

THE NURSERY

When Leibowitz was young, and the world was golden, he'd built a nursery on the west side of the house. Then the war came and brought down with it cradle, baby, and all. The nursery sat empty while the bombs fell, and once the sky cleared, there was no one left but Leibowitz himself; a sad and lonely figure stalking the desolate hallways of the great house, while dust motes span asymptotic to the ground, disturbed by the fading echo of his presence.

He watched, silent and uncaring, as those few people he'd known stopped calling on him, turned away by the unanswered bell, and by the resolute ignorance of the thick oak doors which he never opened. Under the thin sunlight, he became a ghost whose passage no longer prevented the fall of dust, while the whisper of starlight glittered on the empty cradle, rocking under his watchful and eternal gaze.

The house stood alone on the rolling heather of the moorlands, worn near to derelict by the constant and uncaring winds of time and weather. Those few travellers who saw it would remark on the lingering sensation of being observed as they passed it by, and silently affirm their resolution not to return. Rumours, dismissed as idle gossip, were shared in conspiratorial whispers in the nearest town that anyone who entered the old Leibowitz place would surely never return.

~oOo~

Prock kicked the front wheel and swore angrily. A clear twenty miles from anywhere remotely resembling civilisation and driving through a sudden and unexpected autumn storm, the engine had spluttered to a deathly silence, refusing all encouragement from its rain sodden driver to return to life. The sky overhead had darkened under thick black clouds, and the pouring water showed no consideration to either his waterlogged clothing or his lack of foresight in leaving the detachable roof of the convertible behind at his hotel this morning. Prock stared gloomily at the water filling the footwell of the car. Soon enough, he'd be the proud owner of a convertible swimming pool.

He glanced about hopelessly, desperate to see another driver, but he'd chosen this route deliberately for the solitude, and he'd chosen well. It had been two hours since the car had decided on its change in vocation, and he hadn't seen another living soul out here.

The moorland was beautiful, even darkened as it was: great rolling expanses of purple heather that swayed under the building wind as though bending under the downdraft of mighty wings. The road itself wound like a blackened scar across the land, hidden from view in the dips and dells, then rising again to reflect the shrouded evening sunlight on its wet black skin. Held in the

trembling arms of this lonely landscape was a manor house; the only building he'd passed in nearly a half hour's drive. A single light twinkled in one of the ground floor windows.

Prock shivered. Without the roof, the car offered no shelter, and the moorland air was thin and cold. It was unlikely that the house would have a telephone, but at least it might be dry. With limited options and no desire to further brave the elements, he sighed and set off across the heather for the house.

~oOo~

If he thought it odd to see the two bicycles outside the front door, Prock didn't show it. One of the pair had a dented front wheel, but had nonetheless been lent carefully against the wall. The second was lying discarded across the path next to a deep scuff in the gravel, as though thrown down in pique and kicked in much the same way that Prock himself had lashed out at his car. The tiny light he'd seen from the roadway had flickered into darkness halfway here, leaving him concerned that he'd find the place locked up and empty, but the creak of the heavy door as it sat slightly open and buffeted on its rusting hinges told him otherwise.

Prock reached up to knock, then paused before touching the faded varnish that lay speckled across the wood, knuckles extended, eyes narrowed. Under his collar, the tiny hairs on his neck bristled up to stand perpendicular from his skin. He took a deep breath. It had been years since he'd needed to live on his wits, relying on that uncanny sense for trouble, but he'd learned to trust it in the mountains of Tyrol, slipping around the enemy, knowing when to run and when to hide, when to be silent and when to abandon all caution. But the war was over now; done with. He frowned, clenching and unclenching his fist, flooded with an unfamiliar uncertainty.

"I told you, I told you I saw someone moving about. Why don't you ever believe me?" A man's voice floated through the gap in the door, nasal and petulant.

"Because you're wrong so often, Adler." A second voice, deeper and more assured. "It's usually easier to simply ignore you."

Prock tensed as the door swung open, eyes narrowed, one hand reaching for a weapon he hadn't worn in well over a decade. Two figures stood in the hallway; the first a corpulent and pallid man wearing glasses tinged with condensation, peering nervously around the shoulder of his companion, his mouth a wide circle of surprise. The second eyed Prock carefully; clever eyes in a strong, tanned face. The thick muscles of his neck were relaxed although Prock could sense a predatory tension in him.

This man, he thought, is dangerous.

"Well well, Adler," the second man murmured. "It looks as though you were right."

"I told you so!" Adler said gleefully. "A fellow traveller, perhaps?"

There was a moment's tension as Prock fought the urge to simply walk away. Then he jerked a thumb back over one shoulder, marking as he did the instant and subtle shift in the distribution of the second man's weight. "My car broke down on the road. Is this your house?"

"Oh, goodness no!" Adler said, still trying to see around his unmoving companion. "We were enjoying the country air and decided to look a little closer is all, then the heavens opened upon us. My bicycle wheel turned into a dip and twisted, so we walked here and found the door open. It's derelict, you know."

"I see."

Adler clapped his hands together. "You must join us! Really, the place is quite fascinating. Brandis old boy, you're blocking the doorway; do let the poor man in."

Brandis grunted and stepped aside as Adler squeezed one arm past him. "Peter Adler, at your service. This rather sullen fellow is Karl Brandis; he's not a very loquacious sort, but he means well."

"Joseph Prock." He extended his own hand and found it rapidly engulfed in Adler's enthusiastic grip, as though they'd been friends for years.

Even as Adler encouraged him into the house, Prock could smell the rot. It was akin to the first step into a tomb, unsealed after so many years of solitary sorrow, and their footsteps felt to him almost as a desecration of its silence. The faded grandeur of the vast open hallway, the wide and winding stair lying under worn carpet gone to mould and the long attrition of years, the long cracks in walls and windows that allowed the moaning wind to carry the outriding drops of the falling rain in upon them: it seemed as though to stand here and not to weep was a crime.

He followed the other two men as Adler wandered with a seemingly aimless and endless interest in the house's construction, attempting to decipher its history and offering fanciful tales of the reasons for its abandonment. What few words Brandis offered were caustic in tone, and Prock found little to like about him. Adler seemed to become lost every few minutes, his mind distracted and focus wandering. Prock, who had never found any particular challenge in quickly learning the layout of his surroundings, rapidly became irritated with the man, and could soon see to a lesser extent why Brandis spoke to him in such a manner.

The upper level of the house offered little of any increased interest, although this came as no deterrent to Adler. Brandis trailed behind them, clearly bored.

"What brought you to the moorlands?" Prock asked him, voice low so as not to disturb Adler's musings.

"Nothing of significance. Peter's company becomes intolerable if he's kept within what you or I would call civilization for too long a time, so occasionally he needs to be let off his leash. Is that not so, Peter?"

But Adler didn't answer. He stood in the open doorway to another unexplored room, shoulders slumped downwards, all trace of his enthusiastic reverie dissolved away to nothing.

"Oh my." He whispered. "Oh dear me."

"What is it?" Brandis snapped.

Adler pushed the door open in front of them, and for a moment, all stood in hushed quiet before the nursery.

Caught between the fingers of the clouds, the sweet softness of the moonlight lit the curve of an infant's cradle, sat in isolation. In this room alone, the painted walls did not feel so much worn by age, nor did the carpet offer up the scent of mildew. Not one of them seemed to have the heart to enter the place, to walk upon the untouched floor, or disturb the light that so caressed the smooth wood of the cradle. For this room, built on one side of the house, to feel so much like it's beating heart, was a strange thing, and one which did not escape the notice of any of the men. In this, Prock realised the similarities between himself and Brandis: whilst Adler shifted from foot to foot, removing and cleaning his glasses in a respectful but uncomfortable silence, Brandis maintained a wary watchfulness.

"Look." Adler motioned to the far wall.

Drawn in amateur style, as though by the hand of a dedicated but unskilled artist, a child's poem was surrounded by caricatures of three figures fighting for space in a large wooden barrel. The words themselves were greatly familiar, and yet somehow in their reading, Prock felt a sense of disquiet.

*Rub a dub dub,
Three fools in a tub,
And who do you think they be?
The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker;
Turn them out, knaves all three.*

"Come," he said, stepping away from the door. "It's well past dark. We should find somewhere downstairs that offers the best shelter, and try to sleep. We can walk back to the town tomorrow."

~oOo~

For an hour after the others fell into a fitful sleep, Prock lay awake and watched the stars creep across the sky behind a patchwork of storm clouds. Adler wheezed uncomfortably, curled on his side like a grotesque baby, wide hands clutching at the front of the jacket that Brandis had draped over his sleeping bulk with a strange mix of affection and disgust. Brandis himself was hunched against the far wall, a still and silent figure almost lost in the shadows of the room. Prock considered calling his name, to see if he was asleep, and decided against it. Brandis reminded him

too much of days long lost to memory: strong men gone to instinct and brutality, whose purpose had become only death.

What use had the resistance truly been? Men and women hiding like animals in the mountains, their efforts no more truly than an annoyance to their enemies. He supposed that was what had broken him in the end; the futility of it. The seemingly endless days of hard earth, empty stomachs, cold bones and worn nerves. He'd wanted to go home, that was all. Just to go home. And who, rightly, could have denied him that? The faces of the officers who'd taken his unit were etched deeply into him, skin splattered with dirt and blood. Was it so wrong, to have fallen? To have taken their money and turned his coat? The secrets of the resistance were nothing to men such as those. His head sagged gently, pulled downwards by unkind dreams that drew him back to the mountains. Soon, made weak by mortal flesh, he slept.

~oOo~

Traitor...

Prock scrambled back to wakefulness, skin soaked in cold sweat, the single accusatory word fading slowly from memory. A thin mist had coiled into the room through the fractured windows, and now danced in slow and intricate patterns over the rough floor. Wisps of vapour had wrapped around Adler's shoes like ethereal tethers: the man lay on his back, arms stretched wide and mouth open as though he were some operatic performer, paused mid aria. Prock tilted his head, trying to remember the last time he'd heard an aria, but the thought was dismal. He stepped around Adler's recumbent bulk carefully, the sound of shoes on wood muffled by both his own skill and the welcoming arms of the mist, and went in search of a more suitable place to relieve himself.

His first thought was simply to slip outside the house through the front door, but at some point in the previous evening one of his unintended companions must have closed the thing, for it now sat as firmly in its frame as though the weight of long ages had crushed it in place. It must have been Brandis, he thought, for surely Adler didn't possess the brawn for such a task.

Thwarted an easy egress, and unwilling to wake the others if reopening the door were to cause a noise, Prock made his way through the gloom of the dust-struck kitchen and out into the small central courtyard.

He took his relief as discretely as could be managed, pleased that the storm had finally passed. Above the essential mortality of his act, the majesty of the universe lit the sky, and even when he could have returned to the others to sleep, Prock found himself so lost in its marvels that at first he thought the sound to be a construct of his own imagination. The low sweetness of a bel canto, skilfully giving tongue to words of such longing that they made him ache. As moments passed, and the fugue of his disrupted sleep fled into the coldness of the courtyard, Prock realised

the voice was no mere fancy, but was drifting gently down from the floor above. He struggled to place ownership of the singing with either of the other men, even standing as he was in rapt attention, and so allowed his curiosity to lead him back through the echoing emptiness of the house, running trailing fingers through the debris of ages past as he climbed the grand staircase, shadows rippling over tanned and scarred skin.

The door to the nursery lay open as he approached; the ancient frame standing as a throat to the voice within. Half lost to the gloom inside, a tall figure posed in hunched stance over the cradle. Not Adler then; the man's weight was inimical to such a physical attitude. A bone thin finger, shining white as it reflected moonlight, extended to rock the cradle. Too thin. Far, far too thin. Not even then, he realised, as the cold hands of concern slipped around his stomach, not even Brandis. Prock stepped forwards in a rush, slamming the calloused palm of one hand into the door and forcing it open fast enough that it slammed against the inside wall. The shadows thrown by the softly patterned curtains swarmed across the floor, pulling the wraithlike phantasm with them, and once he was stood in the room with its contents clearly in view, he knew he was alone.

"You imagined it." He hissed, berating the weakness of his shock and fear.

The singing, now gone, must have come from somewhere else: the acoustic trickery of an old house throwing the voice of either Brandis or Adler, perhaps combined with some remnant of the his earlier dream.

Prock shook his head. "Fool."

From below him, lost in the gloom of the ground floor, a scream tore through the house. Adrenaline brightened his senses, leading the already raised beat of his heart to a desperate pounding.

"Brandis! *Brandiis!*" Adler's shrieking masked the thump of Prock's feet as he hastened back to the staircase.

Prock cleared the last six steps in a leap, keeping his balance with an ingrained athletic prowess, one hand catching the volute of the last baluster to drag his momentum towards the room he'd left his companions in.

"Adler! What's the matter, man?" Prock barked, sprinting the last of the distance between the two of them to where Adler had drawn himself into a bawling foetal curl.

"There's something in here, *something*, with fingers like bones! I woke up and it was leaning over me, *staring* at me. Its face... its face had rotted away..." Adler's voice broke, giving way to horrified sobs.

"It was only a damned dream." Prock snapped, more to comfort his own disquiet than to calm the snivelling Adler. "Where's Brandis?"

"I don't know, I don't *know*, I shouted for him, but he didn't come."

Prock turned away. "There's nothing in here, Adler. I'm going to look for Brandis."

"Don't leave me on my own!" Adler squealed. "It might come back for me!"

"Come with me then, but you'll need to get on your feet." He turned on his heel, leaving Adler to scramble after him, face still wet with tears.

In the shocked aftermath of Adler's screaming, the house seemed to hold its breath; pausing as if afraid what calamity extra noise might bring. Even Adler himself seemed to notice it, following Prock with as much haste as he could manage, and smothering his unhappy panting in the folds of an oversized pocket handkerchief. The two men passed from room to room with no incident; Prock calling out to Brandis and wincing at the noise of his own voice as the walls passed it back to him.

"Could he not simply have left?" Prock asked quietly, as the two of them mounted the stairs to the upper floor.

Adler shook his head vehemently. "He wouldn't have left me on my own. He knows that I worry so: we've taken care of each other, you know, ever since the war."

Prock grunted an acknowledgement.

"He's a gruff fellow, I'll grant you, and he's not without his faults."

"Yes?"

"Oh yes." Adler nodded, voice still low. "He's got quite the temper, you know. In fact, during the war, he... but I suppose I shouldn't speak of such things."

"No. Check those rooms." Prock instructed, pointing down the corridor.

"On... on my own?"

"Just open the door and look inside, see if he's in there. Don't be so damnably *weak*, man."

Adler nodded, cheeks trembling, then straightened his bowtie and went about his work. Prock matched him in the other direction, paying in truth very little attention to the other man. The strange character of the house so distracted him that it was long moments before he realised Adler was no longer moving, but had retreated opposite an open doorway, his back pressed against the wall, his mouth working in silent denial, as though choking on the vision before him.

Prock laid quick feet along the corridor and brushed past his companion and into the doorway, only to nearly mirror the other man's shock. Adler had found Brandis, but the brutish fellow was no longer possessed of enough vitality to be spoken to, nor saved. Some assailant had felled him in a single blow, using the poker from the room's cold fireplace to skewer his now limp body against the wall, his oesophagus split in precise and violent manner, the weight of his body as it hung over the floor having slowly torn the instrument of his death through his throat until it rested unevenly against the base of his skull. His eyes were closed as if in restful slumber, while the off-white of his shirt was stained red almost in its entirety. What little light pricked through the tarnished surface of the window lit roughly formed words, daubed above Brandis's lifeless head: *I oversaw the execution of prisoners of war, and murdered innocents. I have been punished.*

"You... you did this to him!" Adler was now on his feet, all colour drained from his features as though he had been bled dryer than Brandis.

"What?" Prock turned, sickened and incredulous. "Don't be ridiculous, Adler."

"There's no one else here! It can only have been you! You found out what he did and you came for him!"

Prock shook his head. "Keep your voice down, you fool. There's someone else here, clearly. We need to leave, now. To be out in the open where we can see them coming."

"Leave this place? With you? So you can wait until my back is turned and murder me as well? I suppose you think I'm as guilty as Brandis was!"

"Adler! Keep your voice down, for the love of heaven!"

"I shan't! I shan't be silent any longer! I did nothing, only gave him new papers, a new identity! He was good at his work; he excelled in death, and those camps were full of filthy stinking animals! I didn't raise a knife, only a pen! I'll not let you kill me as well!"

Stumbling under the weight of his panicked hysteria, Adler raced for the top of the stairs. Prock dashed after him, calling for him to stop. Adler paused briefly before his descent, one trembling finger raised. "There was no innocence in that war, Herr Prock, none! Those animals that Brandis exterminated would have covered all the civilised world in their filth! He acted for the greater good!"

Prock raised his hands, stomach turning with a greater fear than he'd felt in years. "Calm down, you lunatic! *Can't you hear the music?*"

Both men paused, faces turned towards the nursery and the gentle singing coming from it, as though children's rhymes had been set masterfully to somnambulant tone.

Adler's voice was choked. "I thought... I thought that was *you*."

If Prock thought to give answer, he was denied the opportunity. The door to the nursery slammed open, and a wraith of shadow and nightmare spilled out into the corridor between them. Elongate fingers of white bone grasped the doorframe, seeming to crush the wood beneath a grip of hellish fury. Wrapped all about in the shadows of the house, the nameless thing span in the air, rushing towards Adler, hissing with unholy fury. Adler stepped backwards, heel catching on the top stair. He shrieked in alarm as he fell, and the wraith descended on him, enveloping him in smoky darkness. His body crashed through the aged balusters at the turn of the staircase, bursting free to land on the harsh stonework of the hall with a wet crack.

Prock ran for the balcony with a shout, but his pace was too slow to be of any assistance. Below him, Adler lay silent and broken, his neck turned at a fatal angle. The wraith had passed back into the shadows, now unseen. Prock swore under his breath, hands gripping the railing as Adler's pooling blood coalesced into letters around his head. Words that mimicked and mocked Brandis's demise: *I have been punished*.

Mind flooded with terror, Prock ran. His feet, once sure and true, seemed unsteady on stairs which threatened to trip him as well. The house seemed to come alive around him; walls and floors possessed of an unseemly sentience. Though he tried to remember the simple route to the front door, it slipped from him as though held in careless fingers. He threw open doors and raced through rooms, all to no avail, and all the while the bel canto sang of sweet sorrow.

Finally, exhausted and staggering, he pulled the door of the nearest room tight shut behind him, and rested on it with both hands. His breath curled into the cold air in streamers, and he shuddered as his mind recoiled from the inexorability of his demise in this place. Why could he not escape? Why could he not simply find the damned *door*? Behind him, the creak of wood caused him to freeze, heart in mouth, and he turned to see the gentle rocking of the cradle. The nursery. How had he come back to this place, this heart of the house, when he'd tried to run for the door and the moorland beyond? What could have so distracted him? No longer pristine, the nursery was as a mortuary; the rotting bodies of the long dead littered carelessly on the floor he'd earlier felt so unsure of treading, their skins torn away to coat the wall in the manner of some ungodly womb. The cradle itself rocked slowly, now broken and worn. Deep grooves as though made by the touch of heavy fingers over long centuries graced its side over spokes that were damaged or missing. Upon the wall, carved in flesh, the words of the childish poem were now changed as if in mockery:

*In revenge for lost love;
Three fools bathed in blood,
Are not who they seem to be.
The butcher, the traitor, the counterfeit maker;
Bleed them out kill all three.*

Something in here had known, he thought. Something in here had recognised the stain on all of their souls. It had drawn them in here to rid the world of their sin, and it had already removed Brandis and Adler. If he didn't find a way out, his body would join those discarded in this place, his skin would decorate these walls. Such were his thoughts even as one of the missing cradle spokes erupted through the front of his chest. Shocked, he raised both of his hands to the outward split of his ribs. Bonelike fingers slipped over his shoulders as though in gentle embrace, and the weight of them forced him down to his knees, then further still. The floor was cold under his cheek as he crashed to it. The world narrowed to a small point of focus: the ache of his broken chest, the frustration of his failure to flee. The futility of it, the *waste*. To have escaped so much, to have come so far only to die here, alone except for the bodies of men could never have trusted. Had he truly been so evil? Had his sin truly been so great?

He coughed, blood splattering his teeth and lips. He ran a hand across his mouth, the movement an agony almost beyond endurance, then turned his fingers to the floor. He did not have life enough to finish the words; the light fled him before he had chance to complete them, but his killer did not seem them go uncompleted: *I have been punished*.

Long after such, the house continued to stand, alone in the desolation of the moorland, surrounded by the wave of the heather, and the vengeful wail of the wind.

