

The Grand

**EVEN THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE
NIGHT NEED A PLACE TO UNWIND**

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REVISION 14

One Flight Over

Disclaimer: *This chapter is currently in development. There are likely typos, errors, omissions, inconsistencies and so forth. Please do not treat this as a polished or completed work!*

Edward Locke was unsure about a lot of things, but fearing for his life was not one of them. Specifically, fearing the horrors that roamed the Grand. These creatures which roamed the Grand were so grotesque that they formed the fabric of local folklore. So why was Edward unable to feel anything more than apathy? The sad truth was this was probably a side effect of his complicity.

It had been a little over four years since his guilt began gnawing at him. It was one thing to accept the bribes and privileges that came with keeping the Grand a secret. It turned out to be another matter altogether to live with the consequences. The faces of those unfortunate souls were etched in his mind, their contorted bodies and glassy eyes pleading for help.

He supposed that if he were certain of an afterlife, then he might have been able to manage his guilt. Alas, with what he witnessed over the years, the concept of heaven and hell proved to be fluid constructs indeed.

"Perhaps this is purgatory," he said.

Elmer cocked his head. Was his driver waiting for instructions? Elmer was hard of hearing and with the engine's roar Edward was not surprised that he had been misunderstood.

Thankful he did not have to talk his way out of it this time, the barrister said, "How much longer?"

"Not too long, sir. Should be there in a couple of minutes," Elmer replied.

Edward knew this road and terrain well but was thankful that he managed to avoid any idle chit chat. Based on Elmer's estimate the upper wall would soon appear, which was more stylistic and welcoming than the valley wall. The lower wall had been built to instil fear, a desirable effect when one wanted to hide what lay behind those barriers.

Sure enough, the glowing eyes of a gargoyle caught his attention. Elmer once said that he thought they were being followed and sadly he was right. Alas Edward needed to keep the true nature of these automatons a secret. It was frightening to know what they were capable of.

He wanted to avoid thinking about it, but failed. His mind conjured up imagery so intense that he shivered. While the event had taken no more than a moment, every detail was burned in his mind. Edward remembered how the fur was stretched out so far that its skin became visible. He saw how the flesh went white prior to tearing and witnessed the disembowelment and exposition of internal organs.

This memory tended to dwell on this singular point in time. It created the illusion of this creature's organs being suspended in mid-air. Unfortunately the laws of physics were absolute and drenched

the area in viscera.

The barrister nearly convulsed, but he bit the inside of his cheek to feel *something*. Edward hoped the surge of pain would disrupt the memory, but was unsuccessful. The image of that creature changing back into a man was horrifying. With ease he could dismiss the death of a monster, of the bogeyman or any other mythical creature spawned in the depths of hell. It was another matter to witness its human element.

“Welcome to the Grand, Master Locke,” a courtier said when he opened the door.

Edward was momentarily dazed as the memory faded, even while the taste of blood lingered in his mouth. No matter, it was nothing that a nice stiff drink would not cure, at least that was the plan.

The barrister exited the car then walked away. He dared not turn around to watch Elmer leave. Somehow he could not bear the thought of his salvation driving away. Such behaviour when overt was bound to arouse suspicion.

“Sir,” two courtiers said simultaneously while they kept open the main doors.

He never got over the view from the Grand Hall’s observation deck, which was flanked by arching staircases leading below. Edward was at a loss of words to explain how this amalgamation of architectural and artistic genius was possible. It was a perfect example at how beautiful the road to hell was.

“Master Locke,” Max said while handing over a key to his suite.

Edward took the key nonchalantly, one of the perks of the hotel was having a permanently assigned room (or was it a cage). Max was one of *them* though Edward remained unsure as to what they called themselves. Had Bram Stoker been correct in calling them *vampires*? Or had it been a wild guess?

The barrister was a bit of an expert on how to spot one in a crowd. Those like Max were seasoned manipulators and knew that hiding from within the flock maintained their hunting grounds. When he looked hard enough, inconsistencies appeared in their breathing. Every so often Edward noticed their faces would distort and shimmer; a sign that they moved quicker than his eyes perceived.

These occurrences were rare and nothing more than a moment of inattentiveness on their part. By keeping an eye out for the signs, it seemed to make their movements easier to catch.

Edward also assumed *they* had always been here in some fashion. People simply chose to dismiss the supernatural as a trick of the mind. A bit like a quick glance at the clock and becoming confused as to why the seconds hand was frozen in time.

“Max. Pleasure as always,” he said to complete the lie.

Someone who could not manage a convincing lie, did not survive for very long when facing opponents in court. Edward ranked well amongst the best and yet his skills were juvenile when

compared to the Grand's staff. The concierge for example was far older than he let on and that was based solely on his accent and height.

"Anyone else at the Hotel tonight," the barrister asked.

"The Mayor is in the Artemis suite for a *private* engagement Sir," the concierge answered.

Not much to go on but enough to know he was not invited. Not that he cared to visit that particular suite. Those suites were linked to the South wing which he explored previously to get a better idea of what lurked within.

Edward half-expected to find torture chambers filled with rows and rows of bodies being drained. There were probably rooms that served such purposes, but the South wing contained luxury suites with no windows.

That is except for room four-fourteen which led to God knows where. There were rumours that a maid once made her way to that wing and just walked through without a care of what lay beyond. Fortunately for the barrister, he knew well enough to avoid going anywhere near that door.

"Ah yes, I expect the Mayor will be rather exhausted from that particular engagement," Edward said with a hint of sarcasm.

He did not expect Max to answer or outwardly acknowledge his statement. That would have been a serious lapse in professionalism, not unlike his own *faux pas*. Still it was nice to speak the truth even though it was filtered through a veil of sarcasm.

Edward looked about for something to do. Management arranged for collaborators to stay at the hotel on occasion. During those evenings Edward was a welcomed guest, free to enjoy the luxuries within.

For those less scrupulous, there were plenty of diversions not on the menu. The Mayor was probably partaking in some of that *entertainment* right now. Were there no limits to the depravity of a politician? Were his hands any cleaner?

Tuesday nights were quiet, but by the sound of it, there was plenty of fun to be had in the West wing. That was unfortunate since his favourite restaurant was in that wing.

Disappointed, the barrister headed over to the East wing, passing by the marble pillars then along a series of ticker tape machines. A crowd had enveloped them, looking at the golden machines encased in a crystal dome. Edward rarely paid those devices any heed, preferring not to gamble on the stock exchanges.

This feeling was not shared by most, however nothing he said would dissuade people from betting on a big pay-out. Nonetheless, Edward found it deplorable to find these men watching the machines chew through rolls of paper so intently. Why not catch up at a later time?

He ignored the men even when one said, "Same numbers all day."

Since his sore cheek was stinging, he thought some gin and tonic would set things right. The barrister wandered until he came across a piano bar and was lured inside by the voice of a siren. The music was enchanting and her voice served as a catalyst that set his curiosity aflame.

He made his way to the bar and Edward recognised the bartender on duty as being one of *them*. The singer might have been one as well but that was inconsequential to satiating his immediate desires. He turned and saw how the room was for the most part deserted save for a few others.

"The voice and beauty of an angel," he said to the bartender.

"Yes, she is quite a *dame*," the bartender replied. "What can I get for you Master Locke," the man asked.

Most of the staff knew him by name even if they had never met. Edward knew of this one, although mostly by reputation since he was always around when something had gone off the rails.

"Gin and tonic please," the barrister replied.

Normally this part of the hotel did not serve food. However, Edward figured they could be coaxed into bending the rules.

"Have any sway with room service? I would love a steak," he said after he palmed a few bills onto the counter.

"I don't see why not," Cecil said before asking, "Anything in mind?"

"Brass rail New York cut sirloin," he said while imagining the smell of this precisely prepared meal. "Medium," he added before turning his attention to the signer.

Cecil did not reply, no need. He quickly prepared the Gin and Tonic before he got on the *blower*.

Edward was more than happy to watch the siren sing while he waited. With drink in hand, he took a sip and watched as blood washed back into the glass. Looks like this time he had bitten down a bit too hard.

The singer leaned against the grand piano with one leg ahead of the other to showcase her silky smooth legs. All part of the show Edward thought, but he found it difficult to keep from getting slack jawed.

Edward wondered how *they* could stare at you and make a hardened criminal's heart melt. He witnessed this behaviour before and assumed this siren was toning it down tonight.

Still it was nice to just sit back and enjoy the show. A bit like finding his way into an opium den to *kick the gong around*. My, what a charming language the youth developed in an attempt to differentiate themselves from their elders.

In the distance, Edward heard a loud crash and figured it was the sound of a vase shattering. He would have paid no heed if the singer's face had not flickered. Without interrupting her song, the creature's head had turned to investigate then returned to its original position. Edward wondered if she heard sounds more acutely than he did, a shame that asking was out of the question.

"That takes talent," he said in between sips; by now the drink had taken on a pink hue.

"Yes, she is a spectacular performer sir," the bartender said.

Edward knew the bartender was playing coy, but would not push the matter further. In the background the cacophony grew in intensity. The barrister was unsure on what was going on, but it sounded like a riot. People were shouting, and that was accompanied by the sounds of furniture being smashed. Was his imagination running away on him? The fact that even this siren missed a note in reaction to the commotion outside meant it was likely not the case.

"What is going on out there," Edward asked the bartender.

"Whatever do you mean sir," the man asked as the chaos intensified.

Whatever was riling up the guests must have been a *doozie*! Edward wondered why the staff were not interested in all this commotion.

"Do not play coy with me," Edward said. "I know full well your hearing is more sensitive than mine," he added but immediately regretted having done so.

In an instant the bartender grabbed Edward's shoulder and then applied pressure. Unlike the initial movement the pressure increase was gradual and constant, so given time he would crush every bone in the shoulder.

"It looks like your steak has arrived sir," Cecil said all calm-like while the siren continued on with her song.

No one else seemed to care or notice what was going on outside. Edward began to wonder if everyone in this room was one of *them*. What a dreadful thought!

"Why don't you enjoy your steak, finish that drink of yours and just relax hmm," the man asked.

Odd how the searing pain in Edward's shoulder made it seem more like an order? He took the steak knife into his right hand and fork on the left before cutting at the meat. The steak was beautifully prepared, giving him no more effort than cutting through butter with a hot knife. One bite of his meal was all the bartender needed to relax his grip. The combination of having his taste buds tantalised and the easing pain almost made him shudder in ecstasy. Wait? Why?

There was no time to question matters, since that first bite somehow managed to sap his strength. First his hands lost their grip followed closely by his balance. As the world blurred out of existence, he felt weightless then heard a loud thump when he hit the floor.

By then the siren had stopped signing and Edward could clearly hear a mob outside. Was that all? No, in the distance he heard someone screaming to their death. Did someone throw themselves from a hotel window? That was quite a drop with plenty of time to change their mind. What was going on?

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The world was nothing but a bright haze when Edward came to. He tried to move but gave up after a brief struggle. After a few moments the barrister discovered that his arms were bound. Nonetheless he managed to push himself against a wall using it for support until he gained sure footing.

Unfortunately all it took was a slight shift in balance to send him into a fall. While in freefall, he face-planted the wall then bounced off.

"Why didn't that hurt," Edward asked, thinking that such a violent impact ought to have knocked him out cold.

Edward tried to free his arms but could not loosen his bindings. Numbed, unable to think clearly or arouse any emotion, he gave up in favour of considering the trouble he was in. Was he drugged?

"Good evening Mister Locke," the concierge said.

For a minute Edward saw through the haze just enough to see he was in a room padded from top to bottom. It did not take one of the greatest minds in human history to figure out where he was now.

Before his vision blurred over, Edward looked up to Max and noticed his change in dress. Gone was his uniform, replaced by something befitting the medical field. Flanking the *good* doctor he saw young ladies dressed as nurses. Max leaned closer to the dazed barrister as though proximity would have an effect on comprehension.

"Looks like the stock market crashed and people are calling it *Black Tuesday*," he said with a light chuckle. "Not a very creative lot," he added.

The memory of those men surrounding the ticker tape machine and their statements hit him like a tonne of bricks. Why did it matter to a place like the Grand? Edward then realised that money was their perceived source of power.

"No clients," he managed to spurt out.

"Surprisingly sharp mind you have there," Max replied then looked at one of his nurses. "Make sure you up his dosage," he added.

A treatment which served as a deterrent to escape attempts. Apparently the staff were not branching out into new territory.

"Yes Doctor," the nurse said.

Wait? The concierge was a doctor? For a moment, clarity returned to his mind long enough to recognise her as the siren.

“The Boss has grown tired of relying on the likes of you to keep our little secret,” the concierge said in an entirely new tone of voice.

Max had always been so jovial and professional in their exchanges. For the moment it appeared the veil had been lifted.

“That little stunt you pulled by relieving the Georgians of that beating heart really annoyed him,” he said.

Max’s hand hovered over Edward’s body until he came to a point just below his Adam’s apple. There Max pressed down until it got a visible reaction. Edward saw nothing more than bright flashes of pain flickering through his eyes while he gasped for air.

“Now we have an excuse to pretend to shutter this hotel,” Max said even though Edward could barely concentrate. “The markets have crashed, thousands have leapt from buildings or killed themselves in response to being destitute,” Max added.

Edward had no trouble recognising how much of a golden opportunity this turned out to be for the Grand.

“Planned,” Edward managed to spurt out, though he drooled all over himself in the attempt.

Just then the nurse returned with a large metallic syringe. Without a second thought she knelt down beside the barrister, found a vein and planted the large-bore needle into his arm. Clearly she was not interested in making the process painless, rather the opposite. Despite the initial pain, his mind instantly clouded over. What was the problem again?

“We manipulated the markets and made sure we sheltered the storm,” the concierge said. “The town will henceforth believe the hotel has been shuttered,” Max paused.

He leaned down close enough to whisper then said, “Though our honoured guests will remain.”

The concierge got up then headed for the door but stopped by nurse siren.

“Start the extraction process as soon as you can,” Max said.

So Edward would remain a guest of the Grand despite suffering from the human condition. What a shame since death would have been far more merciful.

“His family thinks he lost his fortune, went *looney* and tried to take his own life,” Max said. “They will not bother us. Wouldn’t want to sully the family name. So you are free to be as invasive as desired,” he added.

“What are we to look for,” the siren asked.

How could that woman's voice still carry those haunting overtones she showcased last night?

"The Boss wants to know what else this bastard stole," Max replied. "He doesn't care if you leave him a mindless husk as long as we know all he knows."

"Why don't we have the Georgians dissect his brain," the siren said.

Such a direct method would get all the information they needed with minimal fuss. While logical, the look on the concierge's face answered the question.

"Boss feels that would be too easy for him," Max said nonchalantly. "He wants this one to suffer, so take your time in fracturing his mind to get the information," Max added.

Both of the nurses looked to one another then licked their lips. What initially appeared to be a mundane task became an opportunity for sweet delectable torture. Edward would be in for a world of pain. Since his nurses were immortal, they had all the time in the world.

* * * *

It was time for lunch, so John was naturally found in the town's diner. He tended to feel a bit of nostalgia when faced with a pre-war setting. The booths were setup along the windows and provided patrons with a view of the street. Opposite the booths, there was a counter lined with stools. Behind there was serving equipment and a nickel-plated cash register that merged into the background.

The waitresses primarily worked from behind the counter and occasionally ventured out to serve customers. Stools, benches and the counter were all lined with chrome. The colour palette was on the conservative side; restricted to dark reds and browns. The tiled floor had a nondescript pattern which extended from one side to the other, but somehow complimented the wood-panelled walls.

Above every booth there was a chrome cylinder-like fixture fitted with a naked bulb glowing within. During the day it did little, but it filled the place in a warm and welcoming light nearer to dusk.

Lunch here was unoriginal but was worth their weight in gold when compared to what they served at sea. The first few days on ship were glorious when fresh food was available. Unfortunately fresh rations quickly gave way to the same stale swill day in and day out.

Of course, even the crustiest of breads could not withstand the environment of the North Atlantic. Everything ended up a soggy mess which soured the crew's morale, especially when the sea state was high.

He had been sitting there no more than a minute before a waitress approached him

"Morning John," a waitress named Rose said to break the silence. "What will ya have today," she asked mechanically.

John looked to Rose then his eyes wandered to the countertop menu for a moment. The plastic lettering planted into the board had been the same since arriving in town, but he confirmed

nonetheless. It was a bit like checking the time on his clock when writing out a log entry, even if he had already amended the ledger.

"Soup of the day and a steak sandwich please," he said.

He looked at the woman a bit more, he had seen her countless times before. Yet this time he had an odd case of *déjà vu*, even if he was unable to place when and where that might have been. Most of the residents had lived here all their lives, so it was doubtful they had met out East.

"Coming right up," she said before retreating behind the counter.

From there she yelled something to the cook then grabbed a pot of coffee to refill cups at the counter. All the while the feeling persisted, with his luck, this would end up giving him a migraine.

"That would be a shame," Eleanor said.

Seated opposing to him was the black-haired lady he had fantasised about since his arrival to the town. John never did get over how she seemed to know what he was saying before he could think of it. To be fair, men did have a tendency to think of beautiful women in various stages of undress and he was certainly not guiltless in that domain.

"What would be a shame," the barrister asked.

"You getting a headache," Eleanor said softly.

She waved her hand in the air to catch Rose's attention. Without as much as a word, the waitress whipped up a milkshake on the spot then plopped it onto the table.

Flabbergasted John said, "I never said I was getting a headache."

"Sure you did," Eleanor replied. She leaned closer to him and added, "You tend to talk to yourself when you think you're alone."

That might be true John thought. People tended to be unaware of nervous ticks they had. Still that rang as false.

"My apologies then," he said before adding, "Sorry if I offended you by questioning your powers of perception."

Eleanor shrugged then smiled once she set her eyes on the strawberry milkshake. For a second, it appeared as though she were a child tasting the delectable substance for the first time.

John noted how Eleanor wore a dainty summer dress, cream in colour with a matching hat that she had thrown against the window upon arrival. To keep the dress tight against her waist she wore a white belt which made her outfit pop.

A shame that he was not able to see her legs, but her arms were fortunately bare up to the shoulder.

Her sunburned bronze skin was smooth and beckoned—

Eleanor giggled, managing to distract him yet again. This time she had a bit of cream on her lips, to which she licked-off playfully. Odd how sensual it appeared to be, and he wondered if it had been a deliberate tease.

“I saw you outside my house a few months back,” he said as a matter-of-fact.

He focused on the features of Eleanor’s mouth trying to avoid being entranced by those lips. Would she betray herself once she responded?

“Was I,” she asked.

Her response came quick as lightning, so fast that he believed it hard to manufacture. Yet John was willing to swear that this lady had been there that night!

“You don’t remember,” he answered her question by injecting one of his own.

“I tend to sleepwalk,” she said.

John heard stories related to sleepwalkers, even some who opened doors and prepared meals. John lived in the *boondocks* and it would take hours for her to reach his residence while wandering aimlessly.

“When I came down to see you, you went into the woods heading towards the wall,” the barrister said.

Eleanor sucked on the straw until a loud slurping sound was heard. How she never got the mother-of-all-brain-freezes from that John never knew?

“You sure it was me,” she asked.

Befuddled, John was unable to formulate an answer. Unfortunately, it would be a challenge to prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Was it normal to have a person permeate their fantasies and dreams? Eleanor once again giggled, which made the barrister suspicious.

This time he managed to say, “Pretty sure it was you, yes.”

“I told you not to open the door,” she said out of nowhere.

John was used to people changing subjects, but this one took the cake! If she wanted to be cryptic, then he may as well follow her lead.

“I never opened a door,” he replied.

“No,” she said.

Just then Rose appeared at the table with his order. He looked at the hot steaming soup and his steak grilled to perfection.

“At least not yet,” Eleanor said but was gone before John looked up.

John looked from one side of the diner to the other but saw nothing more than the door swinging shut. Eleanor could certainly move with a sense of purpose. She also had no qualms about leaving him on the hook for the bill.

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