, and splashed along the ceiling. 'Fair Fallen, we have entered purgatory.' I spoke quietly, the words barely passing my lips. The sound of men slouching against the wall, sobs, gasps of fear, the sound of hope escaping and rising to the surface. As I turned, a swift shadow took by me. I turned to see one of my men cast himself from the edge of the tunnel. His blue cape flitted and snapped behind him as he fell, dropped like an iron bar in water. I know not what to do at this point. Perhaps my final order should be to destroy ourselves as such."

“Here I sit, upon a cart headed back to the Outer Sanctum. We were rescued by a man named Faujustaen. How he found us, I will never know. Nor do I wish too. I sat slouched upon the wall, preparing to order my men to follow their kind brother suit, to the bottom of the cave, and to the end of their lives. A voice resounded, and torchlight was seen. My men ignored it, they had probably been hearing voices, and seeing strange lights for the past age. I stood, and looked towards the light. The voice resounded again; my weak legs carried me towards the light. I could not muster a word, so I merely stomped towards the light. As my legs gave out, and I prepared to meet the slick hard ground, I felt a pair of strong arms catch me under both arms. My vision was blurred because of the glaring light, but I saw the form of a man with kempt hair, and clean armor. As my eyes adjusted I managed to utter a word. I know not which one, for at that point my mind had all but dissipated under the circumstances. He merely dragged me into the sunlight, and placed me in a wood cart. I heard him shout words to his men, whom rushed into the slit like entrance. I wished to scream out to them, for they would be lost as well, but soon enough, I heard the dragging of boots across stone, and saw soldiers carrying my nearly naked soldiers from the great and terrible maw. With every last ounce of strength I was able to lift my head to gaze into the Cave. Inside, I could see clearly, though the opening was not a large one, the inside was visible, and it was not deep. Not even slightly so, the remainder of my men sat facing the back wall. Which could have only been a few feet deep, their armor weapons, and packs lay only a few short feet behind them. The sun sat at their backs, and my head grew tired. Now I am awake, riding in this cart staring at the name named Andirr. The man I was supposed to find and capture.”

“One dead, my friend Glamestead, whom ‘looked to have died from dropping from a great and terrible height,’ the registrar monk said in a surprised tone as he quickly ran towards me as I sat huddled in the cart. I did not speak to him, nor acknowledge that I heard his words. My mind was fighting an epic battle. How did this happen, how did we become lost in a cave only a few feet deep. How had we been so blind to the sun against our backs, as we continued onward and reentered the city. I was greeted by a face I had grown to hate purely. That foolish apprentice-sage who had led us into that cave in the first place, my mind burned with such putrid disgusting hate, that the words that exited his mouth seemed to be gagged out one by one. I simply stared at him imagining what I would do if only I had a sword, and the strength to lift the sword to meet that fools skull. He claimed to have entered the cave only to see that it was shallow. But when we entered we became lost in a trance, we stared at the walls for hours. Apparently he eventually fell to screaming into my ears and pushing me over as hard as he could to try to rouse us from our sleep. But to no avail, and so... he ran to the Priory near the coast, and organized a rescue party. Faujustaen had been the newly dispatched commander whose job it was to capture the criminal Andirr. After doing so the scholar caught his attention and led them to the Cave. Where they found us in a drunken half-starved stupor, staring at the gray moss and slime covered wall. Our armor and much of our clothing sat only a few feet behind us, and Glamestead lay in a pool of his own blood. Many of us had been slouched forward soaking in it.

"I laid myself at my bedside, I spread my arms wide and asked God if he would give me that ever-warming fire, and place it back within my breast. He did such, and obliged me my final prayer. I do not know what the truth is, and I do not wish to know. From here until the end of my life, all I know is that there is something dark, and disturbing within the shell of this rocky skin we exist upon. And I will never understand it fully. I will continue my writing and my poetry, but not in this blasted book. It holds to much horror for me to possibly understand and take. I will donate it to the library on the coast. So others might read my passages and know that I have seen the Necropolis with my own two eyes."

"Horse shit!"

The deer bolted further into the woods and was soon out of eye sight. Shane had missed another deer. That was the second one this week. Shane got up from his laying position and walked south towards his horse Betsy. As she raised her head, her night black mane swished to the other side of her neck.

"Whell Betsy, it's been rough week. That's two goddamn deer I missed now! Perhaps I'm just getting old Betsy."

Shane hauled himself on Betsy and made his way back to his cabin. He breathed in the cooling autumn air of the Rocky Mountains as Betsy made her way up a stony path. The aspens' leaves had turned to warm colors about two weeks earlier and now they were becoming barren. There was a quick rustle in the sagebrush growing near the trail.

Shane drew his pistol. He quickly guessed where the creature was and took a pot shot. Since there was no further rustle, Shane dismounted and searched the bush.

"Got us a varmint of a rabbit!" he hollered. "It might not be much, but Moroni and Eliza and those varmint kids will sure enjoy it! Perhaps, she might be able to cook it just like momma used to. Whaddaya say Betsy? Wanna go see them Mormons?"

Betsy looked at him with pure apathy.

"Why do I give a shit about your 'pinions anyway?" he mounted. "Get goin' now."

They came upon Moroni's large cabin near sun down. They saw Eliza removing recently dried clothes from a line and folding them neatly. The children Helaman and Esther were helping their mother fold the clothes.

"Grandpa Shane!" yelled the two children as they ran to greet their guest as he dismounted. Eliza quickly finished folding the blue shirt she was working on and ran to get her husband.

"Hello you little varmints!" He embraced the little children.

"Your beard tickles like pa's," laughed Esther. Shane could only laugh back at her innocence.

"I brought y'all a gift," he said excitedly.

"What is it Grandpa Shane?" asked Esther.

"Yeah what it it?" Helaman was missing his two front teeth.

"I'll show it once you go and git yer pa!"

With that the children ran faster than the deer he missed earlier to the other side of the cabin.

Moroni came around from the other side of the cabin wiping the sweat from his brow. His once white shirt was now stand with dirt and smelled of a good days work in the garden. His children hanging onto his hands.

"Well well well," he greeted Shane, "if it isn't the old man of the mountain!"

"Not as old as all that! I see you've started to become a man," he said rubbing his own lengthy beard.

"But not quite as a man as you," he said rubbing his own light beard. "What brings you out for the visit?"

"Well, I caught me one of these little varmints," he said holding up the rabbit. "And you know how I like Eliza's cookin'."

"Eliza, darling, let's get ready for some rabbit stew! Kids, we're going to need your help, okay?" he said bending over to look the children in the eye.

"What do you need us to do?" asked Esther.

"You're gonna have to clean the vegetables and get them ready for dinner. Go and get two potatoes and three carrots from the bunch we picked earlier today and get them washed in the creek. Hurryhurryhurry!"

The children, with endless amounts of energy, ran into the cabin then rushed out with their hands full with the roots. Helaman was trailing far behind Esther.

"Come on Helaman," scolded Esther. "The faster we get these clean the faster we can eat!"

The children ran off eastward toward the creek. Shane handed Moroni the rabbit and grabbed his skinning tools.

"Now you boys skin that rabbit away from the house!" scolded Eliza. "The smell doesn't leave for weeks."

"Yes dear we shall," answered Moroni. Shane then turned around and grabbed his rifle.

"Is that really necessary Shane?" asked Moroni.

"You never know, Moroni, you never know. Now let's skin that varmint."

The two men walked a short distance away from the cabin and sat down on two boulders. They began to skin and gut the rabbit.

"How's the harvest been this year?" asked Shane.

"Very profitable now that Helaman is able to help," said Moroni.

"Yeah, he sure has grown since I saw him last," said Shane. "He's starting to look like you too."

There was a high pitched shriek that came from the creek.

"The kids!" they said in unison.

Shane pulled out his pistol and handed it to Moroni and then swung his rifle to a firing position.

"Lead," ordered Shane.

Without another word the two ran eastward toward the creek.

Not again, thought Shane. *I won't see what happened to my children happen to Moroni's.*

They came to the slope that led down to the creek. They saw it, a giant black bear not three feet from the children. It was standing on its hind legs.

"Oh dear god," cried Moroni in a whisper.

"Kids, stay calm," ordered Shane. "The bear won't attack you if you stay calm."

The children remained frozen near the creek. The bear inched closer to the children and sniffed them. It then turned around and walked away. Esther began to cry.

Moroni and Shane ran down the hill, almost falling over. Moroni held his children in a fatherly embrace of safety.

"It's okay my children, it's okay," he soothed.

Shane picked up the pistol and put it back in its holster. *Thank gods*, he thought. *It was just a bear.*

The children stopped crying for a moment and grabbed the vegetables. They slowly made their way up to the cabin. They saw Eliza waiting in front of the cabin with tears streaming down her cheeks. The children yelled her name and ran toward her. She held them tight.

"M-m-m-m-mom th-th-th-there was th-th-th-this b-b-b-bear andandandandand," Esther couldn't stop sobbing to tell the story.

"It's okay my child, you can tell me once we're eating. Come inside children, lets finish what we started."

"Yeah, Moroni, lets finish skinning that rabbit."

Shane recalled that meal as one of the best meals he ever had with that family.