

Dracula 1912

by Joseph Rubas, 1991-

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For my mother, Robin. It was you who took me to see *Titanic* in 1997, and it is you to whom I owe this novel.

Prologue

Life had been good under the master.

That's what the old people said, their eyes shining with love as they recounted the days when HE resided in the castle. He treated them well, they said, paid them to work, paid them to kidnap travelers from the road and bring them to him, paid them to watch the roads and footpaths twisting through the craggy mountains of lower Transylvania, keeping their eyes open for possible invaders. In the days of the master, the old people said, there was plenty.

But English men came one day long ago and slew the master; they drove a knife through his heart and left him in one of his crates. He turned to ash and blew away on the wind.

Or most of him did.

One man was said to have captured some of him and put him in a jar. This man, a Pole named Voyteck, wanted to be in charge, and with the master out of the way, he was: He installed himself in the castle and made the others his slaves. He raped the women, beat the men, and spat upon the crypt in which the master was once interred.

In the Year of Our Lord 1908, the people rose up against Voyteck and cut off his head, which they put on a pike; his body was left for the wolves.

The clay pot said to contain the ashes of the master was taken and held until the following autumn. Under the light of the first harvest moon, the people selected the prettiest virgin from their ranks, took her out in the woods, and, by the flickering light of a bonfire, cut her throat, collected her blood, and sprinkled in on the ashes of the master.

This is good, the old people said. HE would return and provide for them. No more hard winters. No more starvation. No more destitution.

They took the ashes to the master's crypt, filled a box with soil, and left them there. Each night one or two of them would steal into the mausoleum under the ruins of the castle and marvel at what the box held. The dirt and ash was decidedly taking on the shape of a man.

In 1910, the master opened his eyes for the first time and tried to speak, but was too frail. A thief was killed and his blood given to the vampire. Each month this process was repeated until the master was able to walk on his own. He was perpetually weak, however. He took less nourishment from blood, and tired too quickly. This, some said, was because most of him had blown away on the wind.

He was not fully there. He grew stronger, though he needed more rest than he once did. A rabid wolf attacked him in December 1911, and while he killed it handily, his wounds took weeks to heal. Sleeping on his native soil was no longer enough.

For three years the master fed gluttonously. People were taken from roadways and villages surrounding the castle and brought to him sometimes two and three at a time. In January 1912, his people took him to Bucharest so that he could be nearer to people. But his thirst grew, and by the end of the month, he had killed all of his followers.

More, he thought, I need more.

In March, he found himself in a nickelodeon. Pictures flickered happily across a screen. The film, whose name he didn't catch, took place in America... New York City, to be exact.

A thriving metropolis packed with people. Black, white, Arab, Asian, European... a buffet of souls, his for the taking.

America, he decided, was where he wanted to go.

Chapter 1

As the majestic ship slowly pulled away from its large berth, Count Dracula gripped the cold metal railing and peered intently into the jovial crowd amassed on the dock. Through his smoked glasses, he saw no faces that he recognized from his previous stay in England, but there was still a queer, worried nagging in the pit of his stomach.

Paranoia, surely, Dracula thought as he gazed into the impeccable steely blue Southampton sky. The sun shone brightly down upon his cold face, and the salty sea breeze rippled through his long black hair. They weren't coming. They couldn't be.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Dracula looked over the smiling faces lining the waterfront. Around him, the deck was jammed with people waving a hearty good-bye to their loved ones and to their precious England. The yells and bellows of the gay mortals caused Dracula to cringe. For a moment, he thought of Castle Dracula high in the rocky hills of Transylvania, and the perpetual silent still covering the wooded land like a blanket. He had forgotten how damned loud humans were.

A bit grudgingly, sure that at any minute he would see the familiar face of Harker or Holmwood, Dracula moved back from the railing and bled in with the jostling wave of humanity. A loud whistle, most likely attached to one of the large smokestacks, shrieked mournfully, stabbing Dracula's ears.

With the tap-tap-tap of his metal-tipped walking cane meeting the hard wood deck, Dracula slowly strolled forward, letting the cold wind wash across his Roman face. The sickening onion reek of unwashed armpits, however, soon enfolded him, turning his stomach. A man in a well-worn pair of trousers, damn

sound issuing forth from his goofy smile, backed from the rail and into him. He quickly turned, his grin gone. "Sorry, gov," he ejaculated, his eyes wide. "I didn't see ya there."

Dracula looked the small man from head to toe. He was steerage, one of the cattle kept below decks like a dirty secret. His face was gaunt and pale and his eyes were dark red, as if he had only long ago seen a good night's sleep. His hair was a dull brown, and his voice, with that Whitechapel-street-urchin quality...

"It is fine, my friend," Dracula said, forcing a smile which must have appeared warm, for the young man's face loosened and a small ghost of a grin widened his gray lips. "It is a happy day; we are a part of history now."

The young man nodded eagerly. "Sure is, gov, I'm on me way to America, startin' a new life."

Dracula nodded, smiling and further sizing the man up. His face seemed to be permanently smudged with dirt, and his teeth were an unhealthy yellow. His thin throat was scarred and host to repulsive red and yellow bumps, something contracted from a prostitute no doubt. Dracula curiously wondered what it would feel like to sink his teeth into the pig's neck, how the hot blood would taste as it poured into his mouth... and shuddered.

"It is cold," Dracula lied, wanting the Brit to go away more than he currently wanted anything else. "I must go and find my stateroom, excuse me."

The English youth smiled, tipped his tattered hat, and winked. "Alright, you 'ave a good day, sir, and I'm really sorry for bumpin' into you, I musta forgot me manners."

"It happens to us all," Dracula smiled.

The hoodlum, with a nod, hurried past Dracula, heading in the direction of the stern, moving through others of his like. Dracula watched him go, a sneer of disgust writ across his face.

With a thoughtful shake of the head, he turned and continued along the sunny deck, passing clustered Irish families and Welsh couples, garnering bits of disjointed conversation. Many were happy to be leaving for a supposed better life in America. Unlike their first-class counterparts, most of these lowly bugs were not on vacation.

Dracula passed a few rushing officers in blue topcoats closed against the cold by bright gold buttons and a few burly men in shirtsleeves and dirty trousers, stokers, he supposed.

As he put steerage behind him, he began passing more... enticing prey. A few ladies passed on the enclosed promenade, escorted by frail tuxedoed men. Dracula stole sidelong glances at these well-dressed ladies, but found none to his liking. They were all so porcelain and repulsive. He did pass a few maids trudging behind their tyrannical mistresses who caught his fancy. They were so young and fresh, flowers not much older than some of the children they minded. They wore simple dresses and coats, and looked straight ahead as they passed him, likely having been taught not to look unwarranted at wealthy, better, ladies and gentlemen.

Dracula felt hot desire rising within his parched throat.

For fear of losing his composure and exposing his true nature in a mad attack, he forced his eyes away from the other passengers and looked out at the receding

dock. Above the stone and brick city skyline, sooty smoke billowed into the sky like prayers to Satan.

With a hearty sigh, Dracula turned and went on his way, making a concentrated effort to keep his eyes straight ahead.

Past a rush of well-dressed teenagers, made up mostly of young, golden-haired girls with slender waists and delicate throats, Dracula stepped through a gangway door and into a short hall adorned by tastefully wood-paneled walls; waves of heat struck him, and nearly stopped him in his tracks. For a moment he considered stepping back out onto the deck, for the heat was worse than the cold, but, chin jutted slightly out, he continued past bellhops, stewards, wealthy families, and officers.

He stopped for a moment at the top of the grand staircase, a breathtaking testament to man's progressing knowledge and taste. A massive glass dome topped the polished wood railings and the marble floor. A clock framed by sculpted angels, or some other such, sat embedded in the wall of the wide landing.

For a brief minute, Dracula was awed by the ship's sheer beauty, but then regained himself and, with a glance at the people flowing by on either side of him, went on.

Blind now to the majesty of the steamer, Dracula strode down steps and along narrow corridors, from beauty into increasing unattractiveness, like strolling on a breezy evening from the good part of the city and into the bad, until he had reached his "stateroom".

Deep in the cargo hold of the ship, quiet so not to alert anybody to his presence, he slipped into a long wooden box containing his native soil. He pulled the top closed, blocking out the intense light and noise of the world, and was enshrouded in cool, blissful black.

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Doctor John Seward and Arthur Holmwood, the latter also known as Lord Godalming, helped Dr. Abraham Van Helsing to his stateroom. The old man limped painfully along, never uttering a word of dissent or complaint, even though he hadn't been feeling up to much since his battle with pneumonia the previous year. Seward stole a sidelong glance at Van Helsing, and was inspired by the old man's eager attitude. Even though he had been in bed for the better part of a year and a half, he had not hesitated when he was sent for. Seward had only meant to inform Van Helsing of Dracula's possible presence, but three days later, Van Helsing had been at his door; sick, weak, and ready for war.

"I am sorry," Van Helsing said, his soft German accent soothing. Seward had not realized that Van Helsing's eyes had met his as they slowly but surely made progress. "But being old is tiring."

"I was just thinking of your willingness to fight Dracula again," Seward assured his mentor.

Art, on the opposite side of the frail intellectual, nodded, and added, "As young as I am, I almost didn't want to come."

That was a lie. Seward remembered Art's reaction when he first brought up the possibility of Dracula's return. They were playing cards late one night, and when Seward spoke the fiend's name, a strange and fearsome fire ignited in his eyes.

Seward knew all too well how Art felt about Dracula. Once upon a time, Dracula came to London and fed upon Lucy Westenra, to whom Art was engaged. Over the span of several days the once vibrant beauty withered and perished. After death, infected with the vampire's curse, she rose from her grave and stalked the night. It was Art who finally freed her from the dark spell: He drove a stake into her heart.

Therefore Seward was loathe to bring up the beast, especially on such flimsy evidence. But he made himself; it was too important a matter to ignore.

Presently, after passing a gaggle of teenaged girls, they reached Van Helsing's stateroom. Art and Seward's stateroom was directly across the hall.

Reluctant to leave Van Helsing's side for fear that he would fall and hurt himself, Seward removed the key from the watch-pocket of his trousers and moved to open the door.

Inside, Seward was taken aback by the cabin's splendor. A four poster bed sat in the middle of the grand room, its canopy lacy and white. A wash basin sat between a closet door and an end table. A sofa faced the door, before it a small table, flanking it two wicker chairs.

Golden spring sunlight spilled through the window and onto the tan carpeted floor. The walls, like most on TITANIC, were polished wood.

"Come on, old boy," Art said from the hall, "I want a look-see, too."

"Such beauty," Van Helsing marveled as the two younger men helped him to the sofa.

"Finest ship to ever sail, the papers say," Art said, removing a silver case from his coat pocket. He took out a cigarette and lit it with a light emblazoned with his initials. "Not that you can believe everything the papers say, though they seem to have been right this time."

Momentarily leaving Van Helsing, Art and Seward went across the hall and examined their own room. It almost identical to Van Helsing's, only with two beds instead of one.

Back in Van Helsing's cabin, Art dropped into one of the chairs. Seward remained standing in case Van Helsing needed something.

"Please, John, sit down," the old man said wearily.

Nodding, he sat in the other wicker chair. The sunshine falling through the window was hot on his shoulders.

Slowly, almost arthritically, Van Helsing sat his crinkled black leather bag upon his meager lap, and pulled it open with a snap. His liver spotted hand dipped into the dark abyss, and proceeded to feel around for something. Seward thought of asking if his assistance was needed, but presently Van Helsing removed a large wooden cross supporting an iron Jesus in a T, and sat it on the sofa beside him. Once again his hand disappeared into the bag, and once more came back clutching a holy object: a black leather-bound book with HOLY BIBLE writ across the cover in gold.

"Here, John," Van Helsing said as he reverently held the book out; Seward nearly tipped his chair over in getting the book.

Van Helsing looked queerly at Seward, a small smile on his lips. "John, please learn to contain yourself, I wouldn't want to pay the White Star Line for something you broke."

Seward nodded. "Certainly, forgive me."

"I am only joking," Van Helsing said. "You have been acting very strange lately, is there something wrong?"

There was. He held Dr. Van Helsing in the highest regard. The man was a fierce intellectual, a brilliant person, and a kind soul. But...he was getting on in age. His physical condition was unsuited to the battle ahead...if indeed there was a battle. He was not as strong as he once was, and was more at risk of coming to harm. The prospect sickened Seward.

"No," he lied, opening the book and leafing through it so that he would not have to make eye contact with the old doctor. "I suppose I'm just on edge. Having to do this all again. I just hope I was wrong about Becker."

Charles Becker, a middle aged accountant, had been admitted to Seward's asylum in February, after constables discovered him in London's East End, devouring the still-warm entrails of prostitute Katharine Hill. He was promptly committed, and was suspected as Jack the Ripper, but that was disproven when it came to light that he had been in Germany on all of the nights on which Saucy Jack plied his savage trade. Seward had taken no special interest in the man until he began to rave about the "Master" in a manner similar to Renfield. But unlike Renfield, Becker was petrified of this elusive being. He would sing and chant in his room at all hours of the night, jumping on his thin mattress and howling in terror whenever a stiff breeze shook the building. In late March, Becker hanged himself with a noose fashioned from sheets strips. Before damning himself to hell, he had used a piece of his metal cot rigging to gash his wrist, and with the red blood he had splayed *TITANIC* across the cinderblock wall.

"I am sure that you are not," said Van Helsing as he snapped his bag and sat it on the couch next to him. He picked the crucifix up and turned it over in his hands. "There are truly no such things as coincidences, John. That he used almost the exact words of Renfield, that he once called this being "Drakuli" is proof that he knew something."

"I suppose," Seward replied thoughtfully, "I just...I desperately hope that Becker was wrong and that we are just jumping at the shadows of his dementia."

"I do, too," Van Helsing said softly, comfortingly, "but I know that Dracula is back, I can feel it in my bones. And, because he is back, we must stop him once more."

"He had better hope he's not back," Art said, stubbing his cigarette out in a glass ashtray he had found somewhere. "For his own sake."

An uneasy silence hung over them.

"Well," Art said, "on to happier matters. Did you see that grand staircase?"

"It *was* beautiful," Seward said, thinking back to the ornate woodwork, the clock, the gold trimmed treads, and the massive glass dome through which sunlight poured and dispersed.

"Such extravagance, though," Van Helsing said. "Who needs this much?" He lifted his hands to indicate the room around him. Van Helsing had long ago taken a virtual vow of poverty. "It is not things that matter," he had once told Seward, "it is *actions*."

He lived in a small stone house overlooking a wide European courtyard with few possessions; his books were his world, as were his studies, which he confined to a small barn Seward and Art had helped him build around 1899; he had long since

retired from the medical field, but he had made several important discoveries pertaining to blood that had earned him praise across Europe in 1905 and 1909. Aside from God, books, and medicine, nothing much mattered to him.

"I would normally agree with you, Doctor," Art said, "but this isn't a private residence. It's a floating resort. Something meant to be enjoyed on holiday and then moved on from."

"That is true, I suppose," Van Helsing replied. "But I cannot help to feel that it is gluttony."

Silence once again enveloped them.

"Well, if you gentlemen will excuse me," Art said, standing, "I have a bit of business to see to."

"What business?" Van Helsing asked.

"Visiting the Captain."

Art was personal friends with Titanic's captain, Edward Smith. From what little Seward knew, Art's father, the original Lord Godalming, had been close with Smith, and Art had known him since childhood.

"Well, have at it," Seward said. "Watch your step on deck; I hear it's quite slippery this time of day."

"Yes, go and have fun while we languish away down here in the dark," Van Helsing added. "We wouldn't want to embarrass you in front of your friends."

Art laughed out loud. "Fine then, I was going to bring you gentlemen back some gruel, but you have just proven yourselves unworthy even of that." With an exaggerated flourish, he quitted the room, softly clicking the door shut behind him.

"I think that I, too, need a few private moments, John." Van Helsing said as he stiffly stood. Slowly, creakily, he made his way over to the wash basin. "I will call you in a few moments."

"Take your time," John stood and moved over to the door. "I'll be in my stateroom."

Alone at last, Van Helsing studied himself in the mirror above the sink; his eyes were bleary and bloodshot, his skin resembled leather, and his white hair was wispy and thin.

Though he would scarcely admit it, Van Helsing resented getting old. His mind felt as clear and sharp as ever, but his body...his body pained him. He was slow, clumsy, and achy. Sometimes he couldn't get up by himself, and he needed to ask for help. Him! Abraham Van Helsing! Ask for help! Never once in his life had he needed to ask anything of anyone, and he liked it that way. Now, however, he was... he was old.

Sometimes he got short tempered with others, including Art and John (both of whom he loved dearly). John especially. John was always there, waiting for him to fall down or turn to dust. Van Helsing appreciated his concern, but each time poor John hovered nearby, it reminded him of what he had become.

Maybe he should have stayed in England. He was little more than a liability to the others. Instead of focusing their entire attention on Dracula they would be forced to worry about him as well.

But could they do it on their own?

Van Helsing didn't know. Maybe it was pride, maybe it was selfishness, but he didn't trust not being here...so here he was.

Sighing heavily, he turned away from the mirror and hobbled back to the sofa, where he sat slowly and tentatively down. From his bag he withdrew a leather bound book. There was spidery silver writing on the cover: *Leben und Tod des Vampirs*. He opened the book and carefully flipped through the yellow, age-brittled pages, thinking of how lucky he had been to find this tome in London; it was a rare book even in Europe.

He found his place, marked by a bit of paper, and read and re-read the chapter name: Resurrection des Vampirs.

* * * * *

"It is cold for April," Van Helsing said with a shudder. He and Seward were standing along a rail overlooking the stern. Behind them, the Titanic's boat decks stretched for nearly eight hundred feet, and its four massive funnels rose high into the steely blue heavens. Ahead of them, the stern eventually gave way to open sea. On the horizon, Seward faintly saw the outline of the English coast.

"It is a bit chilly," Seward said. He was comfortable himself, but Van Helsing was aged.

Van Helsing muttered something in German and shook his head.

"If Dracula is onboard," Seward said, clearing his throat, "how are we going to find him? The TITANIC is a big ship."

"Indeed it is," Van Helsing replied, gazing up at the Union Jack flapping atop the lofty aft mast. "Too big, but that is beside my point. If Dracula knows we are here, he is likely to come to us. He remembers what we did to him, John, and his vanity won't let him ignore it."

"So we just sit and wait?"

"No, we will search for him. It is better to meet him on our terms than his, but either way, we *will* meet him."

Seward turned back toward the stern. Several steerage passengers moved between cranes and capstans, enjoying the spring sun.

He supposed that Van Helsing was right; Dracula would come to them if they didn't go to him. On the other hand, he didn't want to overestimate the monster. He could very well hide until they docked, and then disappear into the teeming streets of New York.

He said as much, and Van Helsing nodded.

"You are right. Him staying hidden *is* a possibility. Which is all the more reason for us to actively look for him."

Seward nodded mutely. The thought of examining every nook and cranny of Titanic was daunting, however.

"Do you remember where Dracula sleeps, John?" Van Helsing asked.

"Of course," Seward replied at once. "In a box of his native soil."

"Correct. And where would boxes be kept on a steamship?"

"The hold."

"Yes. The first order of business is to search the hold and see if we cannot find his boxes. If, and when we do, we purify them. If we are lucky, he will be in

one of them. If we do not find his boxes, or if we do not find him, we will play Sherlock Holms.”

They left the rail and began down starboard. A few lower-class ladies lounged in deck chairs and read or happily chatted. Seward tipped his hat as they passed.

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That night, the men dined at the captain’s table.

Van Helsing, while a simple man, was familiar with eloquence; he counted several heads of state among his friends, and regularly supped and bunked in grandeur. The sheer magnitude of TITANIC’s first class dining saloon, however, rendered him speechless. The grand, dome-topped staircase leading into the first class reception room, where the rich and famous gathered before taking their seats, was stunning in its own right: the risers were gold-encrusted, the woodwork of the richest mahogany, and the craftsmanship as fine as any sculpted in the Old World. He especially enjoyed the ornate clock upon the landing, depicting Honor and Glory Crowning Time. Here, the old intellectual paused, his breath bated and the corner of his lips quivering into a smile. It took everything he had to stay his fingers from running themselves over the smooth contours of the regal timepiece.

“Magnificent,” he marveled to himself.

The reception room was palatial and exquisite, reminding Van Helsing of French castles in which he had studied dark works on the supernatural; the only difference was here, there was no sense of foreboding, only one of wonder. The furniture was simple yet beautiful, the windows stained like those in a church, and the potted plants, spaced evenly throughout the crowded room, were green and vibrant.

All three of them were impressed, and so too, it seemed, were the other passengers, men and women decked in the latest fashions. As they mingled with the others, rubbing elbows with the richest men in the world (there, holding a glass of brandy and chatting with his valet, was Benjamin Guggenheim, not three steps away from John Jacob Astor), Van Helsing and Seward both found themselves overcome with awe.

When the time came for them to retreat to the dining room, they reluctantly bid farewell to the reception. The Jacobean-style dining room was not as stunning as Van Helsing had imagined it would be, but perhaps that was because he had quickly become accustomed to high splendor. The floor was linoleum intricately laced to resemble a Persian rug, the tables were finely set, and the oak paneling was rich and waxed.

The Captain’s table sat in the center of the room, in-between two classical pillars, putting Van Helsing in mind of Roman excess. Set for at least nine, the table sat only a small handful of men. Art introduced them before they sat: at the head of the table, dressed in a bright white uniform, a number of medals upon his broad breast, was Captain Smith himself, an imposing figure with piercing blue eyes and a snowy white beard. At his right hand was a small, well-built man with a moustache; J. Bruce Ismay, the President of the White Star Line.

The men shook hands all around; Van Helsing was pleased to find Smith’s grip thoroughly English: firm, strong, reassuring.

"This is a nice ship that you command," Van Helsing earnestly complimented as they sat.

"A modern wonder," Smith smiled, and humbly added, "but you really should lavish your praise on this man." He gestured to Ismay.

"I merely dreamt TITANIC; our workers made it reality."

With a smile, Van Helsing leaned over and whispered into Seward's ear, "You're to answer to him if you break anything."

Seward turned a wistful smile on his lined face. "Don't worry, Doctor; I'll tread lightly."

Art and Smith made small talk for a bit. When the latter freed himself to take a sip of water, Van Helsing said, "Captain Smith, the TITANIC seems a perfect home away from home; though I myself could never live on the sea." He took a drink of his wine, and made a mental note to nurse the drink, more than one could possibly put him to bed.

"Indeed, the lodgings are splendid," Smith said, "but I am afraid to say that this is not only my first voyage with TITANIC, it is also my last."

Ismay nodded. "It is a tragedy to lose such an accomplished and capable commander. You will not be easily replaced."

"I'm sure you'll find someone," Smith smiled.

"Of course," Lord Godalming said, "but what about you? How will you ever spend all the time?"

Smith shrugged. "I suppose I'll write letters to Mr. Ismay and tell him how to run his company."

The table erupted into laughter.

"I welcome it," Ismay said, "a man of your wisdom would be a perfect addition to the company."

Smith smiled politely. "I think that I'll pass on that; I just want to be with my family."

Lord Godalming checked his pocket watch and cast a furtive glance at Van Helsing. Van Helsing nodded. The hour was growing late and they had pressing matters to attend to.

"I hope that dinner will not be late in coming," Art said. "I am simply starving."

"I shouldn't think so," said Ismay, "TITANIC's kitchen staff is the finest on the sea, and, I might add, the fastest."

Dinner, in fact, was not long in coming; shortly thereafter, the sounds of forks scraping and clinking on china for the most part replaced the other noises.

"Fine meal, one of the best I've had," Seward praised in-between bites of his supper.

Captain Smith smiled. "It is." He took a bite, and then said, "Lord Godalming tells me you run an insane asylum."

"Yes," Seward said. Once upon a time he had been embarrassed when the topic came up around Art's lofty friends. Now he didn't think twice. "It's nowhere near as nice as TITANIC, but the residents seem to enjoy it."

"Are they allowed wine?" Ismay asked. "Personally, I could never be happy without at least a glass a day."

Seward lightly shook his head. "No wine. Milk and water only. And tea, of course, if they take it."

“You know, in France the children drink wine due to the filthy conditions of the water,” said Ismay, looking thoughtfully into his glass, which he presently held at eye level. “Almost makes me wish I were French.”

Laughter circled the table.

“I jest, of course. England is my beloved home.” He raised his glass then. “To England.”

The rest of the men raised their fanciful wineglasses in return. “To England,” they said in harmony, and then drained their glasses.

The men spent the next half hour dining and conversing, enjoying the company of one another. All the while, below decks, two young Irish girls on their way to the golden shores of America, both named Mary, disappeared.

After dinner and plans were made to meet at the captain’s table again tomorrow, Van Helsing, Dr. Seward, and Lord Godalming retired to the spacious first-class smoking room. Van Helsing sank into a plush armchair before the roaring fireplace, while the two younger men took to a couch that sat next to the armchair at an L-angle. Van Helsing removed a smooth oaken pipe from the inside of his jacket, filled it with a measure of rich, dark tobacco, and stuck a match into the bowl.

“As I was telling John earlier, Arthur, we’ll need to look inside of the cargo hold. That is the only safe place where he could have his boxers of native soil.”

Art nodded. “I figured as much, Doctor. All we need to do now is get down there and send him back to hell.”

“Now, hold on,” said Seward, “sure, we should, and we will, but do you have any idea how many crates, boxes, cases, trunks, and the like there are in the hold? We very well could still be down there at the turn of the next century. We need to devise a way in which we can narrow down the possible boxes.”

“There is no way,” Van Helsing said sadly, “we’ll just have to go down there and pray God that we happen upon him.”

“What if he is hiding or elsewhere on the ship?” Art worried.

“It is possible,” Van Helsing confessed, “but if he is, we will still come across him. We will need to search the ship itself, anyway.”

“If you think the cargo hold is big, take a look around you at the Titanic,” Art retorted.

“I have, it is a wonderful ship,” Van Helsing said and smiled. “TITANIC isn’t that big, Arthur, we can split up and each search a class.”

The men were quiet for a time. “I have the idea,” Van Helsing said, “that he will come for us no matter what.”

“Seriously?” Art asked. “I rather think he’d hide like a rat until we docked.”

“That is a possibility as well; but I think...no, I know, that Dracula’s pride and vanity will lead him to try and avenge himself.”

Art was silent, brooding. He had a point.

The smoking room was beginning to fill with sharply dressed gentlemen playing cards and enjoying languid after dinner smokes. Van Helsing was rather enjoying the dimly lit room, with its tasteful furniture and fanciful paintings on the freshly painted wall, but he didn’t want to linger too long and draw unwanted attention to him or his cause. “Come, let us go to my cabin and speak of this matter further.”

* * * * *

Dracula spent his first day on TITANIC wandering third class, driven partially by his lust for blood and partly by his innate curiosity; he had never been on such a large, modern ship, and found himself genuinely interested in it. At one point he ventured to second class, but for some strange reason could not force himself into first class. He told himself that it was because he disliked the snobbery that came with money earned without bloodshed, but deep inside, he knew that he was afraid he might see someone he recognized.

At dusk, feeling drained from the day, he cornered a woman in a high necked dress and hypnotized her into giving herself willingly, but the blood he took did little to replenish him. He ordered the woman to follow him, and deep in the hold of the ship, he forced her to sleep. He would come back for her at some point. When, he didn't know. Maybe later. Maybe tomorrow.

Shortly after nightfall, he went on deck and stayed close to the stern, walking through the shadows and watching people as they enjoyed the evening. At some point he observed a young woman staring out into the night. He sensed despair.

Licking his lips, which had gone dry, he approached, and stood next to her.

"You seem troubled," he said, watching her in his peripheral vision. Her jaw was strong and angular. Her curly red hair hung around her face like dull fire.

"I already miss Ireland," she said with a sigh.

"I miss my home too," Dracula said. "But America is the land of opportunity, no? So much can be had."

"Maybe," she said and turned toward him. "Are you...?"

Dracula didn't hear the rest: A large wooden cross hung from her neck. Dracula's eyes were instantly drawn to it, and weakness overcame him.

"Sir?" the woman asked, concerned at his expression of horror.

"I-I must go now."

With that he spun and walked as quickly away as he could.

In the shadows, he leaned against a capstan and tried to catch his racing heart. The momentary encounter with the cross had left him feeling shaken and weak. Before, he had been strong, but now, since he was woken, he was weak. Why?

Not for the first time, Dracula had a sense of approaching doom.

It won't last, he thought. They did something wrong when they raised him. He wasn't the same and, he realized, he never would be.

No. That can't be.

Nerves. It was only nerves.

I am strong.

He told himself.

I am big.

I am DRACULA.

Calmer now, he pushed away from the capstan and went back into the hold.

Where he fed.

* * * * *

Once situated in Van Helsing's stateroom, Van Helsing in a wicker chair and the others on the sofa, Art's legs propped uncouthly upon the frail table before the sofa.

“We all know how this evil dies, so all that is really needed is to find and destroy him.”

“I’d like to know how the bastard came back,” Art said, not noticing that he had broken one of his own personal rules. He didn’t like to curse, but when it came to Dracula, all bets were off.

“Ah, right here, in this book, *Life and Death of the Vampire*, is the answer to the question you ask,” Van Helsing said as he removed the book from the table.

“I’ve already told John,” Van Helsing told Art absent mindedly as he opened the book to his place, “that I am not paying for damages done.”

After an uncomprehending moment, Art smiled and removed his legs from the table. “Bruce Ismay won’t make you pay for anything; in fact, if I say so, he’ll pay you.”

Van Helsing snorted, “He struck me as a snob.”

Art laughed. “Oh, you don’t know the half of it. But he knows which side his bread is buttered on, so he’ll leave you alone.”

For a moment, both Van Helsing and Seward stared uncomprehendingly at Art.

“I donate large sums of my money to the White Star Line,” said Art as he, with a flourish, placed his booted feet back upon the table’s surface. “*Large sums.*”

Van Helsing shrugged.

“Doctor, Arthur Holmwood strikes *me* as a snob,” Seward told Van Helsing.

“I am no snob,” said Art, “I just know that Ismay would rather have me smash his weak furniture to bits than lose my overwhelming financial support.”

“Every time you get around the upper crust, you do too become a snob.”

“It doesn’t matter who is snob and who is not,” Van Helsing said a bit flustered, “what matters is what I am going to tell you.”

Art and Seward quieted down.

Van Helsing read aloud from the book thus:

“The Vampir may be brought back from death in one of several ways, though there are reportedly more ways than these to return an un-dead to life. One may, on the night of the first full moon of the harvest season, spill the blood of a virgin on the ashes or bones of the Vampir. The Vampir thus arises from the grave as a whole man, as he was before he was killed. Another popular method used by certain North American Indian tribes involves the remains of the un-dead being made anew with the first menstrual blood of a maturing female.

Another way to raise a Vampir is to take the ashes, bury it in a wooden box on All Hallows Eve, or on St. George’s Day, and beg Satan to restore the Vampir, at the cost of your own soul..”

Van Helsing stopped and read on by himself for a moment, his lips mumbling and his eyes rapidly racing across the page, back and forth.

“So, we are able to assume that one of these things brought Dracula on us again. The method is notwithstanding, though. He is the same as before. He has the strength of ten men. He can control the weather. He cannot tolerate holy items. And a stake to the heart will kill him. I suspect that he is travelling in the

cargo hold. I want us to search that area first. He has no way of knowing that we are here unless he has seen us himself, and I would like to keep the element of surprise.”

Van Helsing stopped speaking, and a tense silence fell over them. Each man was lost in his own thoughts. Art imagined the hateful bastard hiding like a rat in the hold, and shuddered with hatred. He wanted dearly to get hold of the beast, to make him pay for everything he had done... especially what he had done to poor, beautiful Lucy.

“We should post a watch,” Van Helsing said, “in case Dracula knows we are here and comes for us in our sleep.”

“Good idea,” John Seward said and got to his feet.

Van Helsing waved one gnarled hand. “No, I’ll take the first watch. When you’re old you cannot sleep very well, anyway.”

“I’ll take second,” Art said. “Johnny can have third.”

“Two hour increments,” said Van Helsing, “starting at midnight. Tomorrow we will check the hold. Arthur, you may have to speak with the captain and secure his permission. I would like to not be thrown into TITANIC jail.”

* * * * *

At 11:30 pm, Van Helsing stepped off of the bitterly cold deck and into the pleasantly warm wireless hut, set behind the wheelhouse off the boat deck. For a long moment, he stood in the doorway, panting and holding his icy hands against his heatless cheeks. He had felt plenty worse in his time, but it was April, and to Van Helsing, April meant spring, warm fragrant air, and the occasional balmy day.

The tap-tap-tap-tap of the Marconi drifted to Van Helsing’s ears from a small rectangular window set in the wall before him, allowing a view of the wireless room proper. Van Helsing slowly ambled to the window, and rested himself against the countertop over which business was conducted. A tall youth in a white shirt and black trousers was standing behind the fully uniformed man at the Marconi; his back hunched determinedly, a set of headphones upon his ears.

The younger man saw Van Helsing, jerked almost as if he had seen a ghost, clapped the other man on the shoulder, and moved forward.

“Lo sir, can I ‘elp you?”

“Yes,” replied Van Helsing, “I’d like a wire sent to Jonathan Harker. ‘*We have not met our friend, D.*’ This is from Van Helsing.”

The young man, whispering back the message to himself, jotted it down onto a notepad, and snapped it shut.

“That all, sir?”

Van Helsing nodded. “Thank you.”

The young man nodded and turned back toward the wireless station.

Van Helsing steeled himself against the rush of bitter wind that he knew awaited him, and opened the door back to the boat deck. Despite the blustery conditions and the fancy that his face was numb almost upon quitting the hut, he stayed in one spot for a moment, gazing out into the star-speckled void. He had always loved the peace and tranquility of the sea. It was magical in a sense, in that the night sky went on forever; one was totally free from the rigors of land and traditional life.

Smiling to himself, Van Helsing began limping toward the stern, his cane thumping along the deck. He passed an officer in a thick overcoat and a white-and-blue hat languidly strolling toward the bridge.

"Evenin', sir," greeted the officer in a rich voice, his hands clasped behind his back. A furry mustache adorned his near blue upper lip; Van Helsing vaguely wondered how long he had been on his round.

"Good evening," Van Helsing replied warmly, "'tis cold out this night."

The officer smiled pleasantly. "Sure is, haven't seen an April like it since I was a boy."

"I have seen one or two like it in my travels," Van Helsing said, "but not in England and the North Atlantic."

The officer nodded, seemingly intrigued. He stopped, and Van Helsing likewise grinded to a halt.

"No, sir. You say you travel; have you ever been to Moscow?"

Van Helsing nodded, a small smile on his lips. "Yes, once or twice back in the eighties; a very bad place in the wintertime. I once saw a man lying on the ground frozen, and I had just seen him no more than ten minutes before, hale and healthy at the pub."

The officer whistled. "I lived there with my mother when I was just a boy. I can't recall much; just that in the winter the air was so cold that it felt like you stepped into a sobering slap."

Van Helsing chuckled, "I remember those days, so many, harsh."

"Yes. It's been nice talking to you, but I must to get back to it, busy night."

Van Helsing nodded, happy that the officer would not hold him on the inhospitable deck much longer.

"It is tomorrow that we dock at Queenstown?"

The officer nodded. "We can't actually dock, Queenstown doesn't have a berth big enough for the ship; we'll have to drop anchor about a mile or so off shore, and then the little boats will bring out the passengers and mail."

"Okay, thank you."

"You have a good evening, sir; enjoy your trip."

"I will, thank you. Good night."

* * * * *

Past midnight, Dracula forced himself into first class.

A few men played a game of cards in the grandiose smoking room while a few women read in the ladies' reading room.

The corridors were dim and quiet, completely unpeopled.

It was with a great shock then that he saw a man sitting in a chair outside one of the staterooms, dozing. When he recognized the man, he nearly started.

Van Helsing!

For a moment Dracula stood frozen where he was. His greatest fear was realized!

But memories came flooding back, and his fear turned to anger. How *dare* they? How *dare* they come after him?

Suddenly, he wanted to rush forward and snatch the old man up by his shirt, but didn't. If he killed one but not the others it would alert them, and in his condition he might not be able to face them.

Instead, he turned and went back to the hold, where he lay awake in his box for a long time.

The best thing to do in his position was to hide. When they got to New York, he could make a run for it. By sundown he could be halfway across the country.

But remembering what they had done to him so long ago, what they had made him into, nagged him. Hatred filled him, and he began to dream of killing them one-by-one. Tomorrow night or the next. Get them alone and snap their scrawny little necks.

When Dracula finally slept, he smiled.

Chapter 2

Van Helsing rose shockingly late for a man of his temperament. The wind-up clock on the nightstand said 10:30. A golden bar of early morning sunshine fell through the window and lay across the bed, warming his stiff legs.

Mein Gott! Van Helsing sat bolt upright, his back sore and his eyes crusty.

"Good morning," John Seward said from the wicker armchair, a bit bemused, perhaps by seeing his mentor nearly blast out of bed. A book was open on his lap, one leg resting atop the other thigh; it was the Bible, for the only other book that Van Helsing had was in German. On the table, a cup of hot tea in a fine, delicate glass sat upon a saucer, thin wisps of steam rising into the air.

"About time you woke," Seward said as he snapped the book closed, and sat it on the table next to his drink.

Van Helsing nodded, shamefaced, and replied, "Yes, I am terribly sorry. I feel as if I am putting strain on you and Art."

John Seward dismissed that notion with a flap of the hand, "No, not at all. I am glad you slept well; we all need all the energy we can get. Anyway, Art and I got an early start, before sunup, and found six possible matches for Dracula's boxes of native soil."

"Good, good. Where is Art?"

Seward smiled, "Working his magic with the captain, seeing if maybe we can pry the boxes open. Searching was one thing, I had to goad Art for about an hour this morning to get him to go along, but opening them is something else altogether."

Van Helsing got out of bed and shuffled to the wash basin. "Perhaps if we get Dracula out of the way early we can enjoy the rest of our trip."

"We had better enjoy it; it cost too much money not to enjoy."

Refreshed, Van Helsing went over to the sofa and sat down. "God help me, but I want to see him die, John, I want to be sure that he is true dead this time; and it would be of satisfaction to see him sent back to his master."

"I think we all want that," Seward said. Clapping his knees, he got to his feet. "What say we go and find our dear Lord Godalming?"

“Yes,” Van Helsing said. “Let me dress.”

* * * * *

Lord Godalming stood inside TITANIC’s enclosed wheelhouse, waiting patiently for Captain Smith to finish speaking to the quartermaster, a small, thin man who stood at the wheel. It was roughly ten in the morning, and bright sunshine fell through the windows overlooking the outer bridge and the bow beyond.

Smith, a tall, imposing figure with a white beard and piercing blue eyes, clapped the quartermaster on his shoulder and uttered a hearty laugh. Looking at the man, Art was reminded of his father. Smith was like his father in many ways: Both were upright Englishmen of a different generation who bore themselves with implacable dignity. Sometimes, in the presence of men like that, Art had trouble believing that they were actually men and not statues come to life. They seemed... different. Mythical, even.

Captain Smith was different, however. Or maybe he wasn’t. Maybe Art simply *viewed* him differently. Art had known the old seadog since he was a child. He vividly remembered Smith visiting his father; vividly remembered the seaman taking him onto his lap in the parlor and telling him exciting stories of maritime adventure by the flickering light of a warm fire; remembered the misty look in his when Art told him that his father had died. Smith may have been a statue to some, but Art had seen what was underneath, and to him the old man was *different*.

Presently, Smith made his way over to Art and offered his hand. “Good morning, Lord Godalming. And to what do I owe the visit?”

Smith’s grip was strong and firm.

“I have a... a favor to ask you.”

“A favor?” Smith laughed. “Tell me what it is and I’ll see what I can do.”

Looking over Smith’s shoulder to make sure the quartermaster was minding his own business, which he was, Art said, lowly, “My associates and I need to search the hold of the ship. We are...”

He stopped. He had formulated his excuse in the night, but wasn’t sure if he could be convincing enough.

Smith regarded him quizzically.

“Do you remember Inspector Johnson?”

“Why, yes, I do.”

Inspector William Johnson was a mutual friend of theirs. He worked for Scotland Yard.

“Inspector Johnson has... sort of deputized us, you would say. There’s an opium smuggling ring in London and we have reason to believe that a shipment is onboard TITANIC.”

“Opium?” Smith asked, shocked.

“We need permission to open some of the crates in the hold...to make sure there’s no opium inside.”

Smith considered for a minute. “It’s against White Star regulations,” he finally said, “but I’ve seen many men driven to madness by drug use. You have my permission.”

Art sagged, relieved. "Thank you, sir. I..." Art started, but was cut off by a soft rapping at the door.

"Enter," Smith called, raising his usually placid voice, and the door opened, allowing in a blast of cold, salty air. A small, grim-faced man in a dark blue overcoat with golden rings on the cuffs and a white hat atop his head entered and blocked the doorway with his arms, as if he were trying to push apart the doorframe. Behind him, Art saw Seward and Van Helsing, faces red and most likely numb, peering into the bridge over each of the man's shoulders.

"These men say they need to see you, sir; say they're personal friends of yours."

"Thank you, Mr. Murdoch, send them in."

Murdoch's eyes darted from Smith to Art, and back. "Aye, sir," he said and removed himself from the doorway. Seward and Van Helsing entered, and Murdoch softly clicked the door shut behind them.

"Good morning, Captain," Van Helsing said and shook Smith's firm hand. Seward, with a low, "Sir," was next.

"I was just telling the good captain about the opium smuggling ring," Art said as if they had any idea what he was talking about.

"Yes," Van Helsing said sadly, "a horrible drug."

"Yes," added Seward with authority, "opium has a terrible effect on the brain."

"A shame it all is," Van Helsing added, "I myself never saw reason for more than the occasional stiff drink."

Smith nodded politely. "When this search is over," he said, "I want all put back the way that it was found; I would like to avoid any unpleasantness on my final voyage."

"You have my word as a man," Art said.

Chapter 3

TITANIC dropped anchor two miles off of Queenstown at 11:30 that morning, and passengers were ferried to and from land by two small White Star vessels. Van Helsing, alone, for Art and John were taking lunch in the Café Parisian, stood at the railing next to a large American man named Archibald Butt, a military aide to President Taft, and watched the transfer process while thinking of Dracula.

"The biggest damn ship I ever been on," Butt was saying as he looked toward the Irish coast, his ham hock hands tightly gripping the rail.

Butt, though flabby, perfected a stern, military air. Van Helsing could sense a great energy lurking just beneath the surface; this was a born man of action. Van Helsing couldn't help but contemplate the ravishes of time. He imagined that Butt had once been lean and young, his face unlined and his hair lacking the hints of gray that were there now. Van Helsing had once been young and strong. Now he was an old man.

"Yes," Van Helsing said and leaned against the railing on his forearms. He wished to cast the hateful cane in his right hand, a testament to his age and

decrepitude, into the churning gray waters, but he did not. Instead, he mused. "It is a wonder of the world, I suppose."

"We're living in a wondrous time, my friend. Man can fly; crossing the Atlantic is as dangerous as taking a bath; and our medical knowledge increases every day. We have electric lights, motor vehicles, telephones, phonographs. Surely the best of times."

"Yes," Van Helsing replied, "it amazes me so all of the luxury and amenities that we today have. I never thought I'd see the day when men in America and men in England could communicate as though they were in the same room."

"The best of times. "But perhaps also the worst."

"How so?" Van Helsing asked. He turned from the gray coast, and the small oncoming liners, and looked at Butt. He was still facing forward as if afraid to meet Van Helsing's eyes, sullen, his face hard.

"Weapons of war, Doctor Van Helsing. We have modern Gatling guns, cannons, aeroplanes, submarines, a thousand other machines that, if unleashed, would destroy the world."

"Perhaps," Van Helsing said. "But I have faith in my fellow man. I think war will be a thing of the past by 1940. If not through compassion, then simply because *everyone* has these weapons and no one will want to go against them."

Butt shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe. But the tangled alliances of Europe have me doubting. One small conflict can plunge the whole Continent into war. *Will* plunge the whole Continent into war."

"Certainly not."

"Mark my words, Dr. Van Helsing. In ten years there will be a war unlike any we've ever seen."

Van Helsing opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again. Such a war was possible. He elected...

Toward aft, a woman screamed.

Dracula!

Van Helsing turned, and saw the woman several yards away, terror written across her porcelain face. She was pointing at one of the funnels.

Expecting to see a ghastly cross between a man and a bat, Van Helsing looked up.

A black, sooty face peered down over the lip of the fourth funnel.

A jolt hit Van Helsing's heart, and he nearly cried out a warning to his deck side contemporaries, his chest clenching painfully, but, beside him, he heard the rich booming laugh of Butt.

"Why, that's just a stoker from the engine room," he said, and waved to the sooty face. Van Helsing saw a small dark form, which must have been the stoker's own arm, return the wave.

A few of the men on deck, having had their attention drawn from Queenstown by the woman's frightened shriek, and having overheard Butt, chuckled lowly; some even gave their own wave.

Van Helsing clutched his chest, his heart thundering against his ribcage. He took several deep breaths to fill his windless lungs; the world began to gray at the edges, and he was dreadfully certain that he was having a heart attack.

Slowly, however, the world went back to the way it should have been.

“See, that last smokestack’s a fake,” Butt explained, pointing. “They added it for cosmetic reasons; it is only a vent for the boilers. That stooge there musta crawled up the inside.”

“I would never have known it was not real,” Van Helsing said a bit breathlessly.

“Me neither, but I talked with Mr. Andrews, the ship’s builder. A nice man, on this very voyage.”

* * * * *

At 1:45, with TITANIC finished and underway, Queenstown at her back, the men gathered in Van Helsing’s stateroom.

“Okay,” he said as he handed John and Art both a small crucifix and a pointed piece of birch wood. “We all too well remember how to kill Dracula. All I need to then say is exercise extreme caution. He may have set a trap for us.”

Van Helsing led the men in a quick, silent prayer, and afterward they left. With Van Helsing in the middle between Art and John in case he fell where corridor width allowed, they descended into the bowels of the ship.

While not as stunning as the breathtaking first-class staircase, the one leading down into the second-class, simple, carpeted, surrounded by gleaming polished dark oak, was still ornate, reminding Van Helsing of some of the better hotels he had stayed at over the years.

From second class, they entered into a virtual maze of corridors, rooms, and gangways.

At nearly 3:00, they entered TITANIC’s cargo hold, a massive space crammed with a jumbled assortment of crates, trunks, boxes, and other odds and ends, including a Renaults motorcar.

“We have marked the suspected boxes with chalk,” Seward said as he led the men into the hold.

Van Helsing followed behind the younger men, grimly silent, as they led him to the first box, a large wooden crate shoved up against the ship’s hull. In black stencil, French writing was splayed across the box, over an uneven read stamp, faded and apparently hurriedly applied, which read *TITANIC*.

Van Helsing strongly doubted that this was one of Dracula’s boxes, but it was not impossible; he could have come through France on his way from Eastern Europe. Van Helsing stiffly bent down and placed one hand upon the splintered wood, trying to imagine this crate, containing possibly just soil, or soil and an affront to God, strapped to the back of a jostling horse carriage, bumping over rutted dirt roads and through rocky mountain passes. But he was no clairvoyant.

Van Helsing rose to his feet with a popping of the knees and a weary sigh, when each man grabbed each of his arms, sudden anger exploded within him. He almost snapped something, almost told them that he didn’t need their damn help, that he could stand on his own; but, as fast as it flashed, the anger went, leaving Van Helsing cold and sorrowful inside. They were only trying to help him, they worried about him; he was lucky to have friends like he did.

“Thank you,” he said a bit forced.

Art and Van Helsing stood aside while Seward produced a crowbar from inside his jacket, and used it to pry open the box in a shriek of nails wrenched from wood.

Once the box was open and the lid set aside, Art and Van Helsing stepped forward, and joined Seward in looking down into it. The box contained nothing but a few stacks of fine china set atop what looked like a soft, cushy tarp.

“Damn it,” Seward muttered disappointedly.

“You two pry open the next box while I reset the lid,” Van Helsing said. He saw a look exchanged between the two younger men. They were probably wondering if it was a good idea to let old, elderly Van Helsing do even that much; he could drop it, or hurt himself.

Van Helsing felt anger threatening to overwhelm him again, so he took three deep breaths and said, “Go, we haven’t much time. You are the slowest men I have ever seen.”

Without further word or protest, Art and John moved on to the next box while Van Helsing dragged the lid back onto the box, panting, his arms screaming by the time that he had done.

The box that Art and John were currently focused on was rather queer, made of a curious red wood and polished to a slippery finish.

“This must be one of his boxes,” Van Helsing declared as he hobbled over. “Be very careful in opening this, Dracula may be inside.”

Opening this box was much harder than the last one had been. First Seward took a swing, and nearly collapsed after five minutes of straining and grunting. Only having removed the lid about two mere inches from the box, Seward, red face covered in sweat, panting deeply, handed the crowbar to Art.

“You try, I might break myself,” he said with a small smile.

Art took the crowbar, rolled up his sleeves, and made a show of strutting over to the box. “Let me show you a true man in action,” he said, and thus began an epic ten minute struggle which ended with Art on the ground, gasping for breath, and the lid atop him. John and Van Helsing could not help roaring laughter when Art finally wrenched the lid free, and fell back with a small cry of shock, his eyes wide and his mouth open in an O of surprise.

No Dracula popped out, Van Helsing saw through tear filled eyes, so he hoped that at least this would prove to be a box of dirt.

“A true man,” Seward was saying in-between laughs, “yes, yes, a true man indeed!”

“Shut up,” Art grunted as he pushed the box off of him and sat up, his wet face the color of a beet. “I got it, didn’t I?”

“I believe that it got you,” Seward retorted, and everyone laughed, including Art.

“Let’s see what she has in her, anyway,” Art said, peering in.

Nothing. At least nothing pertaining to Dracula; only a stack of books atop a neat pile of folded clothing.

“Damn it all!” Art exclaimed and kicked the side of the box, “for nothing!”

Van Helsing reset the lid while Art and John, shrouded in sullen silence, went on to the next box, a long steamer trunk with unlocked latches on the sides. Inside, there were several folded suits, a dress or two, and a pair of men’s shoes.

They frantically checked several more boxes, some not even marked with the white chalk cross that Art and John had earlier used, but they found nothing; no soil, no Dracula, only clothes, personal effects, and failure.

Once they had done all that they could presently do, the three men sat side-by-side on a long crate (which had been checked) and smoked; Art and John cheaply made cigarettes, Van Helsing his pipe.

"I don't understand it," Van Helsing said between puffs, blue smoke hung in a haze around their heads. "His boxes have to be around here somewhere, he is onboard TITANIC, I know it."

"John and I will have to come down later," Art said almost sadly, "and scout out more possible matches. He's here, alright, but where?"

On thinking of Dracula's hiding place, and the man himself, black anger washed over Art and the pain of Lucy's death was brought back anew. He tried his best not to think of her, and he succeeded most times, but he still had the damned nightmares, in which he was in vampire Lucy's crypt alone, with a stake and no idea (or no wish) to use it. He usually awoke with a jerk when the stake plunged into Lucy's heart, and her eyes, her eyes flung open, along with the horrible Satan's mouth. He'd had it last night.

"Somewhere," Van Helsing said.

Somewhere, Art thought as he took a puff of his cigarette.

"I still wonder if I was right in assuming Dracula is aboard," Seward said fretfully, bringing Art out of his deep pool of thought.

"I have already told you," Van Helsing said slowly, with the infinite patience of a long time teacher, "you were right, John, Dracula is here."

"I just hope that I didn't make an awful mistake," Seward said quietly.

To this, Art replied tightly, "Don't worry, he's here."

Before they left the hold, Van Helsing removed a bit of Eucharist wafer from his bag and sprinkled its crumbs around the hold. Outside, he mashed it up with water and rubbed it on the doorframes. If Dracula's boxes were inside, they were off limits to him now.

Van Helsing smiled.

Chapter 4

That night the men once again joined Captain Smith and J. Bruce Ismay for dinner; tonight they were accompanied by Thomas Andrews, Harland and Wolff shipbuilder; the man behind the TITANIC.

He was a rather large man with brown hair and an open face, dark eyes and a tight mouth.

"A fine ship you have built," Van Helsing gushed when he was introduced to Andrews. The two men shook hands, a sly smile on Andrews' face, and a soft light dancing in his eyes. "Do you really think so?"

"The best I have seen in all my years," Van Helsing declared as he eased himself down into his chair, with the ever constant, though protective, specters of Lord Godalming and John Seward behind him.

"Thank you, Doctor; I believe that I am free to say that I take a certain pride in the TITANIC. But I feel that it could be better."

“Don’t worry yourself,” Ismay said from beside Smith. “The TITANIC is far and away the greatest liner ever to sail, and without your unparalleled genius in their camp, our competition will never rival us.”

Andrews blushed. “Thank you,” he said sincerely, “but things, especially great things, can always be better.”

“Mr. Andrews is a bit obsessive,” Ismay said in the general direction of the three men. “A perfectionist, he’ll most likely fret over Titanic until the day he dies, ‘this could be better,’ ‘there should be more of this,’ ‘that could have been bigger’.”

After taking a long sip of wine, Ismay announced, “I wouldn’t take a hundred men in his stead.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ismay, but you flatter me.”

“No, it is true. Just look at this ship. I drew the original outline on a dinner napkin, and look what Thomas has done. This ship is far beyond my wildest expectations.”

Van Helsing nodded, “You have outdone the best, Mr. Andrews, you should be proud.”

Lord Godalming echoed this sentiment, and then checked the menu, for his stomach was growling very un-gentlemanly. Veal. Probably the best veal known to man.

“I have already planned some renovations to be made as soon as...”

Ismay groaned, “Oh, what have you got in mind, how are you going to better perfection?”

“I was thinking of converting the first-class ladies reading and writing room into more staterooms.”

After a moment of silent contemplation, Ismay responded, “I don’t think that that would make her any better, but you go on and do what you wish. The ship is fine as it is, right?”

The entire table adamantly agreed.

“Titanic is a pleasure to pilot,” Smith, hitherto quiet, said, “and many of the passengers have come to me with nothing but praise for her. You have a hit on your hands, Mr. Andrews, there’s no need to carve her up.”

“Perhaps,” Andrews said thoughtfully, and took a drink of his wine.

“Where will the ladies read and write if you take their room away?” Lord Godalming asked with a slight smile.

“They can use their staterooms,” Van Helsing said, “one does not need an entire room to read or write.”

“Indeed,” remarked Ismay.

Captain Smith nodded.

“You may have an idea there, Mr. Andrews,” Dr. Seward said, “if Titanic can accommodate more passengers, she will make even more of a profit.”

“True,” Ismay considered, “I’ll have to think on my own feelings. But, Thomas, you do what you will.”

Shortly, dinner was served, the soft sounds of the band playing drifted though the long, packed dinning saloon.

In the middle of the meal, Art’s two glasses of wine made know their desire to leave him.

He tried to hold himself until after dinner had been completed, but sloshing liquid lashed his groin, threatening to force its way out. He had had this problem for well of five years, but he kept it to himself. Sometimes, he would wake up twice or thrice a night to relive himself, and taking more than a few sips any drink at a time, especially wine, was practically begging for an accident.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me," Art said as he stood stiffly, afraid that this would be the day, that this time he would urinate all over himself. He'd had nightmares in which he wet himself at one crowded social function or another.

It seemed to him that he had a lot of nightmares these days.

"Of course," said Smith. Ismay was currently in middle of taking a drink, so he merely nodded, the wind sloshing back in forth in his glass like...

Art made a concerted effort not to run through the dinning saloon, past tables packed with smiling and laughing members of high society. He desperately hoped that someone that he personally knew, like Caledon Hockley or Benjamin Guggenheim, would not see him and wish to converse.

Once in the long, well lighted corridor, Art picked up his pace, glancing over his shoulder to make sure that no one saw his strange behavior. He passed nobody as he headed to his stateroom, for they were all at dinner. He rounded a corner and...

...stopped, his heart dropping, only to shoot back up into his throat. The beast Dracula, clad in an overcoat and a top hat, smoked glasses and white gloves, leaning on a wooden cane, stood outside of his stateroom door. His chilly, graveyard smile radiated hatred, and the two needle point incisors hanging down over his pale lower lip gave testament to Dracula's evil un-dead state.

The pinching need to urinate temporarily forgotten, cold profound hatred, repulsion and anger tempest tossing his entire being, Art growled over unconsciously bared teeth, "You," his voice dripping with contempt.

Dracula opened his hellish mouth entirely, and Lucy Westenra's voice issued forth: "Art, Art, is that you? Oh, Art, help me! I'm burning in Hell, I'm melting, I'm scared, I'm a fucking whore!"

For a moment, Dracula and the scene around him wavered as if it were nothing but heat shimmering from desert hardpan. His body began to fade away, and the body of Lucy, in what may have been a long white nightgown, began to form.

He's doing something to your mind, Art told himself as he closed his eyes against the horror and covered them with his hand. He let out a shaky sigh.

"Art, come to me, Art, come fuck me, Art, stick it in my tight ass-hole..."

"Shut up!" Art roared lion-like, filling the hall with black sound. "You're not Lucy," he said, this in a childish voice, "not Lucy."

"I am, Art, and I'm burning down here, burning down here for you!"

Face red, stomach in knots of fear and hatred, heart slamming against his ribcage, Art let out a bellowing howl and rushed Dracula, who in turn began his own sprint down the hall, back hunched, mouth open, cane discarded on the floor. The two met in mid-stride, the beast slammed into Art's chest like a locomotive, knocking the wind from his lungs. Before he could resist, Dracula's iron hands were clutching his arms like a vise grip, his eyes blazing hellishly.

Dracula removed one hand from Art's arm, and grabbed his throat. He lifted Art off of his feet and slammed him against the wall. Art balled his fist and struck Dracula in the nose twice in rapid succession; it was like hitting granite.

“Bastard,” Art rasped, and drove his dangling right leg into Dracula’s groin over and over, but the monster only smiled and tightened his grip on Art’s neck, squeezing the remaining air from his lungs.

Art managed to work up a nice sized wad of spit, which splattered Dracula’s broad forehead and his tiny smoked glasses. A silvery tread slipped down the bridge of Dracula’s nose, and dripped onto the front of his topcoat. He didn’t seem to notice.

In a final, petty act of defiance, Art knocked the hat from Dracula’s head. The beast went on smiling.

The world was graying before him, a fuzzy darkness was encroaching on the edges of his vision. Was this how he was to die? Murdered by a fiend from the darkest reaches of night? If it was to be so, then fine, he would take his death like a man. But he did not want to die feeling the intense rage and murderous hatred that he now felt.

“Say! I say, put that man down!” a man’s voice, filled with outrage, called from down the corridor.

The fire in Dracula’s eyes flickered, and his broad shark’s smile fell a bit. He glanced to his right, toward the voice, and then back at Art.

Art was surprised to see something like fear in his eyes.

With a sneer, the vampire flung him to the ground and fled.

Chapter 5

Drs. Seward and Van Helsing were more than capable of treating Lord Godalming, but Captain Smith insisted that the ship’s doctor be brought in, perhaps not trusting his longtime friend in the hands of two men that he barely knew (an understandable sentiment). At first, there was worry that Art’s larynx had been crushed or that his lung may have collapsed. Further into the examination, the doctor pronounced him healthy and left him with Seward and Van Helsing. Art, in action and appearance, was normal, save that an ugly purple bruise hung round his throat like a satanic necklace.

“That son of a bitch!” Art raged after the doctor had left him alone in his stateroom with Seward and Van Helsing. “If I’d been ready, I could have ended him! That bastard... how could he say those horrible things? Fucking scum is all he is; I’ll rip him in half!”

Art sat on his bed, marinating in rage. Van Helsing and Seward stood side-by-side before the closed door, shocked into silence by Art’s vulgar tirade.

When he wasn’t cursing like a sailor, his mouth was closed and slightly bulged, giving testament to the fact that he was bearing down exceptionally hard on his teeth. His bright red face was covered in a film of perspiration, and he trembled all over as if he were a dying leaf on a thin October branch. His eyes glared down at his balled fists, damning their impotence. When the thought of breathing penetrated the dark haze of his anger, he sucked in massive breaths as if he were

an opium addict attempting to inhale any traces of the intoxicating smoke left in the air.

“Calm down, Arthur, you did your best to fight Dracula; he ambushed you.” Van Helsing looked from Art to John next to him; his eyes were clouded with worry... and excitement. They had proof that Dracula was onboard, and they knew that he wasn't shy about coming out. Their luck, it could be argued, had taken a turn for the better.

“I still should have beaten him, he's a...”

“A vampire, Arthur, he has the power of ten men,” Van Helsing said lowly, in his teacher's voice.

“Yes, a vampire, old man,” Seward said, “and you are, paraphrasing you own words from earlier ‘a true gentleman.’”

Art could not suppress the sunny grin which broadened his stony face. But at once, he went back to staring at his shaking fists, his lips pursed, his eyes hard, his countenance grim.

“I think that from now on,” Van Helsing said, “we had better sleep in one room.”

“Okay,” Art mumbled, “Dr., you take the bed first, I'm going out to look for Dracula. John, I'll relieve you at midnight.”

“Arthur,” Van Helsing said in a fatherly manner, “that is not such a good idea. We are only men, and if he can get us each alone, he can squash us like we were garden bugs.”

“Not if I have the right tools with which to fight him,” Art said and withdrew the crucifix from inside of his jacket. “It was in here when that bastard got me; I put it back after we searched the hold and never thought of it again; now it will never leave my side.”

Seward and Van Helsing exchanged an uneasy glance.

“Okay,” Van Helsing said, “but you must be careful, Dracula is ruthless and evil; you cannot count on him to fight fair.”

“He's already shown me what he is,” Art said as he stood, “and I'll show him what I am.”

Art pulled on his dark topcoat and his hat, apparently ready for the numbing cold of the decks.

Seward and Van Helsing stepped apart like the Red Sea, and Art past in a swift wind smelling of cologne.

“Well, Doctor Van Helsing,” Seward said after Art had left, “what do you think we should do?”

After a long quiet moment, Van Helsing replied, “Why not take a little walk around the ship, and see if Dracula tries to attack us?”

Seward nodded, “Just what I was hoping you'd say.”

The two men made a quick return to Van Helsing's stateroom, from which he took his bag, which held his Bible, a wooden mallet, and a sharpened stake; his crucifix was always in his jacket pocket, and a rosary around his neck, to protect against the same fate that had befallen Art.

* * * * *

Lord Godalming slowly strolled along the boat deck under the stars, from stern to bow, stern to bow. He had looked in the smoking room, the gymnasium, the

Turkish baths, the dinning saloon, and every other place easily reachable in first-class; no Dracula. He figured that he would have to go and look in second and third class for his elusive foe; TITANIC was such a big ship, the thought of scouring every square inch of it made Art tired even though hot ire still simmered in his chest. And, Van Helsing was right about Dracula; he did not, nor would, fight fair. Dracula could just grab him from a dark doorway as he passed by, and drag him to his death... or worse.

The blustery sea wind held many people inside the great sparkling liner. Art had passed a few men and an officer or two, including Mr. Murdoch, but for the most part he had the boat deck to himself.

Every so often, he would stop and look into the black sky, his gaze held by the beauty of the twinkling stars, or out to sea, in an attempt to differentiate the sky from the water. He was never at total ease though, for Dracula could have been behind any door, any window, any one of the covered lifeboats, waiting to step out into his path, a fiery smile on his face, hate in his eyes, and the faux voice of Lucy passing hatefully through his dreadful lips.

Near the lighted wheelhouse, Art thought of entering the wireless hut and sending a message to Jonathan in London, but he decided against it.

With a sigh, Art turned aft and entered the smoking room; Van Helsing in his customary place by the fire and Dr. Seward was sitting on the nearby couch, his legs crossed. The only sound in the magnificent room was the crackle of the flames in the fireplace; a group of men quietly sat to themselves, discussing something, in hushed tones, that must have been of great import. Another man sat on a leather sofa, his bulbous nose buried in a thin red book; only two men occupied the card table tonight, both of them smoking, drinking, and chatting more than playing.

"No sign of Dracula," Art said as he sat down next to Seward, and Van Helsing started with a jerk. He had been nodding off; the faded blue eyes behind his tiny spectacles were red and blurry. John, though not so rudely treated, had also been evicted from the palace of sleep by Art's arrival.

"We searched the second class a bit," Van Helsing yawned, "and we found nothing at all."

Seward sadly nodded his agreement, his gaze held by the dancing flames in the fireplace, and Art sighed.

"Well, there isn't much more we can do tonight; you both are tired, let's go to the stateroom. I'll take first watch."

Van Helsing reluctantly nodded and pushed himself out of the chair; Seward stood too, and stretched. "Isn't ship's time different from real time?" Van Helsing asked lowly as they left the smoking room.

"About an hour and a half later, I believe," Art said, "why?"

"I am wondering why I am so tired all the time."

"It may be that, I'm not sure if that interferes with one or not."

The three men, abreast, descended the grand staircase, and made their way down the long corridor off of which their staterooms opened. They passed a few ladies in nightgowns and slippers, and a few men. Two stewards and a valet were walking from the opposite side of the hall, and the six men had to scatter and regroup once the other crowd was passed.

Van Helsing and Seward tiredly bid Art a good night, and entered the dark stateroom. Art was a bit apprehensive, for Dracula could have been in there, hiding under the bed, maybe, but there were no noises, and when Art opened the door and peaked in, he saw Van Helsing and Seward safe and sound, preparing for bed.

Art, satisfied that his friends were in no danger, clicked the door shut, and sank into the wicker chair. He had a long night ahead of him, for he planned to cover Van Helsing's shift so that the old man wouldn't be working under too much strain. He thought briefly of Van Helsing wondering why he was so tired all the time, and Art worried. Any number of things could make an old man tired, any number of horrible cancers and ailments.

Or maybe he was just exhausted from worry and from the trip, much as Art was.

Chapter 6

Dracula realized with drawing horror that he could no longer enter the hold. Rage swept through him, and he lashed out, kicking a door so hard it came off its hinges.

He had other boxes on other ships, but getting to them (and coming back) would weaken him even more.

He needed someone to do his bidding for him. An emissary. He closed his eyes and sent his mind wandering the deck. He found a suitable man on deck: He ordered him to come, and they talked long into the night.

Later, as he slept, he dreamed of something in the darkness, something massive and white. When he saw what it was, he was delighted. In his sleep, he called it forth, and it came.

Some of his strength, however, went.

Chapter 7

The morning of April 14th, 1912, dawned like all the rest aboard the R.M.S. TITANIC: Cold and clear. Van Helsing, who slept poorly most nights was up with the sun. John Seward was slumped in an armchair near the window, his feet propped upon the small table which Bruce Ismay would rather have destroyed versus losing money from Lord Godalming. He had tried to make John spend a night in the bed, but he refused, saying that he rather liked sleeping in the chair. Likely story. As Van Helsing sat on the edge of the bed in the dim room, he let out a sigh, slightly perturbed that he was considered something akin to a fragile woman by the younger men.

John was snoring away in the darkness, but a dark, abstract form, as Van Helsing weakly arose and hurriedly dressed. He worried that he was making too

much noise, and that John would awaken, but he was still snoring as Van Helsing softly eased the stateroom door open and stepped into the lighted corridor.

Standing before him, almost as if he had been waiting, was Art, dressed in a fine tan jacket and a pair of dark slacks, his face ashen and his eyes red from lack of sleep. Another thing that bothered Van Helsing, and very much bothered John Seward, was that Art had taken to keeping the night's watch solely by himself.

"Art, what are you doing up?" Van Helsing asked.

"I've been up most of the night," Art said heavily, and smiled. "Someone has got to keep Dracula from storming us in the dead of night."

"John would like to have a chance," Van Helsing said, "and so would I. Arthur, you must sleep. I and John are capable of handling Dracula should he come."

"I am very well aware of that," Art said. "I just... I want, Doctor Van Helsing, it to be me he encounters when he comes back."

There was no doubt that Dracula would be back. As Van Helsing had told the others the previous day, Dracula was a prideful creature, one who would not let the transgressions against him go unpunished.

The only thing that truly unnerved Van Helsing was whether or not they had actually gotten his boxes when they purified the hold. If they hadn't, then Dracula was still able to draw strength from his infernal dirt, and would be in top form when the final battle came. Van Helsing was confident that they could handle him even so, but it would be much better for them if he was weak.

At the present moment, it had been days since the cleansing of the hold, which would mean that Dracula was weakened, but not nearly weak.

"Arthur... this is a... a team effort; you cannot do it all by yourself."

Art nodded. "I know, but I have the most reason...after all that he has done to me."

Van Helsing nodded sympathetically and placed one of his gnarred hands on Art's shoulder. "We all want to find him. But this is not about revenge, Arthur, this is about protecting an entire innocent city, and an entire world. Dracula is not a man you can deal with, he is the un-dead, a creature of the pit."

Van Helsing stopped to fill his lungs with air, and Art, head hitherto hung down, looked up. "You are right. This is not about me."

Van Helsing smiled, "Good, then you see?"

Art nodded.

"Good. I was just going to go on a stroll and see if I can find anything amiss, would you like to come?"

Art's eyes lit up as if he were a child at a fair, and a bizarre grin overcame his face. "Yes, more than anything else in the world."

Walking side-by-side, Art and Van Helsing made their way down the hall, up the grand staircase past a few rushing stewards, and to the smoking room, which was totally deserted at this hour, save for a few stewards taking a break from preparing the tables in the dinning saloon for breakfast and an elderly man in Van Helsing's favorite spot by the fire (nearly now a bed of glowing coal), silently engrossed in a thin book. Art and Van Helsing settled for a beautifully polished table surrounded with four green leather wingback chairs. A small glass ashtray, sparkling like the finest piece of modern crystal, sat in the middle for their use. Art removed his cigarette case from inside of his coat, and offered one to Van Helsing, who took it,

for he had left his pipe and tobacco back on his nightstand. Art struck a match and then inhaled deeply. Van Helsing used a match from Art's book to light his own smoke; it tasted horrible, noting like the tobacco that he was used to.

"Do you like it?" Art asked, "It's Turkish."

Van Helsing coughed and tried desperately to wave away the offensive smoke. "It is awful," he said, and Art grinned. "How can you smoke this? It tastes like acrid steam."

Art shrugged. "I guess you have to let them grow on you."

Van Helsing had no idea why anyone would want to let such terrible tobacco grow on them, but he said no more.

"As you were saying earlier," Art began, then took a long puff on the end of his cigarette, "we all want to find Dracula."

"Yes," Van Helsing replied, weighing whether to continue with the abominable cigarette or to snub it out.

"But... frankly, we aren't doing enough. We're covering the same ground just hoping to bump into him. I think it's time we... intensified our efforts."

Van Helsing pulled on the cigarette. The second puff wasn't as bad as the first, but it was still repugnant. "How do you propose we do that, Art? There's not much else we can do. I am of the mind that Dracula will not be found until he is ready, making all of our work for naught. It is... it is what they call busy work. It gives us a sense of satisfaction and purpose to actively look for him, but the chances are that we will find him when we are not looking, the way you found him the other night."

Art nodded thoughtfully, chewing the butt of his cigarette. "That may be right, Doctor, but if we were to throw all of our resources into finding him, we very well could put him on the run, and force him into a fight. I agree; he will come, but wouldn't we rather face him on our terms?"

Van Helsing considered for a long, smoky moment. Art had a point, but Dracula would not face them on their terms. The last go around had taught Dracula that dirtier was better, which was why they always had to be on the lookout. Dracula would not come from the front and toss you a sword to counter his own... he would drop out of the rafters and snap your neck.

He told Art as much, and Art nodded. "True, but we could force him, Doctor. See here: We're sure that we have destroyed his boxes, are we not?"

"Not entirely," Van Helsing said cautiously. "He could have only one hidden away in a stateroom somewhere."

Art sighed. He had entertained that idea himself. "Let's just say," he said hopefully, "that we have destroyed his boxes. Without them, he is weak."

"Not nearly as weak as I would like, but yes, he is weak."

The door to the smoking room banged open, and a man in officer blues strode in. Art waited for him to pass before replying.

"This plays greatly to our advantage. Do you remember what you read to John and I yesterday?"

No, in fact, he didn't, at least not off the top of his head. He grasped for a moment before it came to him: "Yes, about the forms the vampyre can take." Even as he spoke, Art's meaning struck him. "That is right! It takes much energy to

change shape, and even more to maintain it. Without his boxes, there is no way that he can recharge himself. He will most likely be in man form to save strength.”

Van Helsing could have slapped himself for nothing thinking of it himself.

“That’s right. Even if he still has the brawn of eight men, he will be in man form, solid man form. As such, he cannot float or crawl away.”

Art nodded. “And we’ve cut him off from the hold, meaning that he cannot hide there. He will be out and about, perpetually walking the decks and the halls. He will be easier to spot. We can put him on the defensive, run him down, force him into a fight.”

Van Helsing saw Art’s point. It *would* be harder for him to stay hidden, meaning that he would thus be easier to find, just as Art had pointed out. Still, even confined to the limitations of men, Dracula was a shrewd and cunning beast; he would try his best to avoid them, and he may just do a good job too.

“You said it yourself, Doctor,” Art was saying, “there is not much we can do. We can either take him, or wait for him to take us.”

“I know,” replied Van Helsing as he leaned over the table and snubbed the nasty cigarette out in the ashtray. “I am just...”

Just what?

“...Cautious. You are right that we want to pick the time and place, not him. We will do that. I just worry that being as wise and powerful of mind as he is, we will be unable to find him still. I tell you, though; he will come to us. He is weak and must act quick.”

If we purified his boxes.

Chapter 8

Count Dracula paced the dark, quiet decks of the TITANIC and focused, frantically casting his mind’s eye out over the black, crashing sea. The ROCKFORD was several days back, a small steamer upon which Dracula had several crates of soil. THE CARPATHIA, THE CALIFORNIA, and THE OLYMPIC, TITANIC’s sister ship, were all close by. He could be on one of them shortly, leaving Van Helsing and the others to wonder after him until their nosiness killed them elsewhere.

But he didn’t want that.

He wanted them dead. He didn’t trust himself to do it himself, not in his condition. They had the upper hand though they were probably too stupid to know it. He would have his emissary do it, and only after he had seen their bodies would he depart. The iceberg he had called forth was still out there. If the Titanic hit it and sank anyway, what did he care?

Chapter 9

Art and Van Helsing caught two hours of fitful sleep before Seward awoke them for breakfast. After properly dressing, they moved to the first-class reception room, where their meal was served.

They made small talk as they waited for their food, each enjoying the beautiful sun washed room. Around them, other first-class passengers talked, laughed, and ate, each one of them dressed as if they were at a major gala, which, Van Helsing figured, they were. The TITANIC was not only a majestic ballroom, so to speak, but it was also filled with some of the most wealthy and influential people on earth. Had he been a young wealthy man, Van Helsing knew that he too would have never been caught dead by his contemporaries without being clad in the finest wear.

The waiter eventually arrived with their meals, and once he was gone, Seward said: "Alright, Art; out with it. What are these ideas?"

Art took a sip of tea. "First of all, we need to start asking people for help. I already know that Doctor Van Helsing wants this kept as discreet as possible, but we've been ignoring a valuable pool of resource. We don't need to make a spectacle of it, all we have to do is calmly and quietly ask around, see if anyone's seen Dracula. Perhaps we just might learn that he has a favorite spot on the ship. As we were saying earlier, he has most likely been in man form since the day we sanitized his boxes, which means that someone must have seen him."

Van Helsing, rather to Art's surprise, nodded agreeably. "You are right; I am not that keen on the idea of involving outsiders in the search, but we're going to have to start if we want to flush Dracula out. It would greatly help if we could find an artist to draw a likeness of him."

"Right," Art smiled, "that would be ideal."

"What else?"

"I was thinking of enlisting members of the crew in the hunt. The least we can do is ask Smith..."

"Absolutely not," Van Helsing decreed, shocking Art.

"What? Why?"

"We cannot keep pestering the captain. There is a good chance that he may grow suspicious if we're constantly asking to go here and do this."

"But, Doctor, he believes..."

"That flimsy opium story will not stand up to close scrutiny, Arthur. The only reason he accepted that is because your long friendship, but he is not a stupid man; he could easily see our ruse for what it is, if only he looked hard enough... and he will begin to look hard if we keep coming to him and asking for more and more. He is a sea captain, a man of duty and order; he will not stand for shenanigans on his ship."

"Doctor, you're not making sense!" Art protested. "I know this man, he trusts me: all I would do is have his men put on alert for..."

"For an opium smuggler," John said. "They won't know him for what he really is until it's too late. I agree with Dr. Van Helsing; it's not safe, for us or the crew."

"That's a risk we're going to have to take, John," Art shot back.

"No, it is not," Van Helsing said, "we are not involving Smith or his men any longer. Just questioning the passengers will bring us to his attention, but *that* is a risk we can take."

Before Art could begin to protest again, Captain Smith himself, decked in his Sunday finest, slowly approached the table, his hands clasped behind his back in a dignified manner.

“Good morning, Lord Godalming, gentlemen,” Smith greeted.

Van Helsing nodded, “Good morning, Captain.”

Art and Seward acknowledged Smith in like fashion, Seward finding it impossible to get over what an imposing figure Smith cut. He reminded him, as he did somewhat Art, of General Robert E. Lee, slightly in appearance, but mostly in demeanor. This morning he was wearing dress attire, a white suit, his hat in his hands behind his back.

“How are things on the bridge?” Seward inquired.

“Fair,” Smith said, “we have received a number of ice warnings from other steamers in the area, but otherwise all is well.”

Smith moved languidly around the table and, bending at the waist like a proud tree hunched over by a powerful typhoon, whispered into Lord Godalming’s ear, “No Chinese opium, I hope.”

Lord Godalming forced a chuckle, “No, none of that dreadful stuff, thank God.”

Smith stood, patted Lord Godalming on the back, and once again laced his hands behind his back. “Speaking of God, I hope to see you gentlemen at my worship service. 10:30 in the dining saloon.”

“I hope so too,” Lord Godalming said cautiously, “but we may not be able to.”

“Well, if you can make it, please do,” Smith said, and, without further word, departed.

* * * * *

When Art had finally finished his breakfast, the men, by unspoken consent, decided to stroll the boat deck whilst formulating plans against Dracula. The air was nippy, but the warm sun shone brightly down, replacing a great deal of warmth stolen from the day by the wind. The deck today resembled the streets of a city, for so many people had decided to venture out. Fashionably dressed ladies with high umbrellas walked with their beaus in tow, children, laughing and squealing, weaved in and out of the crowd, playing tag and other childhood games. A few ladies even reclined on the wooden deck chairs, reading or talking to their love interests, husbands, mothers, and other close associates.

“Art,” said Van Helsing as they moved along, his cane tapping rhythmically on the deck, “I want you to take first-class, John will take second, and I will take the steerage.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Van Helsing saw Art and John exchange a quick glance.

Probably want me to take the first-class; ‘the old man takes the easiest, he may fall!’

“Okay,” Art and John said almost in chorus.

They walked along in silence for a while, until they reached the portion of the boat deck overlooking the stern and parted ways. Van Helsing stayed at the railing for a moment, one hand resting on the cold steel. Looking over the stern, he saw the massive blue expanse that TITANIC had crossed and the white capped waves displaced by her passing. What a tranquil sight, and a humbling one too. The

mighty sea was so large, so huge, that a man was made meek to see it all spread out before him like this; it made him feel small, it reminded him of his place in the scheme of things, of who was in charge, that he who made this had also made them.

Somewhere over the breathtaking horizon was England, and beyond that Transylvania.

“Please, Lord,” Van Helsing was suddenly moved to pray. “Help me to be strong, in body and mind, and help me to vanquish this demon that hell has unleashed upon this world.”

Despite the cold and the discomfort of standing in one place too long, Van Helsing went on: “May You smile on us and help us do what is right. Please God, help us and hinder Dracula.”

After a long pause in which he could think of nothing else to add, Van Helsing closed. “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who makes me strong in all that I do, amen.”

He stood for a second more and then moved on.

Chapter 10

They met in a quiet, shady corner of the deck, away from prying eyes and ears. Count Dracula had aged some in the past hours: his eyes were wrinkled and his hair had lost its luster. His eye color was fading and slowly turning black.

“Have you got the afternoon off?” he asked his cohort, who only nodded.

“What time must you be on the bridge?”

“Much later.”

“Good. I want you to kill each of them. I don’t care how or where, just do it.”

“Yes, Master.”

Chapter 11

Coming down the grand staircase, topped with its wonderful glass dome radiant in the early sunshine, Art met John Jacob Astor and his new wife coming up, most likely to sun on the boat deck.

“Lord Godalming!” Astor said happily and stopped. They shook hands over the railing separating them. “I trust that you are well.” He leaned in and added, “After the other night.”

“Oh, I’m just fine, thank you. It was only a little tiff, really.”

“Who was he?” Astor went on in hushed tones, his wife standing by smilingly.

“Just a fellow that I owed a bit of money to, it’s all taken care of now,” Art replied.

“How much?” Astor whispered, his eyes touchingly concerned.

“Oh, not much at all, just a few pounds; he’s in second class, and you know how much money means to those types.”

Astor nodded stiffly, perhaps surprised by Lord Godalming’s reference to “those types.”

Like Art, he disdained snobbery.

“Yes. Well. Have you met my wife, Madeleine?”

Art had not, for Astor had recently married her. From what he had heard, she was but eighteen, and very pregnant.

The woman came forward with a smile, and Astor wrapped one tuxedoed arm around her shoulder. Art took her frail hand and pecked it; it was as cold as ice, they must have already been on deck.

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Astor, I’ve heard so much about you,” Art said with a smile.

“And I you, Lord,” Madeleine Astor replied. “From what JJ tells me, you’re an explorer.”

Lord Godalming chuckled. “A long time ago I traveled the world, I never explored, except for adventure. And that was all I found.”

“Very impressive,” she said, “I’ve always wanted to see the world. And now, I suppose, I am getting my chance.”

“Yes, with Mr. Astor you’ll see plenty. Now forgive me, but I must be going. I have urgent matters to see to.”

“You take care of yourself, Lord, make sure that that dreadful man doesn’t sneak up on you again,” she said, and from the way John Astor’s face fell, Art ascertained that he had told her... after she pledged secrecy.

“No, that shan’t happen again,” Lord Godalming replied with a genuine smile. “Charmed to have met you, Mrs. Astor.”

Without further word, anxious to get to Dracula, Art descended the stairs, and hastened to the smoking room. Of course Dracula wasn’t there.

Back at the grand staircase, Art stopped and put his hands on his hips. “Where are you, you bastard?” he muttered under his breath.

* * * * *

After a light search conducted by each man in their three respective classes, they met in the sun washed Café Parisian for lunch. Already, the café had become the favorite establishment of the younger passengers. Groups of young men and women sat around circular tables, chatting happily and eating the finest food on the sea.

Dr. Seward arrived first, and chose a table at the back of the gaily lit room. A steward came by to take his order, but he told him that he was waiting for his friends to arrive. He did, however, order a glass of red wine, which he currently sipped as he watched the younger crowd.

Though it didn’t feel like it, spring was on, and it was the time for young love to blossom. All of the girls he saw were pink blushing beauties, some coy, some not. All of the young boys were perfect gentlemen, rightly following the examples of their fathers.

Seward checked his pocket watch and found it half past noon. He was starting to worry about Van Helsing and Art: He feared that Dracula may have picked the

others off one-by-one. It would be easy for him to wait until each man was in a quiet place and snap their necks. Seward was surprised that Dracula hadn't done so already. Why had he let Art escape? John Jacob Astor's presence? Indeed, JJ Astor presented as much a threat to Dracula as a cringing field mouse presented to a wild eyed hawk in flight.

After finishing his first glass of wine and ordering another one, not caring if the stewards, stewardesses, and spoiled rotten brats thought him an alcoholic, relief flooded him as he saw Art and Van Helsing, side-by-side, entering the restraint in the distance.

Seward raised a hand; Art saw him and pointed Van Helsing in the right direction. The two men slowly crossed the room, garnering stares and glances from the teenagers.

"Hello, John," Van Helsing said happily and sank woodenly into a chair across from him.

Art pulled his chair out and sat down. "Have any of you found anything?"

"Nothing," Art mumbled.

Seward nodded, "I found that Dracula was not in second-class. I also found that the fare there was equal to, if not better than, what most other liners feed their first-class passengers."

"I suppose that I had the most success," Van Helsing sighed.

"You did?" Art asked, perking up, "what have you found?"

Van Helsing smiled and held up a calming hand. "There is no reason for such exuberance, Art; it isn't much. I talked with a young man who has seen Dracula several times. It just so happened that a friend of his is an artist."

He reached into his jacket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. The others leaned in and he opened it, revealing a masterful pencil sketch of the Count's Roman face: His eyebrows furrowed, his eyes boring, and his teeth slightly protruding over his lower lip. In the bottom right corner, the artist had written his name and the date: *J. Dawson, 4-14-12.*

"Too bad there is only one," Art said, sinking back into his chair.

Van Helsing grinned. "There is more than one. I had him do three of them, one for each of us. That is what I did with most of my time down there."

"So, it looks as though Dracula is a common sight in steerage." Art took a sip of water. "How about we all search it at once? Splitting up is doing no good. Even if we find Dracula, we cannot fight him."

"That is not true, Art," Van Helsing said. "We each have the necessary tools at our disposal. It would be best if we were all there to fight him, but we most likely cannot be."

A blanket of silence fell over the men, revealing the commonplace saloon sounds of scraping forks, clinking glasses, and the occasional crunch of teeth against hard food, here peppered with loud talking, giggling girls, and uproarious laughter. Scanning the room again, listening to the young speak, watching their mannerisms, seeing their damn youthfulness, Dr. Seward realized that he and Art were closer to Van Helsing in age and thought than they were to over half of the other passengers in the café. He could tell from the light in Art's eyes and the wistful smile on his lips that he had long ago come to that conclusion, and was amused that it had taken his friend so long to follow suit.

Presently, a steward came along and took their orders. Seward took tea over wine, Van Helsing wanted only coffee, and Art ordered a light salad.

“What tools are those, Doctor?” Art asked when they were alone again. “The cross offends him, yes, but unless you back him into a corner, he’ll escape.”

“Holy water,” Van Helsing countered. “All you have to do is splash him with it. A cross, yes, is not really a weapon, but holy water is. And in his weakened state (if he is in a weakened state), any little thing can hurt him. A punch, a stab, a shot. It all adds up and...”

Before Van Helsing could finish speaking, Art jumped up from the table, rattling it in a clinking of china and glassware, and unceremoniously bolted from the café, dragging with him the stares of almost everyone present. He burst through the door to the deck, and Seward watched as he ran past the large open windows, his hair blowing in the breeze.

“What was that?” Seward asked slowly.

“I know that look,” Van Helsing said lowly, for the entire eatery was so silent that one could easily hear a pin drop across the room. “Do you know the name of the look in Arthur’s eyes when he left?”

“I believe,” Seward said, and took a sip of his wine, “that they call it ‘eureka!’”

“Spot on.”

Anxious to see exactly what Art was on to, Van Helsing and Seward quitted the room, not noticing the man at the table closest to the door, for a menu covered his face. When the men left the room, and were safely on their way toward the smoking room or their cabins, the man sat the menu down and watched them as they ambled forward, all but holding hands like young lovers on a clandestine midnight stroll.

Bastards, he thought as they vanished from his line of sight, leaving behind an empty deck.

“Would you like anything else, sir?” a steward asked, having suddenly materialized at the table.

“No!” the man spat as he swung from the window and fixed him with a withering gaze.

Nodding, the steward rushed away.

Chapter 12

In the stateroom, Van Helsing and Seward found Art sitting on the bed, which must have been properly dressed by a maid during the day, his legs crisscrossed and a small metal lockbox atop his lap. He grunted and muttered curses under his breath as he worked a small tarnished key in the lock to no avail. The curtains were drawn, leaving the gloom to reign over what was not lit by the small electric bedside lamp built into the wall.

“Do you need...?” Seward started, but with a painful shriek of rusted metal and a loud grunt of victory, Art opened the box, and removed from it a small black

revolver, a newer model, Seward thought, but he could have been wrong; he was not much attracted to guns of any type.

"I brought this beauty along for no reason at all, really," Art said thoughtfully as he stroked and admired the weapon. "It was like a little voice in the back of my head was telling me *take the gun, take it, you might need it*. Turns out that I do. If Dracula cannot stand the type of punishment that he usually does, then this may be of some assistance."

"Art," Van Helsing said almost as if Art were a genius of the highest caliber, "do you know what you have in your hands? Do you know zat zat gun could, carrying ze right cargo, injure Dracula more zan you tink? How many rounds do you have?"

"There are five in the chamber and ten loose in the box," Art recited from memory.

"Gift me all za bullets," Van Helsing said excitedly, his accent thickening.

"What have you in mind, doctor?" Seward asked curiously.

Without replying, Van Helsing stepped forward and thrust out his cupped hands, which shook slightly. "Now, gift me za bullets."

Art shrugged and emptied the chamber, handing Van Helsing a handful of tubular brass cartages, and then picked, by ones and twos, the remaining ammunition from the box with his thumb and forefinger. With these in hand, Van Helsing, grinning like a madman, shuffled over to the small writing desk by the door and sank down in the chair with a pleased sigh. Once the bullets were on the table before him, he switched on the small lamp, rubbed his hands crisply together, removed something from his jacket pocket, and dipped in like a man would a fine meal. Art and Seward exchanged puzzled glances. Art stood, and with Seward at his side, moved over to stand behind Van Helsing.

"What are you doing, Doctor Van Helsing?" Seward asked as he leaned over his mentor's shoulder. In his hand was a tiny pocket knife, and he seemed to be sawing into the head of one of the small bullets.

"Why are you destroying my ammunition?" Art asked bemusedly.

After a silent moment, Van Helsing set the bullet aside, standing it on its end. "I am not harming them," Van Helsing nearly huffed, "I am making them better, gentlemen. You see, on the tip of each of these, there will be a tiny..."

"Cross!" Seward exclaimed, just now realizing what Van Helsing was up to. "Each will have a cross, so that they will prove even more effective against Dracula."

"That's a... a capital idea," Art marveled lowly, as if he had just seen the invention of the telephone or the electric light. He leaned closer over Van Helsing's shoulder to get a better look.

"Arthur, please back up, you are in my light," Van Helsing said woodenly, not likely paying much attention to light or dark. Art at once stood to his full height and backed off a bit.

"Will this really work against Dracula, though?" he asked Seward.

Seward looked at him, shrugged, and said, "I would think; Dracula is hurt by holy items, and this is an expressly delivered holy item."

"Yes, Art," Van Helsing added, from the farthest reaches of concentration. "Remember what the wafer did to Mina's forehead?"

Thinking of the bread burning into, and charring, Mina Harker's head for some curious reason turned Art's stomach. "Yes," he pecked out.

"This will do the same thing to Dracula, only from the inside. If he takes enough bullets, then he may even totally burn, and die from just that. Now shhhh."

For the next half hour, John and Art sat side-by-side on the bed in deafening silence, smoking and playing tic-tac-toe on a piece of TITANIC stationary while Van Helsing hunched over his work, meticulously carving a perfect cross, even though his elderly hands were unsteady, onto the head of each bullet. If one of them so much as coughed or yawned loudly, Van Helsing would offer a maddeningly annoying shhhh.

Finally, the old man arose with a pained exhaling of breath and clutched his lower back. "I am done," he said simply.

Art rushed to the table, closely followed by Seward, each meaning to inspect the bullets. On each they found a cross so perfectly rendered that one would have sworn that Van Gogh instead of Van Helsing had etched it on. Art took five of the long rounds, slipped them into the gaping chambers, and put the rest into the breast pocket of his coat.

"Who gets the gun?" he asked curiously, not wanting to hog the weapon. He had brought it in the off chance that it would prove somewhat useful, but now that it was very useful, he wanted it to be communally used. He really wanted Van Helsing to take it...

"You," said Van Helsing as he stiffly paced the tiny circumference of the room, working sleep and soreness out of his legs and back.

"I don't want it," Seward said as he looked Art up and down. "A real man does not need to use a long range weapon, he fights hand-to-hand!"

"You'll find out about fighting Dracula hand-to-hand," Van Helsing said with a small smile.

Seward nodded. "Really, I don't want it. I'll make do some other way."

"Well, we had better get going," said Van Helsing, "meet back in the smoking room before dinner."

Chapter 13

The hall was harshly lit, the brash light stinging Van Helsing's eyes. He wasn't exactly sure where he was, for he had been taking so many lefts and rights at so many different crossways, but he was certain that he was no longer in third class proper; the horrible droning of heavy machinery gave testament to that. But you never knew. The way that steerage passengers were treated by the major shipping lines was truly shocking; the White Star Line surely wouldn't mind if such lowly peons were kept awake all night by the sounds of the ship's guts; J. Bruce Ismay was not the kind of man who would lose a night's sleep over that kind of thing.

With sore feet and an aching back, Van Helsing forced himself onward, growing more and more disoriented with every step he took. He stopped once and looked behind him, for he had thought that his best course of action was to retrace his

steps, but did no good; the last two or three (or ten) corridors that he had traversed had all looked the same; steel walkways, steel walls with a steel handrail running the length, and harsh lighting.

Van Helsing rubbed the back of his neck and looked about himself again. There were no painted arrows on the wall which could point him back on his way, there were no signs, nor any writing whatsoever. The last person that he had seen was a young Arabian girl of roughly fifteen, and that had been... what felt like miles ago. He deeply hoped that he would meet with a burly stoker or even another Moslum; somebody, for he felt isolated, and the repetition of the landscape was maddening, almost frightening.

“Scared, you old bastard?” came a low, spiteful voice from behind Van Helsing.

With a small womanish squeak, possibly the sound his heart had made when it leapt into his throat, Van Helsing swung around, already bringing the cross up.

Not Dracula, Van Helsing thought. The shapeless figure was clad in something that may have belonged to the Moslum girl: a flowing black dress with a veil. The voice, though, had been that of a man, of an Englishman, and not of Dracula. His hands were black gloved, and in one of them was a...

Before Van Helsing could react, before his mind had fully grasped the situation, and before his tired brain could send the message that the cross at the end of his extended arm was not needed, something made of steel and exceptionally hard struck him square in the forehead. An explosion of white light flashed across his field of vision. He felt himself toppling back into oblivion, and reached out to grip the handrail.

No, no, don't go down! Van Helsing wailed at himself, knowing that he would be killed if he did. But old Abraham Van Helsing's selfish wants had no sway over Newton or God the King, and Van Helsing fell back onto the floor, the breath knocked from his lungs.

“You bastard!” the man in the dress howled, and then was atop Van Helsing, swinging what may have been a pipe in such anger that, thankfully, he missed his mark every time and hit the floor.

Acting fast, mindlessly, Van Helsing balled his fist and bashed it into what he thought to be the face of the man. He opened his eyes, saw (and heard) that he had been successful in striking his opponent's ear, and immediately had to close his eyes again, for they were stung terrible by the onslaught of blood rushing down his scalp.

The attacker was still groaning when Van Helsing balled his fist again and bashed it forward with all his might. This time it hit the man in the nose, or close. Yelping in agony, the man fell tumbled off of Van Helsing and landed on the floor in a screaming heap.

“Bastard, bastard, bastardbastardbastard!” the man howled and stumbled to his feet. Van Helsing opened his eyes, and saw the man in black looming over him, his booted foot reared back for a deadly kick.

“Want to play, do you? Want to play a game? Well, have I got a game for you, you old bastard!”

Van Helsing closed his eyes and steeled himself. This kick took him in the breast bone, but was not as sharp as it could have been, for, in the heat of battle, unbeknownst to Van Helsing and his foe, a stoker had happened upon the scene.

As the attacker's foot sliced through the air, on a collision course with Van Helsing's heart, he was wrenched back by two hundred pound of Irish brawn.

"Let me go, you bastard!" the man in black wailed. Van Helsing opened his eyes, and saw that the stoker had the attacker in a head lock. His bald head reflected the hard light, and his yellow teeth were bared in determination as he held the man in black between his torso and his bulging arm.

"You like to 'it old people, do you? 'Ow 'bout I 'it you, show you what it 'eels like to get kicked?"

The man in black thrashed harder than a wildcat, and Van Helsing vaguely wondered if Dracula had somehow imparted some of his power on this man, who was obviously just a man.

"Now, calm down, maggot, it ain't gonna 'urt that bad, just take you..."

In a desperate move, the man in black reached into a hitherto unknown pocket, fished something out, and struck it repeatedly into the stoker's side. Van Helsing watched horrified as red spilled from the stoker's side, and his faced paled noticeably, but he held fast, his teeth gritted even harder.

"That all you 'ave, me little lady? A little knife?"

The man in black was still stabbing away, and now the stoker was swaying on his feet as if he were a large oak in danger of crashing to the forest floor. His rocky face was completely bloodless now; his eyes seemed dazed and faraway.

"I got me worse in Clancy's pub, you little shit." He was weakened nevertheless; the man in black squirmed out of the stoker's grasp and grabbed him around the neck from behind.

"Fucker!" he roared. The stoker grabbed the man in black's small arm with two hammock hands, but they were powerless.

By this time, Van Helsing had managed to get to his feet, picking up the fallen pipe in the process. When the man in black spotted Van Helsing on the move, he let the stoker go; the poor soul crashed to the floor and lay still on his face, dark red blood pooling around him.

"C'mere," panted the man in black, his chest heaving. "I got somethin' fer you."

Van Helsing advanced a step and then, with all the might that he could muster, eyes stinging as blood flowed into them, swung the pipe.

It connected with the man in black's head, jarring Van Helsing's arms. The man fell against the wall, and sank to his knees. Van Helsing stepped forward and swung the pipe again, this time hitting only his shoulder. He cried out in agony. Van Helsing rose the pipe again, but before he could swing, the man punched him hard in the knee.

Losing his balance, Van Helsing gripped onto the handrail and managed to keep from falling. The man in black was on his feet once more; only this time, he was hobbling away.

Despite the pain, Van Helsing briefly entertained the idea of going after the man in black, but when he tried to move his legs, hot pain flared in his chest. He slowly got down to his knees beside the stoker with a cry; he could feel the still warm blood seeping through the knees of his trousers.

After a long moment of inhaling over clenched teeth, the pain somewhat subsided, and he regained his mind. He pressed his fingers against the stoker's muscular neck, which had already cooled substantially; there was no pulse.

“You were a good, strong man,” Van Helsing whispered to the stoker whose name he did not even know. A crushing sadness filled his chest. Who was this man? Did he have a loving family waiting for him to return to Ireland?

Finally, Van Helsing rose to his feet, found his cane and cross, and limped mournfully away to find a wash basin.

* * * * *

As the molten sun sank into the ocean, leaving behind a glorious show of orange and purple, a light numbing breeze sprang up, and washed over TITANIC’s boat deck. The ship was cast in gloom, and the outside deck lights had already sprang on to light the way for passengers and crew. Lord Godalming strolled along with his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his overcoat, passing no one, for all the passengers had already retreated into the warm accommodations to celebrate the fact that Titanic was nearing New York. As he passed large windows, Art peered in at the enjoying warm splendor; the Astors were entertaining a group of well-dressed friends. Caledon Hockley and his new wife-to-be stood in the middle of the festivities, he chatting with a man Art didn’t recognize and she gazing somberly at the floor, as if the party were the last place on earth she wanted to be.

For all the people in the saloons, the deck itself was empty; Art had seen only a few sailors and crewmen out on break or walking around for the hell of it. He had passed one man slumped against the wall near the stern, his eyes red and his husky voice slurring the words of one popular song or another. Lord Godalming had no idea how the poor bloke could stand passing his few off hours drunk on the cold deck, but to each his own. There were many other worse things that one could do with his leisure time. Jack the Ripper... well, the world knew that he did with his off time.

Presently, Art was nearing the bow at a slow creep, his feet singing a sad song of soreness, his tight back also added in its own choruses. His forehead ached slightly; it had been a busy and productive few hours, and now he wished to rest. He had spoken to a great many people, including some of the housekeeping staff, and had shown the sketch of Dracula to as many people as he could. One of the maids was sure that she had seen a man fitting his description the day before, but no one else seemed to recall ever laying eyes on him. He had also persuaded the purser (with a small monetary bribe) to open a few of the unlet cabins. None of them contained anything out of the ordinary. The pursuer, a beefy fellow with a beard and mustache, implied that he was not above letting Art into the other cabins during the day, when most passengers were out and about. Certainly, that was an avenue to be explored, but now he wasn’t as sure as he had been earlier that Dracula was hiding a box in a stateroom. Most likely, he had boxes salted around the Atlantic on other ships. If he were wont to do so, he could merely abandon TITANIC and make his way to New York unopposed.

Such a simple and brilliant out, but he wouldn’t take it, Art knew. Van Helsing was right; he was proud and he was vain. Though he wanted to face the beast on his terms alone, he knew that he would face him regardless. It wasn’t all about him, as he had told Van Helsing that morning, but it never had been. He was dedicated to killing the monster who had taken his Lucy; if that was a sin, then so be it. As far as he was concerned, the others could step aside. He wanted to be the

one to meet him, to kill him, to send him screaming and crying back to hell. He could live with himself if John or Van Helsing did it, but he simply did not want that.

He wanted to be the one; and he would have to act fast, for Dracula was feeding. He hadn't heard much, but from what he had gleaned from Captain Smith when they had chanced upon each other earlier, two or three third-class women had gone missing, and their families were frantically scouring what parts of the ship they could with the help of officers and other crew members. Ambiguously, they were threatening a lawsuit if they did not have their loved ones by the time that the Titanic had reached her berth in New York City.

Though Smith had said nothing of the sort, Art felt that Smith blamed...no, suspected, Art's imaginary opium fiends. The way that Smith's steel blue eyes had borne into Art's own, as if he wanted to telepathically communicate, instead of asking outright if the opium smugglers would do such a thing. Art knew that Smith would not want to bring up such a subject with him, but if Dracula kept up his antics...

Thump.

Blackness.

* * * * *

Like a man ripped from the depths of the sea, Art's eyes and mouth flew open and a gasp escaped his trembling lips. For a moment he was fuzzy and disoriented, the hard discomfort in his chest and stomach a mystery. But as reason returned to his dazed mind, he came to the startling realization that he was lying lengthwise along the top railing along Titanic's boat deck, one arm and one leg hanging over, and someone was working to push him the rest of the way off.

He was slipping.

His stomach lurched and his heart exploded. He screamed. Mindlessly lashing out, spasming, he wrapped his arms around the railing.

"Bastard!" his unseen enemy grunted, and at once began pounding his fists against Art's legs and lower back, "go over!"

Art screamed wordlessly and tried to hook his feet into the lower rails, but couldn't. If he went over, he realized then, nobody would know. He would be alone in the great ocean as the shimmering TITANIC sailed into the twilight.

Insanely, another realization struck him: That wouldn't happen. He would hit the water, and within moments, TITANIC's giant propellers would suck him in and chop him to bits.

"Help me!" Art wailed, the spray and cold wind choking him.

"Bastard!" howled his murderer, as if he had seen something unsavory. With one final push, he shoved Art's legs over the side.

Shrieking with unashamed fear, Art swung over the side, his wrists twisting painfully. He cried out, but didn't let go, couldn't let go. Now, he was upright, dangling over seventy feet above the sea.

Looking straight up, past the glare of the lights on the deck, Art could see the sky above, black velvet adorned with a smattering of cold, callous, twinkling stars, seeming to wink hatefully down at him.

Art blinked, and found a black silhouette looming over him. “Bastard!” hissed the form, and then, with a balled fist, pounded each of Art’s straining hands in an attempt to loosen him.

“HELP, HELP, HELP!” Art wailed as he clung fast, his hands aching, both from exertion and from his attacker’s blows.

Suddenly, the attack stopped, and the dark form seemed to evaporate.

Art’s hands, weary and throbbing at the wrists, began slipping, and his heart boomed in his chest.

An instant before his fingers unhooked, three concerned faces hove into view. A set of strong arms grabbed his aching wrists, and more hands grabbed him under the arms.

Faint, vision graying, Art was wrenched back on deck and fell into a heap atop another being. There were excited voices, but the clamor of his heart in his ears and blood thumping in his forehead (and the hot pain in the back of his head, where he had been brained by some unknown coward) prevented him from discerning words.

Finally, the man under him managed to push Art, heart gripping and thumping like an abscessed tooth, off of him and against the railings. In the horrible moment that he was in motion, Art was sure that, despite the safety precaution, he would plummet over the side and become fish food after all.

“Lord Godalming!” someone gasped, and Art opened his eyes. Thomas Andrews knelt before him, his eyes wide and his face pale. Behind him, Captain Smith and Bruce Ismay huddled close, each one looking as though it had been *them* hanging over the side.

“I... I misstepped,” Art ejaculated in-between gasps for air.

Bruce Ismay snorted, “That’s a doozy of a misstep, Lord Godalming.”

“Oh, yes,” Art said as he rose weakly to his feet, and promptly began to sink to the deck. Captain Smith and Ismay grabbed Art under his arms, all three men talking loudly over one another, advising the others to do this and to do that.

“I’m fine,” Art smiled as he shrugged off the men’s help. He stood on his own, swaying like a drunkard. “See, all good. I was just looking over at the surf, and bam! There I go, my own stupidity, my own fault, all better now.”

The three men exchanged a glance among themselves. “Are you really fine?” Thomas Andrews asked disbelievingly.

“Sure,” Art said and dismissed their worries with a flap of the hand. “I’ve been in worse pickles.”

“By the sound of it, this one was pretty bad,” Ismay said, “you were screaming like a woman.”

Art’s face reddened. “Of course it was bad.” He glanced over his shoulder. “But not the worst I’ve ever seen. Had me scared, though.”

“Gentlemen,” Smith said tightly, never taking his steely gaze off of Art, “go on without me; I need to have a private word with the Lord. I’ll catch up.”

With a few murmured protests and a few pats to Art’s back, Andrews and Ismay departed, heading aft.

“Arthur,” Smith said sharply, “come with me.”

Art followed Smith as he sullenly led him to his office behind the wheelhouse. Art had never before been in here, and was surprised to find that it contained

nothing more than a deck, two chairs, a filing cabinet, and a soft reading lamp atop the desk.

Smith sank into the chair behind the desk, and Art eased himself into the one opposite. Smith sat there for a long time in the glow of the lamp, his hands tented, covering his mouth and nose. Finally, he stood and, hands laced behind his back, began pacing along his side of the mahogany wall.

"The other night, you were beaten by a large man in the hall of B-deck. I didn't bring it up, mostly because, knowing you, I knew that you would be ashamed at losing like you did..."

Art moved to say that he had not really lost, seeing that there had never been a fight but an ambush, but Smith held up a forestalling hand.

"I know that it wasn't a fair fight, and to keep from further... rubbing your face in it, so to say, I never brought it up. But now... I find you hanging on for dear life on the boat-deck, in front of God and everyone. Mr. Astor saw you the first time, and that was bad enough, but I think he'll keep quiet, he's a good fellow. Now, however, Mr. Andrews and Mr. Ismay see you dangling off the side of the ship. I simply cannot stand for that sort of thing. And, as a deeply concerned friend, I cannot stand to see you in such peril. This wasn't a dirty fight; this was an attempt at murder!"

Art grunted, grasping for, and not finding, the right words.

"The opium people did this to you, didn't they? You may have amused Mr. Ismay with, 'Oh, I tripped,' but you do not amuse me. I not only have you to worry about, I have an entire ship. What are these men capable of? Should I call for assistance? Will they go willy-nilly tossing people off the side, or will they only do that to you and your friends?"

There was no use in lying (on top of lying), Art figured. Smith was not stupid, neither were Andrews or Ismay. They had all seen through his flimsy fiction. He damned himself for ever telling Smith about the "opium smugglers."

"They are only dangerous to those who get in their way, as they have well demonstrated."

"What about..?"

"Oh, those girls in steerage? Surely not, sir. These men are drug peddlers, they do not worry about stealing young girls. They... are only concerned with their wares."

Smith was quiet for a moment, studying Art from above. "Would it be any help if I had my men made aware of the situation?"

"Yes," Art said. Though Van Helsing didn't want to risk the lives of the crew, having their help would be invaluable.

Smith blinked. "What shall I do?" he asked.

Remembering the sketch, Art reached into his pocket and pulled it out. Smith took it, unfolded it, and studied it.

"This man," Art said, "is the leader, Dracula."

"Dracula?" Smith tasted the name as one would swill rotten wine.

"Yes. He's a very dangerous chap, John; therefore I don't want your men approaching him. Tell them whatever you will, but make sure they know that they are not to challenge him. I want extra eyes, not extra hands."

Smith nodded thoughtfully. "I'll inform them at once. If anyone spots him, are they to come to you?"

"Yes, or to Dr. Seward or Doctor Van Helsing. But preferably me."

Smith nodded again. "Shall I keep the drawing?"

"Yes."

"Is that all I can do?"

Art nodded. "Yes. For the time being. Now if you'll excuse me..."

Smith looked hard at Art. "Official business?"

"Yes. I've gotten some leads that I must follow up. That's where I was heading to when I was attacked."

Smith heaved a heavy sigh. "Go. Will I see you at my party tonight at the à la Carte?"

"I would like you to," Art said, "but I'm not sure if you will. The Wideners are hosting it, am I correct?"

Smith smiled, "Yes, the Wideners."

The only people that Art disliked more than the Wideners were the Thayers. If John Seward thought that Bruce Ismay was a snob, he would be floored by the total inhumanity of The Thayers and the Wideners; inhumanity at least when it came to anyone not able to afford a first-class ticket on Titanic.

"Well, do make sure that you can wrap up your business without getting yourself or someone else killed." The soft affection in Smith's open eyes profoundly touched Art. He wished, for a very brief moment, that he could hug Smith and tell him how much he meant to him. Art, though denying it even to himself, felt more for Edward Smith than he did for his own father.

Smith came around the deck and escorted Art out of his office, through the wheelhouse, and onto the blustery deck. Mr. Murdoch was standing near the small box-like structure on the edge of the starboard bridge's wing, peering intently toward New York, languidly enjoying a cigarette.

"Mr. Murdoch, would you please see that Lord Godalming makes it safely inside the ship?" Smith asked his first officer; Art's face immediately flushed with embarrassment.

"Captain, I assure you that I can make my own way..."

Murdoch dreamily turned from the angry red horizon and regarded Smith as if he had antennas standing from his head. His face was cast in darkness by not only the dusk hour, but by the fact that he wore his hat low on his head as if he were trying to block out the sun. Art figured that he had affixed the hat so earlier when the sun had been high and bright, and had neglected to rearrange it.

"Sir?" he asked bewildered, and looked to Art.

"Lord Godalming can't seem to traverse the TITANIC's decks without meeting with disaster."

Murdoch looked from Smith to Art again, and back, his brow furrowed.

"Please, captain; I am an adult, I can make it inside under my own power."

"Very well," Smith sighed. "But do me a favor and look behind you more often."

* * * * *

Art found Van Helsing and Seward in the smoking room near the roaring blaze. Van Helsing was slumped in his chair as if he were a man who had just finished a

long day of exceedingly arduous labor, and Seward sat with his cheek in his hand, staring thoughtfully into the fire, which cracked and popped when a knot of wood burst. There were very few men in the sleepy room; someone had scraped up a card game at the table closest to the fireplace, and three men idly whiled away the time with unenthusiastic plays.

Art sank into the sofa on the other side of Van Helsing's chair, and at once related his account of being attacked from behind and nearly dumped overboard into the sea. Seward came to attention and intently listened as Art told of his hanging onto the railings as and dangling above the ocean, of how the figure had tried to pound his hands into submission, all the while using the word 'bastard' over and over. He told of his being rescued by Smith, Andrews, and Ismay, but left out the part wherein Smith confronted him about the drug smugglers and his executive decision to put the crew on alert.

Finally, the flow of words died and silence, save for an occasional grunt from one of the card players or the clink of plates be carried to and fro by harried stewards preparing for dinner, prevailed. Seward opened his mouth to speak, but Van Helsing cut him off.

"It would seem now that the battle is three to two," his voice was shaky and watery; his wrinkled hand never left his face.

Art looked to Seward, who nodded. "Dr. Van Helsing was attacked below decks by a man in black. He is here only for the bravery of a stoker who interfered, at the price of his own life."

"I figured that it wasn't Dracula who sneaked me," Art said, "he was smaller, thinner, and sounded like a Briton."

"He is a human, no doubt under Dracula's spell." Van Helsing sighed mournfully. Art only now noticed the ugly gash across the old man's forehead. Anger swept through him.

Seward, hoping to boost his comrades' spirits, told them of his rambles in second-class, how he met a man who claimed to have dined with Dracula in the past.

"I asked if he would arrange a meeting with him for tonight, but he said that he hasn't seen Dracula since the day before yesterday. He did, however, promise that the next time he saw him he would, and then notify us."

"Could he be this man-in-black?" Art asked.

Seward shook his head. "He's an Italian, and his accent is rather thick."

Art nodded. "Either way, we have a new playmate and we have no idea what he looks like. He could be anyone."

"The dynamic has changed," Seward said.

"We can handle them both," Art went on, "we'll just have to be more careful."

"Yes," Van Helsing said, "from now on, we stay together. We will be harder to combat in numbers. And we must never, never let our guard down, whether we're on an empty deck or a crowded saloon."

"Let's get back at it now, shall we?" Art asked. "Third class seems to be where he's most comfortable, so we should focus there for now."

Van Helsing nodded. He was hopeful. Perhaps Dracula's use of an emissary meant that he was too weak to fight himself. Either that, or he was conserving his energy. Both ways, it proved to him that Dracula's boxes were ruined.

It also meant that they could not just sit and wait for Dracula to come to them anymore. They had to find him, and soon. If that meant barging into cabins uninvited and drawing the attention of the Captain, then so be it.

Play time was over.

Chapter 14

It was past 10:00 P.M. by Seward's golden pocket watch when the men shuffled into the ambient-lit first-class smoking room, which at this hour was occupied by a number of men at several tables, playing cards more enthusiastically than before. Instead of three, at one table there was nearly a dozen, including Archibald Butt, whom Van Helsing remembered from the stop at Queenstown; he, like all of his tablemates, was dead to the world, engrossed in his hand, his cigar, and his brandy. A blue haze, a mingling of many different brands and flavors of tobacco, hung over the entire smoking room, tickling Seward's nose. Looking down at the accumulated mist, he imagined that his view was that of a giant walking high among the clouds, peering down at distant earth.

The men took up their usual positions by the fire, which blazed warmly, and said nothing to each other. Van Helsing sat in his armchair, looking deep into the fire, thoughts reeling behind his faded eyes. Art was hunched over on his sofa, looking down at his intertwined hands, perhaps comforting them over the fact that they had not had the chance to wrap themselves around the neck of Dracula or his cohort.

They had come close, though. If it weren't for Dracula's damned shapeshifting, they would have had him.

It happened in third-class, just as the men reached the bottom of a Spartan metal staircase. Seward was asking about dinner, suggesting that they stop off in the steerage dining room for a bite, when Van Helsing noticed, at the end of a long, bleak corridor, a fleeting form hurriedly rounding a bend.

Art noticed it too, for he pushed (yes, pushed) through Seward and Van Helsing, nearly knocking the former to his knees, and gave chase. By the time the others were able to catch up to him, Dracula was gone, and in his place was a white mist hovering in the middle of the hall. Art stood before it a shade dumbstruck, and Seward's grip on Van Helsing's arm tightened. Van Helsing, for his part, was certain that he saw a pair of blank eyes peering out at them, ragged phantom holes, but he wasn't sure. Elation ran through him. The beast was within range. They could beat him!

"Art!" Van Helsing cried, "shoot him! The gun! Use the gun!"

Seeming to remember it all at once, Art ripped it from his pants and aimed it at the vapor. Before he could squeeze a shot off, however, it was, by all appearances, sucked into a vent along the baseboard.

"Damn!" Seward yelled.

All hope was not lost even then, for as the tail of the mist entered the grate, Dracula changed back to man form, his foot and foreleg left jutting from the shaft.

“He cannot hold form for long,” Van Helsing said, but wasn’t sure if he whispered or screamed. Art, noticing the wiggling appendage after a moment taken aback, threw aside the gun and pounced upon it, snatching the ankle in a two-hand death grip.

“Help me!” he cried, “help me with the motherfucker!”

Seward rushed forward and wrapped his arms around Art, who then heaved a great pull. In the shaft, Dracula screeched.

“Ze cross! It vill veaken him!”

Even as Van Helsing spoke, Dracula wrenched free, and Seward and Art tumbled back in a heap. The foot disappeared.

Screaming with rage, Art jumped to his feet and ripped something from his inner coat pocket. At first, Van Helsing had no idea what it was. But Art twisted the top off with one trembling hand, he saw (no, understood) that it was one of the vials of holy water.

With a snarling cry, Art splashed the contents into the gaping hole. It seemed a futile task to Van Helsing, but moments later a roaring cry of pain issued from the walls around them, almost as if Titanic herself were wounded.

“Die, you bastard!” Art screamed, and threw the vial into the vent after Dracula. He punched the wall, kicked it, and punched it again.

From the chasm, Dracula’s cries trailed off into whimpers.

“I almost had him,” Art presently said, breaking the lethargic spell that had fallen over them. “Almost had him.”

“It’s alright, Art,” Seward said, patting Art upon the back. “The important thing is that we found him.”

“Only to have him dance away again.”

“All this time we have not seen him,” Van Helsing said, “and tonight we do, and we even wound him. We know he’s in the steerage now, for sure, and that he is weak. He would not have changed so suddenly if he weren’t.”

Art sighed. “We’ve proven that we can do it, yes, and it was a productive day, but... I let him slip through my fingers, Doctor.”

Van Helsing waved one hand. “Nonsense. You did what you could. Dracula, even weakened, is the un-dead...”

Art nodded, remembering the speech from that morning. “I know, but...”

“But nothing. We are tired and need to sleep. We turn in now, and wake early. Until then, business is done for today.”

* * * * *

Count Dracula limped onto the boat deck and nearly collapsed. A thin man in fine clothes who happened to be passing at that moment stopped and regarded him with a concerned expression. “Are you alright, sir?”

Dracula, bent now at the waist, shivers of pain wracking his body, replied with a panted, “Fuck you.” The man, making a *humph* sound, went on his way, leaving Dracula alone.

After a moment, he managed to make his way to the rail, hissing with each step. There, he rested his back against one of the boats, pangs of hot agony rippling up his left leg. He tried to bend it, but screamed at the pain.

He couldn't do this. He would have to leave the ship and sleep in one of his boxes. He checked his watch. 10:16. He sent his eye out over the sea. There, still over an hour out, dark and low, sat the iceberg.

The closest ship carrying one of his boxes was THE MERRYLAND, an illegal seal-hunting rig twenty miles off. It was just close enough that he could return with a fair amount of strength.

Looking out at the indiscernible horizon, Dracula morphed into a bat and soared high into the sky. In his berth, the man-in-black, asleep, awoke with a start, his naked torso bathed in cold sweat.

"Just a nightmare," he told himself as he lay uneasily down. For the moment, he was free.

Chapter 15

John Seward checked his watch. It was 11:56 pm, and something was wrong.

He had been nodding in his chair, a novel by Dickens tented impotently in his lap, and something had awakened him, something out of the ordinary, something unpleasant. He snapped his head up and looked around with a grunt and a start, expecting Dracula or the man in black to be upon him, and found the hall eerily dim and deserted, nothing seemingly amiss.

Seeming that there was no imminent threat, Seward's first instinct had been to reconcile his chin with his chest, but even as his eyes closed, his mind began to clear; the cogs were turning, rustily at first, but then with greater speed.

What was that? There was something. A jolt, perhaps, or a shudder.

Seward stretched and yawned. A jolt, or perhaps a shudder, was never something to be taken lightly at sea. He knew this from firsthand experience. Once he'd been on a steamer that went down off Nunhead after it struck a hidden sandbar and the captain and crew ignored the upset, firmly maintaining that they'd just glanced a whale, or some other such nonsense. None were lost, thank God, but it could have been a disaster. Though he wanted to return to sleep (or, now that he was awake, his book), he instead stood.

Down the hall, a door opened and Seward turned. A man in nightclothes stuck his head out. "Did you feel something just now?" he asked.

"Indeed I did," Seward replied, "rather like a shipwide vibration."

The man considered that. "Yes. Well, hopefully it doesn't spell a delay."

"Certainly not," Seward said, and the man popped back into his stateroom and shut the door. So, something *was* afoot, lovely. He should really wake the others, but then again why bother? The Titanic wasn't unsinkable, but it was nearly so, and if there were any danger it would be hours in the future. The best course of action would be to go up top and have a look about before going off willy nilly and crying wolf.

Seward rested indecisively for a long moment, wondering what he should do. Finally, he started toward the deck. He met only a few people along the way,

several men in their evening attire and a steward hurrying past, an innocuous sight any other time, but one that worried Seward now.

In the smoking room, the fire still high in its grate, there was a card game going on at one of the tables. Men sat around drinking and smoking, laughing and chatting.

Seward paused before the door to the boat deck, unsure of what exactly his investigation should consist of. He turned and approached the card players. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but did you happen to feel anything out of the way... say ten minutes ago?"

"Yes," one of the men replied, "there's talk of ice on the deck. I think we struck a berg."

That certainly wasn't what Seward wanted to hear. "Is it serious?"

"Not at all," one of the men assured nonchalantly with a wave of the hand, "if it had been we surely would know it."

"And TITANIC might as well be unsinkable," someone else added.

"Sinking is never out of the question, of course," a gentleman mused, "but highly unlikely. And the ship is so large and sound it would take days for the job to be done. Before that time we'd be in New York and TITANIC would be docked."

Another man opened his mouth, but before he could speak the door to the deck burst open and a man strode in. "What an interesting turn of events. We've struck ice." He was wearing a light brown coat, powder blue pajama bottoms, and a pair of brown shoes.

"The deck is absolutely strewn with the stuff."

"Are we damaged?" Seward asked.

"I don't know," the man replied, "the berg must have been gigantic, though. I doubt we escaped wholly unscathed."

Chapter 16

"Art, wake up."

From a deep, warm blackness, Arthur Holmwood slowly and reluctantly rose, like a man drifting to the surface of a lake after diving in. He hadn't been far enough down to dream, but his mind had been sluggishly plodding on. The man in black was the primary thing worrying him, with Dracula a close second. Had John not rescued him, he surely would have been ruptured by the teeth of a nightmare. He'd been having them a lot lately. In them all Dracula eluded him, leaving him behind, impotent and shaking with rage and failure.

"What?" he muttered sleepily.

"We hit an iceberg," Seward said.

Those four simple words brought Art fully awake. Sitting bolt upright, his heart beginning to race, the first thing to dance through Art's head was a hateful montage of death and destruction, shattered windows, twisted metal, smashed machinery, fire, smoke, water, and corpses floating in the icy sea.

"What?"

John was standing awkwardly over him, his face grave. "An iceberg."

"How much damage?"

"I don't know; I haven't been on deck."

Art got out of bed. "Who have you spoken to?"

"Several people. Some gentlemen in the smoking room who say there's ice all over the foredeck and a steward who says we've only lost a propeller."

The impact must have been slight to not have awakened him, Art reckoned. Though his sleep had been deep as of late, it had been light. "You've seen nothing for yourself?"

"No, Seward admitted, "but... Art, the ship is stopped."

Indeed it was. Though Titanic was as steady a passage as could be booked, one could still tell that he was moving at 18 knots through the sea. Now, all was still.

"Something's happened," Art said as he shrugged into a coat and stepped into slippers, "wake Doctor Van Helsing while I go up top."

"I'd rather not," Seward said, "he's been working so hard, he's exhausting himself. I'd like to be sure before waking him."

"I agree... but now isn't the time for that. We may be in danger."

He was right. "Okay." Seward turned, and nearly started.

"Speaking of the Devil, I believe the phrase goes," Art said with a smile. Van Helsing stood in the open doorway like something roused from the grave. His eyes were red and his hair wild. It was a wonder he managed to dress himself.

"We have hit an iceberg?" he asked.

Seward nodded. "It looks that way. Art was just going to find out."

Van Helsing looked from one man to the other. "Let us go together. If there is a chance we turn over and sink, I'd like to be on the deck when that happens."

Art chuckled. "Certainly, Doctor."

* * * * *

A group of impeccably dressed men had gathered around the door leading to the smoking room, as if they were ready to dash back inside if the temperature should drop another degree. Most of them held drinks in their hands and spoke softly to the man closest to them, laughed and jokes were exchanged. Only a few of the wealthy passengers on deck looked uneasy, nervously looking aft and forward in an attempt to find a knowledgeable crewman or an officer. A few of the men had wandered off to the bridge, where the sound of an impromptu soccer match between some of the steerage passengers, using a large chunk of ice as a ball, came from the bow, where those unlucky souls in third-class were forced to take their sun, amongst capstans, cranes, and the other heavy deck equipment.

"Bloody good show!" exclaimed one of the well-clad men as he raised his glass in celebration of one play or another.

Art finally tore himself away from watching the odd sight, and began strolling down the deck. From doors and gangways, more and more people were coming onto the deck, most all sleepy-eyed and clad in nightgowns covered with fur coats, pajamas, slippers, and the occasional white padded lifebelt. There was a terrible ruckus on the deck, as officers bashed metal chains holding the boats securely in place to bits, a small multitude of people, mostly first-class men who had been awake when the collision occurred and their families, talked lowly and

occasionally laughed at one bland joke or another. Close to the bridge, which was cast in a dimmer light than most of the aft leading deck, a few able seamen and an officer or two, milled about, talking lowly and awaiting the Captain, most likely.

Art thoughtlessly wiped the warm snot trickling down from his nostrils away with the sleeve of his coat as he walked. The men standing about on the starboard bridge wing, peering over at the bow at the large pieces of ice, or possibly trying to discern any damage above the waterline, were unaware of his approach.

"I'm sorry sir, crew only," said a voice from Art's left, startling him. He turned, and saw First Officer Murdoch stepping out of a door flanked on either side by brightly lit windows; probably the crews' quarters or the officer's lounge or something.

"Mr. Murdoch, do you remember me?" Art asked as he stopped. Murdoch, squinting his light adjusted eyes, approached, and studied Art's face for a moment. Finally, recognition dawned in his eyes, and he smiled.

"Ah, yes; Lord Weakling, isn't it?"

"Lord Godalming," Art replied tersely, certain that Murdoch's mispronunciation was intentional.

Murdoch nodded, a sly smile creeping across his shadowy face. He, like all the other officers, was dressed in a long, heavy blue coat with golden buttons and golden strips on the sleeves. The hat was still low on his head. "Ah, yes, Lord Goldoming, how can I help you?"

"I need to see Captain Smith," Art said, swallowing his anger.

Without taking his eyes off of Art, as if he expected him to loot the bridge blind whilst unsupervised, Murdoch pointed one black gloved hand aft, "He's in the wireless hut."

"Thank you," Art muttered under his breath, and at once shoved off toward the door which he supposed Murdoch had meant to indicate. He could feel Murdoch's gaze boring into his back. What was his problem? He must have seen himself as a big fish in the pond because he was the highest ranking officer on Titanic's bridge. He stuck Art as one to throw his weight around.

Unsure of which door Murdoch had meant, and unwilling to go flinging doors in at random, Art was relieved to see Smith stepping out of the wireless hut. He softly shut the door behind him, saw Art approaching, and smiled. "Hello, Lord Godalming," Smith said, seemingly genuinely happy to see him. "I missed you gentlemen at the festivities." Smith extended one gloved hand. Art took it. "Terribly sorry, but... well, you know how business goes."

Smith nodded, and, when the handshake had ended, shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his blue overcoat. "Indeed I do," he said.

"It never lets you rest," Art said by way of small talk. He didn't want to cut right to the chase, but he forced himself; time was of the essence. "Captain, I need to know... it would make my work a bit easier, though I hope not for obvious reasons, but...is the TITANIC going to sink?"

Smith's gaze wavered, the first such time that Art could remember. His eyes clung to the buttons of his coat, but finally they met Art's; in them, cold and soft, Art saw the dreadful truth, and not just the one that he had already guessed. Titanic was not only sinking, but it was to be a catastrophe.

“Mr. Andrews has estimated that we have no more than three hours at the outside,” Smith said, and then smiled warmly once more. He placed one hand on Art’s shoulder and squeezed. “I suppose that this does make it a breeze for Scotland Yard; after all, would not the opium be lost?”

Art nodded, his stomach reeling. He looked into Smith’s eyes, now warm and affectionate, and realized that, tonight would be the last night of his life. If indeed no rescue materialized, and the Titanic slipped beneath the waves, Art knew that Smith would be right on the bow, defiantly facing the black rolling sea with a placid look on his face, and his hands clasped behind his back.

Art tried to speak, but found that a watery lump was blocking his throat. He looked once more at Smith’s eyes, and his heart dropped anew at the sickening prospect that this fine English gentleman before him was not going to survive the night. His father’s death had been bad enough, but now Smith...? The man who he held as a second father?

Goddamn Dracula! Goddamn him to hell!

“Art,” Smith said, once again squeezing Art’s shoulder, “I know that you and the Drs. will be gallant to the last; it’s women and children first, you know, the rule of the sea.”

“Of course,” Art said from far away, his thoughts on what a life would be like with absolutely no older, wiser friend to give advice and lead the way, on what life would be like knowing that his friend of decades, the dignified Smith, was but a corpse on the ocean floor.

Art forced his English to reassert itself. “No more than three hours,” he marveled, realizing that his death, and the deaths of Dr. Seward and Dr. Van Helsing, and the death of Smith, could be only one-hundred-twenty minutes away, or, thanks to Dracula, unthinkably closer.

“Thank you,” Art said through numb lips, the cold, and the shock, were conspiring to freeze him down to the bone. His nose was running again, and he quickly wiped it. His face, even to his shaking hands, felt like a block of ice.

“Be British,” Smith said, “see the best for the women and children. When the time comes, and there is nothing left to do, see for yourself.”

“I shall,” Art assured Smith. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

“Certainly.”

As Art walked back to the smoking room, the shock and the brief flash of fear were already melting away.

Inside of three hours, they would meet Dracula.

Chapter 17

While Art spoke with Captain Smith, Seward and Van Helsing stood on the boat deck, watching as more and more people arrived, most of them still clad in their gowns and robes, some of them even wearing lifebelts.

It was thirty after midnight, by John’s watch, when steely faced officers in warm blue coats and caps began uncovering the lifeboats and swinging them out.

A small measure of fear tightly clutching his chest, Van Helsing looked down at a ragged chunk of ice at his foot, regarding it with a sour expression.

The vampire had control over weather, as well as animals, everyone who had even taken a cursory glance at a history of vampires and witches knew. And, unfortunately for TITANIC, and unfortunately weather included icebergs.

“John,” Van Helsing said, “this does not look good.”

Seward licked his lips, his chest tight and his stomach sour. “There is still hope, Doctor,” he said, unconvinced even to his own ears.

“Maybe,” Van Helsing muttered.

And maybe not, maybe the ship was going to go down. Van Helsing sadly looked from face to face in the growing crowd behind him; all were jovial and gay; even the nervous ones had lightened up a bit with the approach of good friends. If the ship did founder, Van Helsing knew too well, then the lifeboats, sturdy or not, would only save less than half of the passengers onboard.

Our fault, the realization struck Van Helsing like a ton of bricks. If the TITANIC foundered, thus taking lives with it, it would be all his (and Seward’s and Art’s) doing. Had they just left Dracula alone, to do his will in New York...

No, that was unthinkable. While the thought of being a mass murderer, of killing however many people, sickened Van Helsing, if it had to be done to stop Dracula, than it had to be done. Women, men and children dying in the sea, going down with a massive piece of useless metal, was horrible, but so much better than being made into un-dead.

A piece of ice was again at his foot, and Van Helsing stared at it, damning it for being out and about on the sea, within reach of Dracula’s satanic call. This iceberg was just as bad as the man who had stabbed the stoker, and who had tried to throw Art overboard. This piece of ice was a... a... a coconspirator.

With a tiny ball of hot anger in the hollow of his stomach, Van Helsing lashed out and kicked the ice. It instantly crumbled into a thousand little pieces, and slid along the deck in a flurry.

Of course, Dracula had done this. Why was beyond him. Perhaps he hoped to capitalize on the chaos. Or maybe he just wanted to kill as many people as possible out of pure spit.

The bastard.

But, hope was not yet lost. The TITANIC may not be sinking, it could float with two or so of its watertight compartments flooded, and that more than one was flooded now was... a possibility, a strong possibility, but merely a possibility nonetheless. Even so, TITANIC could surely remain afloat for enough time for a whole flotilla of vessels to arrive and transfer her passengers from danger. With the wondrous Marconi machine on TITANIC, hope was not dead until the ship went down.

That was where the problem was. If TITANIC went down with no other ships around to quickly rescue and administer to her passengers, there would be a horrible death toll among those who did not escape in a lifeboat; over half. Hypothermia was the main concern. The water was surely below freezing, a human body could not stand such barbaric temperatures for long.

Van Helsing’s stomach turned, and he felt in danger of fainting. All of it, all of this, all of what could happen, his fault.

Van Helsing sighed, and looked down the deck just in time to see Art pushing through the accumulating crowd, which had grown since he last took notice.

“Art,” John greeted, “what did the Captain say?”

From the grave cast of the younger man’s face, Van Helsing knew that the news was dire.

“We have three hours,” Art told them, “at the very most.”

The words hit Van Helsing like a fist to the heart. There had been hope just moments ago, and now even that was gone. The TITANIC was sinking.

“Dracula’s too weak to confront us himself,” Art grumbled, “so he did this.”

Van Helsing swallowed. “That may be so, Art; but he wants to see us die personally. To know that TITANIC and a good sized portion of its crew have followed him into death is good, enjoyable for him; but I think that he wants to see us squirm and bleed.”

“Of course the son of a bitch does,” Art hissed through clenched teeth. “But he’s got another thing coming. I will happily go down to the sea, if only I can make him squirm and bleed.”

“What is the best course of action?” Seward asked.

“We live to meet Dracula, when and wherever he comes, and we beat him.”

“Amen,” said Art.

As they spoke, the men moved slowly and absently into the smoking room, which was still sedate and tranquil, warm and well-lit. For a moment, drinking it all in, Van Helsing felt a small blossom of doubt. Was the ship really sinking?

Yes, it was.

Sinking gratefully into his chair, a wave of weariness washed over Van Helsing. The others took spots on the adjacent couch; Art lit a cigarette, and passed another to Seward.

“They said that not even God himself could sink this ship,” Van Helsing mused, his eyes closed and his head thrown back, “but it looks as though He is. God would have had to allow this happen, or else it wouldn’t have.”

For a moment, the suddenness of his word-shift left the others without a reply.

“So, God let Dracula sail TITANIC into an iceberg?” Art asked skeptically.

“Yes, our God is a jealous God; He said that we were to have no God before Him. And it seems that the men of today are making things such as the electric light and the Titanic their God.”

“God, in a manner of speaking, is mad at us, men, because we basically say that God cannot sink what we make. And...well doesn’t it seem that God Himself is the one allowing our knowledge to progress?”

Van Helsing nodded. “God made the wood, and the metal ultimately melted down, that the Israelis used to build their idols while Moses was on Sinai. There is nothing wrong in making something, but to worship it...”

“But nobody is worshipping TITANIC,” Art protested.

“They are not?” Seward turned his head and regarded Art. “They say that God could not sink it, that time and ability has progressed beyond the point of losing liners at sea. They say that we are conquering nature. Concurring God. It is hubris.”

All was quiet for a moment, the only sound the low talking and laughing of the card players. A steward entered from the boat-deck, and stood to one side of the door in case needed.

“Steward,” Art said and raised the fore-and-middle fingers of his right hand. At once the steward was away from the wall and fast-walking across the room.

“Sir?”

“If possible, could you bring me a glass of brandy? It appears that it is going to be a long night.”

“Yes sir,” the steward said meekly and nodded. He disappeared.

“As I was saying,” Van Helsing said, “didn’t I say that TITANIC was a symbol of gluttony? Maybe... maybe whatever happens is not our fault. Maybe God moved Dracula to pick this certain ship over others, maybe those here are meant to die, and the Titanic to be lost.”

“So many maybes,” Art said.

Van Helsing was just finishing his pipe, and Seward was just lighting another cigarette when the steward returned.

“The Captain requests that you report to the deck with your lifebelts on, sirs.”

None of them spoke; Van Helsing only nodded, and then sighed again. Once the steward had moved on, he said: “I suppose we better do as he says.”

“What about Dracula?” Art asked, “surely you don’t mean to stand around on deck until he comes out of the shadows, do you?”

“What can we do, Art?” Van Helsing, freezing in the middle of pushing himself up, snapped. “The same thing we have been doing for days, walking around hallways and looking under beds. Add to that the evacuation, and it will be impossible.”

Art knew that the old man had a point, but he couldn’t admit it. Standing on deck might be practical, but it was passive, and Art wanted action; he wanted to hunt the rat to his hole and stake him there, now twiddle his thumbs until the twenty-fifth hour.

“I’m not suggesting that we scour the entire ship, Doctor,” Art said as John helped Van Helsing up and they began to walk. “The water will take a few decks out of the equation very shortly, reducing the search area by half.”

“We are on a sinking ship, Art. Not only that, we have the man-in-black to worry about. Waiting before was foolish, but now it is the only way. We pick a spot and stay together. That way, Dracula and his lackey will have less room to play with.”

“Doctor...”

“You said, Art, that we should flush Dracula out. Now...the sea will flush him out. Soon, he will have nowhere to go but into our arms.”

They were on the grand staircase now, descending past a crush of humanity going up to the boat-deck; no one seemed unduly alarmed or frightened, only sleepy and miffed. Many people, like some of those on deck, Art noticed, were wearing heavy coats over their nightwear, wearing their lifebelts in turn over those. A few maids and valets, dressed in their uniforms, followed in tow behind the families they served. Art noticed young Jack Thayer in the crowd, with a young woman on his arm; she seemed in a huff. George Widener escorted his wife up the ornate stairs, he did not seem worried in the least, only angry at having been so rudely awakened.

In the corridor, there was no Dracula or man-in-black, only more people in their pajamas, sometimes two and three abreast. As they passed, Seward heard a few snippets of conversation being passed, and discerned that most of the first-class passengers were under the mistaken impression that the TITANIC had only dropped a propeller.

At their staterooms, Art and Seward entered and at once went to their closet for their lifebelts. Van Helsing entered his own room, and switched on the overhead lights. With the aid of his cane, he slowly crossed the room to the closet. He opened the door...

...and something rushed out, striking him like a train and knocking him down; something lean and muscular; something cold and *alive* and covered with fur.

Dracula.

In the form of a wolf, his eyes yellow, jagged rows of teeth crowding his snarling snout, his hot breathing smelling (and dear God tasting) of sulfur.

Van Helsing screamed, throwing his arms defensively up. The beast snapped but did not bite, poked his left flank with its muzzle, then his right; taunting him, savoring his fear.

Old fool, you stepped into it, old fool, old idiot!

He had made a mistake in opening the closet door. It wasn't his first mistake, by God, but he took consolation in that it would be his last.

No! Do not give up!

Moving with a speed he didn't know he possessed, Van Helsing grabbed the monster by its neck. The fire in its eyes momentarily wavered; it was not expecting direct confrontation...not for poor, old, weak, defenseless Van Helsing.

"Dr. Van Helsing!"

Van Helsing turned just as Art kicked the beast in its side, knocking it aside; its rear slammed hard into the wall, dazing it.

Art rushed forward, but the beast ducked past him, crashing woozily into the wash basin and shattering it. Art kicked it again. Sitting up now, Van Helsing watched as John came from his position by the door, his arm extended, a crucifix clutched in his trembling hand. Not seeing him, Dracula frantically tried to escape, but shrank back with a whimper at the majesty of Christ.

Art advanced, his hands balled into fists. The hound turned, and he hit it in the jaw the way one would a man. Angling down, however, upset his balance, and he went to one knee. Seizing the opportunity, Dracula lunged for him, but Art caught him and, rolling, amazingly threw him; yelping, he sailed through the air and came down hard on an end table, breaking it into a million pieces and uttering a hellish shriek.

Van Helsing was on his feet now. He reached into his coat pocket for his own crucifix, but Dracula was back on his feet, his left eye skewered by a sliver of wood; blood dripped onto the carpet.

John came forward again, leaving the door unguarded, poor fool, and Dracula slipped by, turning back to a man as he reached the threshold.

"Get him!" Art roared. He got to his feet and gave chase, yanking the revolver from his coat as he went.

The silence in the cabin was crashing.

Shaking his head and coming alive, Seward went to Van Helsing. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Van Helsing said, shrugging away. Truth be told, his heart was racing and his stomach ached from Dracula's lupine weight. He moved to one of the wicker chairs and heavily sat.

"Are you sure? I can find the ship's doctor..."

Van Helsing held up a hand. "I am fine."

When he had caught his breath, the old man shook his head. "He is weaker than I thought."

Chapter 18

Art raised the gun, his finger tightening on the trigger, but didn't fire. Ahead, Dracula swung around a corner. Just before the turn, a man came out of his stateroom, looked around, and flinched when he saw Art, red-faced and huffing, a gun in his hand: The man wisely withdrew into his room and shut the door.

The corner around which Dracula had disappeared concealed a stairway. Leaping, Art hit the second-to-last step. In the hall, a man in a tux sat dazedly on the ground, a hand to his head. Some feet away, Dracula went through a door.

Art skirted past the casualty. "Dracula!" he yelled.

The doorway opened on another set of stairs, this one leading into second class. The hall was empty here, but ahead a rush of people moved unaffectedly up the main staircase, some of them wearing lifebelts, many not. He didn't see Dracula.

Forsaking decorum (because the bastard was soooo close), Art rudely shoved through the crowd. "Out of the goddamn way!" he grumbled.

A few people whispered. Someone said "He's got a gun!" as though he were a common criminal.

He turned right into another hall.

It stood empty.

Huffing, Art stopped, tossed a glance around, and shook with rage. "Dracula! Fight me like a man! You coward!"

The bastard was probably hiding!

Art went to the first door and ripped it open. An empty room, the lights still burning. Across the hall he did the same; a woman sat astride a man, her back arched and her hand on his chest.

Art slammed the door closed just as the woman jerked in his direction.

"Dracula!"

He went to another door and opened it, and a fist smashed him in the jaw, knocking him back. Dracula rushed out, and threw another punch, this one low, connecting with Art's side.

"*You're mine,*" Dracula snarled.

He grabbed Art by the lapels and shoved him against the wall. Art punched him in the side of the head. Blood gushed freely from the beast's ruined eye.

Without thinking, Art headbutted the bastard; pain exploded through his skull, but Dracula let go and stumbled back.

Looking up, blood trickling from his nose, the vampire sneered. "You..."

Art raised the gun and fired.

The round took Dracula in the shoulder, spinning him partially. Smoke instantly rose from the wound; the cross etched onto the bullet had worked.

A look of horror crossed Dracula's face, and he wailed.

Art stepped forward to deliver the final blow, but before he could, Dracula lashed out, hitting him in the temple.

For Art, the world went dark.

* * * * *

In the smoking room, the men who had earlier been playing cards were still at their posts, dealing hands, talking, and chomping on their cigars. A steward stood dutifully by, and was twice called upon to refreshen drinks. A few ladies were present near the door to the deck, wearing thick padded lifebelts over their coats. Their husbands stayed close to them, laughing with one another and discussing the dreadful inconvenience that being ferried to a rescue ship presented.

"Why must White Star be so blamed cautious?" Van Helsing overheard one man bemoaning.

"Insurance against lawsuits," another replied matter-of-factly.

The chair before the fire was unoccupied, and Van Helsing sank into it with a grateful moan. Seward remained restlessly standing.

"John, you are making me nervous," Van Helsing finally said, motioning to one of the couches, "sit down."

"Sorry," Seward mumbled, and took his seat.

Van Helsing removed his pipe from his jacket, and began packing it. "What time is it, John?"

Seward checked his pocket watch. "12:45," he replied.

"If Arthur is not back by one, you can go."

Seward nodded, "Thank you."

Van Helsing smiled. "Why don't you go and take a walk or something? You look like you are going to exploded with energy."

"I'm fine, Doctor."

"No you are not. Go out onto the deck and see what's happening."

"Honestly, Doctor, I'm..."

"I would like to know the situation," Van Helsing retorted with firm finality.

Seward nodded and stood. "Okay. Are you sure you'll be fine?"

Something like searingly hot air rose in Van Helsing's chest. Fine without my chaperone, you mean?

"Yes," he said aloud, "Dracula is currently eating Art, so I am safe."

Van Helsing chuckled at his own unexpectedly morbid humor, and launched into a full, crying gale of laughter at Seward's expression. "I am sorry. You either laugh or you cry sometimes. Go on."

With a nod, Seward disappeared.

Turning his attention to the flames, Van Helsing sighed.

* * * * *

On the starboard deck, smatterings of people stood back as one of the forward boats was loaded by harried officers. Most of the ladies, Seward noted, seemed disinclined to board, and stood by their men. Officer Murdoch stood tensely by the davits as a few of the women were gently forced into the boat by the cooing of husbands.

Due perhaps to the women's reluctance, a large number of men were admitted to the boat.

Seward was about ready to return to the smoking room when, from aft, the sound of music struck up. Along with most everyone on deck, Seward's head turned, and he saw further up the deck the ship's musicians in a small cluster, playing as though this were nothing more than an eloquent dinner party.

Someone laughed. "Music to drown to." A few of the other men tittered.

A terrible joke, Seward thought, almost as bad as Van Helsing's.

Speaking of Van Helsing...

Seward turned, and the old man was behind him, grinning. He hadn't recognized his voice.

"You are full of gloom and doom tonight," Seward commented.

Van Helsing shrugged.

* * * * *

"Sir? Sir, are you alright?"

Art came shakily to his senses. A man was crouched over him, a worried expression on his face. For a moment Art didn't know where he was, but then it came flooding back to him: Dracula.

There were other people in the hall too, some of them standing in doorways. "How long have I been out?"

"Three minutes, maybe four," the man said, "but..."

Art got to his feet.

"Sir, I think you should..."

"To hell with what you think."

Shaking his head, Art staggered down the hall. He didn't know where Dracula had gone, but he was certain it was deeper into the ship, where he could lick his wounds and plot his next move... if indeed there even was a next move. The bastard was practically dead already. A stiff breeze and he would be mincemeat.

* * * * *

Dracula shoved the boy into an unoccupied stateroom and closed the door behind him. The kid, barely sixteen, watched him with wide, milky eyes. "Give me your neck. Now."

The kid obeyed, leaning his head to one side and exposing his neck. Dracula plunged his fangs into him and shuddered as hot, coppery blood gushed forth. He felt it instantly: A warm, tingling sensation beginning in his center and radiating out. Strength flowed into him. The aches and bruises dulled.

When he was done, the boy was dead, his veins entirely empty: Dracula let him fall to the floor.

Back in the hall, he stood indecisively for a moment. He was still too weak. He needed more.

Three women rounded a corner and started past.
Dracula took them all.

* * * * *

Deeper in the ship. Art threw open random doors, searched under beds and in closets. Dracula was nowhere.

Sighing frustratedly, Art snapped off the light in the current room and went back into the hall. Maybe he had been wrong. Maybe the fiend was on his way back to the boat deck to finish off John and Dr. Van Helsing.

Another door across the hall was shut, possibly hiding an un-dead horror. Art crept to that, reared back his leg, and with all the angry might he could muster, let fly. With a snap, the door cracked down the middle, and fell inward, landing on the carpet.

The room was dark, Art fumbled for the light, and found nothing, just emptiness.

“Damn it!” he growled, and unleashed another kick on the downed debris of the door.

Back in the hall, the clink of metal-on-metal once again made itself known; it was coming from the end of the corridor, which ended at another closed door.

Maybe Dracula was behind it, trying to lure him to his death; or maybe there was a dullard making an attempt at music, not knowing that the ship was slipping into the sea from below him. Either way, it warranted further investigation.

Okay, Art thought as he slowly moved toward the end of the corridor, gripping the gun tight in his sweaty hands, here I come, son-of-a-bitch.

From outside the door, the clink was louder and more urgent. Art looked to the brass knob, but decided against using it. Breathing heavily, heart still beating a bit faster than it did on most occasions, he stepped back, brought his foot to attention, and kicked the door in all in one fluid motion. This time the door didn’t shatter, but flew back and thumped against the wall with a report as loud as that of a revolver. The room was another berth, this one with two small cots along each side of the wall. One was empty, the other supported a man in his skivvies, his hands tied behind his back, a piece of cloth tied around his mouth. His face was red as if he were in danger of choking, and his eyes flew open in surprise and fear when Art stepped into the room, gun raised, a no doubt demonic looking sneer of hatred distorting his face.

His heart leapt when he saw him. Almost frantically, he shoved the gun into his pocket and knelt beside the man, who was large and red-headed. He looked a man from afar, but up close he had the face of a boy. The boy stiffened and let out a muffled cry when Art yanked the rope bounding his hands. With his hands, wrists an angry red, free, the boy hurriedly ripped the cloth from his mouth and began greedily sucking air into his lungs.

“Who did this to you?” Art grated.

The kid rolled his head and regarded Art with watery blue eyes which seemed not to comprehend.

“Who did this to you?” Art asked more roughly this time, already knowing damn good and well who.

The kid slowly shook his head. "I don't know," he said in a thick Irish accent. "He was a big man, had long hair, and a mustache. He stole my uniform, ripped it right off of me."

"What are you?" Art asked.

"A steward," replied the boy. "I was just walking in the hall, and this guy knocks me down and drags me in here, rips my clothes off, and puts 'em on."

Damn, Dracula was trying to disguise himself.

"Well... get on deck, we're going down," Art said and stood.

Chapter 19

A low murmur ran through the crowd, which had grown in the past ten minutes. Men and women in their nightclothes stood back from the boats while officers uncovered them and swung them out. Steaming rushing from valves in the funnel made it difficult to hear; Seward was reminded of the sound a train made as it pulled into station, only multiplied by ten. Some people had left the deck because of the noise. A group waited in the gymnasium while another had gone into the smoking room.

Seward watched as crewmen communicated with each other by gestures. The list was noticeable now, but only slightly.

Back in the warm smoking room, Seward found Van Helsing waiting by the door.

"They're getting the boats ready," Seward said.

Van Helsing nodding. Leaning on his cane, he took out his pocket watch. "12:35," he said. "Let's go."

Van Helsing pushed his way through the door and onto the bitterly cold deck. The terrible steam noise suddenly ceased then, and the silence was so total as to be alien. "Thank God!" someone said.

For a long moment, Van Helsing stood where he was and intently watched the crowd; looking for Dracula, Seward supposed. Five minutes after coming out on deck, or maybe ten, the officers began loading the first boat. The process took longer than it should have because the officers (one of them Murdoch, Seward noted) had to practically beg women to get in; no one believed the ship was sinking. In fact, come to think of it, Seward hadn't heard anything about it sinking at all. Did these people even know what was happening? The list forward was presently quite pronounced. Certainly the others noticed it as well.

"Come on, John," Van Helsing finally said.

Seward shuffled behind Van Helsing like a faithful child. When they had finally quitted the thick of the crowd, and space on deck permitted, Seward moved to Van Helsing's side, and placed a steadying hand on his upper arm. Van Helsing almost flashed a warning to back up or lose that hand, but he kept quiet.

"What are you planning, Doctor?" Seward asked as they put the bright lights behind them, and entered the blissful dim of the forward bridge.

"I mean to calculate Titanic's position."

There was thoughtful silence from Seward. "By the stars?"

"Yes," Van Helsing replied.

More silence.

"How does one do that? I've heard of it being done, but I've never tried myself."

Van Helsing said, as they came to a stop in a spot dim enough to allow a beautiful view of the sky and the stars, "You take two stars for the latitude. And two for longitude. One star north and one star south, one star east, and one star west. If you find a major discrepancy between eastern and western stars, you know that there is a mistake somewhere."

"Ahh," Seward said as if it made perfect sense to him, which it did not. Maybe Van Helsing didn't explain it well enough, or maybe Seward was dumbing down in his advancing age. How did one the longitude and latitude from that?

Van Helsing was currently looking up at the stars, whispering soft German to himself. Seward craned his neck, and peered up. The black sky was profoundly deep, and the cold twinkling stars were poignantly moving. So much beauty was to be had in this world.

"Okay," Van Helsing said thoughtfully. "It looks as if we are at 41 46' North, 50 14' West."

"Amazing," Seward marveled lowly, looking from the sky to his mentor, who stood cast darkly in shadows. "And you are sure it is right?"

"Right enough to give to the wireless men; right enough to save lives."

The two men at once began strolling aft, toward the wireless hut. Up the deck, under the bright orange lights, the crowd of wealthy passengers still stood clustered, watching the officers at their work. A few people had drifted away, and the officers, either not noticing or not at the moment caring, offered not a word of protest.

"Wait here for a moment, John," Van Helsing when they had reached the door to the wireless hut. John nodded, and crossed his arms over his chest for warmth. Van Helsing wiped a string of snot from his nose with the back of his icy right hand and entered the warm room.

Along with the heat, the first thing to greet Van Helsing's ears was the constant click-click-click of the Marconi machine. Van Helsing knew a bit about Continental Morse, and knew at once that the call being sent was CQD, come quickly, danger.

The young man from previous visits was again standing over his senior officer, who sat ever hunched over the apparatus, determinedly tapping out calls for assistance.

The young man noticed Van Helsing, patted the older man on his shoulder, and came forward.

"Lo sir, can I 'elp you?"

"Yes," Van Helsing said and leaned against the countertop, his side and chest suddenly sore anew from his encounter with the man-in-black. "I've calculated our position to aid in your..."

"Oh, thanks sir, but officer Boxhall's already done that. We're at 41 50' North, 50 14' West. What did you get?"

"Exactly that," Van Helsing said, a smile spreading across his face. This Boxhall deserved to replace that asinine Murdoch as First Officer.

“Well, that’s good to know,” the young man said, Van Helsing just know realizing that he was not fully dressed. He was still in his underclothes; he must have been asleep when TITANIC struck the berg. “If two men can figure our place like that, then we know that we’re sendin’ right.”

He looked over his shoulder and cried, “Hey, Jack, this man ‘ere agrees with Mr. Boxhall on our positionin’.”

The other man, in a light blue coat and a pair of headphone over his ears, turned and nodded.

“Well, I was only trying to help.”

“Oh, thank you very much, not many men would ‘ave thought of it.”

Van Helsing nodded and smiled. He turned, and was just about to push the door open, when from outside the door was pulled open and in walked Smith, in his cap and heavy blue coat. He smiled and Van Helsing and offered him his hand.

“Good evening, Doctor Van Helsing. I just saw Doctor Seward and he told me you were in here, so I thought I’d see how things are.”

“They are fine, Captain,” Van Helsing said, “as fine as they can be at a time like this.”

Smith nodded soberly, “Yes, a terrible time for all involved. But, hopefully, these two young gentlemen here can save our skins, so to speak.”

“SOS,” the young man said with a snicker from behind the countertop. Smith was uncomprehending for a moment, but then smiled on realizing what the young wireless operator meant.

“Yes. Bride, what are you sending, anyway?”

“CQD, sir, just that,” the young man replied, and then to his Senior Officer, “you might wanna send SOS, it’s the new call, it may be your last chance to use it.”

Spontaneous laughter claimed all in the room, including Smith. It felt, at least to Van Helsing, like a release of steam, of fear and frustration. Since learning that Dracula was back in business, it felt as if a great weight had been upon his chest, and it had been worse since discovering that the Titanic was doomed.

“Yes, hopefully not,” Van Helsing said with a weak smile. “If you’ll excuse me, Captain...”

Smith nodded.

Van Helsing left the hut, the cold hitting him like a train as soon as he stepped onto the deck; at once his nose began to run. He put his hand on Seward’s shoulder and squeezed. “It appears that an officer has already done what I did, which is good; it affirms my belief that I am right.”

“You needed not assure yourself,” Seward said from faraway, “I knew all along that you were correct.”

“Thank you, John.”

Without word, both men began walking back up the deck, each grimly quiet, noticing that the list had increased even more.

* * * * *

The corridor in which Art currently stood was quiet; he had encountered only a few people in the past ten minutes, and they were neither un-dead nor threatening.

For a long time, he stood in the middle of the hall, looking helplessly about himself. He had heard nor seen anything weird since he had freed the young American steward; Dracula had given him the slip, so to say, and he was either hiding or still on the move. For some reason, Art didn't think that he was particularly interested in Seward and Van Helsing at the moment. It could have been his own paranoia, exacerbated by chasing a real life monster through a foundering vessel, but Art was sure that Dracula wanted to claim him first. Dracula may even have wanted to turn him into an un-dead, just out of a sick hate. As Art got back under way, moving cautiously so that he could not be ambushed, and so that he would miss no noise or any other unnatural disturbance, Art was jolted by the resolution that came into his mind: He would commit suicide before he let Dracula do to him what he had done to...Lucy. A picture flashed across Art's mind: He was on the floor, struggling weakly under the hellish weight and fury of Dracula, who's mouth was open in an O, revealing his nasty needlepoint fangs. This imagination Art calmly removed the pistol from his jacket, placed the barrel into his mouth, and pulled the trigger.

Art shuddered. He hoped to God that it would not come to that.

A few moments later, Art found himself standing before a glass door leading to the second-class dinning saloon. He tentatively entered, peered from left to right, saw only a few stewards sitting around a table smoking cigarettes, and removed himself. They didn't seem to be flustered in any way. If Dracula had come through...

Just then a horrible occurred to Art. He tried and tried to ascribe it to his unfounded paranoia, but he couldn't. Dracula, possibly, didn't have just one lackey on the ship, he had two, or four, or ten...

Art chuckled away his own apprehension, and continued on down the long corridor. A narrow stairwell brought him down a deck, and he was immediately taken with how almost all the corridors on Titanic were nearly identical; it couldn't have been too hard to draw the plans up: a few luxurious accommodations, and the rest bland, rehashed filler.

Up ahead, several men stood outside of a door, smoking and casually conversing. They took little notice of Art as he approached.

"There's talk of water down in the engine room," one man, a tall bald specimen with a walrus mustache, informed his comrades.

"Nah," one said with a dismissive wave. "You mean in the watertight compartments, and that's only two of 'em."

"I thought it was all the same," replied the walrus.

"Nope. The engine rooms are back towards the stern; only the two forward-most compartments are flooded, and not even to the ceiling. All's well, boys, it takes at least five or six flooded compartments to sink us."

Art passed them without a word or a thought. Another staircase took him down another deck... and there, up ahead, stood Dracula in man form, his arms crossed and a hellish smile splitting his blood-caked face. Art jerked to a stop, and at once had the gun in his hand.

"Too late," Dracula said goading. And indeed it was. For when Art next settled his eyes on Dracula, he was nothing but a fine mist, which was quickly sucked into a vent on the baseboard.

Molten rage filled Art. “Come back! Come back and fight, you coward!” he screamed, already moving. He knelt down before the brass vent, and peered into the darkness. From faraway, echoy, evil sounding laughter drifted forth.

“Fight me!” Art called into the vent, but was rewarded only with a repeat of his own command. “Come face me like a man!”

More chilling laughter rolled forth. “Art... Art...” said Lucy Westenra’s voice, mocking and hateful. “Art, I never loved you, I hated you from the first... I didn’t want you... who would want a sissy, a Lord Weakling!”

The laughter which followed, a blasphemous reproduction of the same laughter that Art had so cherished in his youth, ripped his heart wide open. Dracula had taken and befouled Lucy, now he meant to use her to torture him.

“Bastard! Bastard! Come and fight me! Come and say that to my face!”

“Oh... Art!” Lucy’s voice continued, fading further away into Titanic’s ventilation system. “Did I ever tell you about Quincy and I? How he made dirty, dirty love to me? How he made me fucking bleed...from front *and* back?”

“Shut up! Shut up! Leave Lucy and Quincy out of this! Stop it, monster, beast, motherfucking piece of goddamn gutter trash!”

“Bye, Art...” faint now, very far away. “Back to hell with me, where Quincy and I can fuck and watch you sink. We’ll be waiting, Art... we’ll hold the door for you...”

Chapter 20

The officers manning the Welin davits waited anxiously as women bid their husbands and older sons a reluctant goodbye and stepped down into the boats.

At some point while Seward and Van Helsing were in the smoking room waiting for Art, the band had assembled on deck and began to play cheery music. Some of the younger passengers stood as far away from the boats as they could in order to listen.

“I should really go look for him,” Seward said. They were standing near the entrance to the smoking room. Seward fought to keep from shivering against the cold. Van Helsing, for his part, didn’t seem to notice it.

“Soon,” the old man said. “I have faith that he can handle Dracula alone in his present state. I may need you here.”

Up until now, Van Helsing had been sure that Dracula would not attempt to escape until he had avenged himself. Now, having seen how weak he was, he wasn’t so certain. He may very well try to sneak into a boat. The only problem was: Boats were being loaded on the port side as well, and they couldn’t police boat sides of the deck...and though Van Helsing hated to admit it, even to himself, he couldn’t take Dracula on his own, even in his weakened state.

Van Helsing opened his mouth, but a shrieking whistle from the bridge cut him off. He turned just as a rocket exploded in the sky.

Many of the other passengers turned to look. A few of them let forth an “ooooo” or “ahhhh” as though it were fireworks on a Sunday picnic.

“Come, John,” Van Helsing said, and led the way aft, past calmly worried men waving to their departing families, and women who refused to leave the ship. “We should make a round of the deck and...”

The old man was cut off by the sight of a familiar face. Wearing an coat thrown haphazardly over his pajamas and looking palely disheveled, Thomas Andrews appeared from a doorway into the ship, his pants billowing as he went. His hands, at his sides, were trembling, and his eyes were unfocused. He looked as though he were in shock.

He passed Seward and Van Helsing without a word, and immediately began nearly begging with the women to leave the ship. Seward and Van Helsing stopped, turned, and watched as Andrews pleaded desperately.

“You must go,” he whined, his hands folded before him as if he were imploring God to answer an urgent prayer. “There is not a second to lose, you cannot pick and choose your lifeboat, go. We are going to sink.”

A murmur ran through the crowd, and a few of the women exhaled and gasped. Andrews went on, but Van Helsing and Seward had not the time to watch him.

“He is doing right,” Van Helsing said cryptically, “if these women and their children are not pushed, they will stay onboard unto the last minute.”

“Yes,” Seward replied, “but, with Titanic sagging in the water deeper and deeper every moment, I foresee no problems getting them into the boats eventually. I do worry about keeping the men out. The officers may not be able to deal with a panicked crowd of men when the time comes.”

Van Helsing sighed. “You are right. Have I ever told you about the “Mask Theory”?

Seward favored Van Helsing with a quizzical stare. “I don’t believe you have, Doctor,” he replied.

“Well,” Van Helsing began, and then stopped. Another rocket shirked into the sky and exploded. Most of the passengers milling on deck looked up once more and watched as the blast faded into nothingness.

Van Helsing sighed again. “We humans,” he said, “live from day-to-day wearing a... a... a thin layer of civility. The moment something goes wrong and we are endangered, that layer, the mask, slips away, and we are revealed for the animals that we truly are. I personally think that man is not that way, but some in the field disagree.”

Seward nodded.

“Men are... mostly good, but there are those who walk among us who *do* wear such masks. They are not truly good. They are playing a game, trying to fit into polite society.”

“We will see plenty of those types reveal themselves tonight, won’t we, doctor?”

Van Helsing nodded. Looking up the deck at the faces cast darkly in the dim lights, he replied, “Yes, John; more than we can count, if we aren’t lucky.”

They stood in their spots for several minutes longer. Another boat down the deck opened for business, and the women protested just a bit less strenuously than the ones before them.

Suddenly Van Helsing felt very tired. Walking the deck seemed somehow less important. “I would like to sit down for a moment,” he said.

“Certainly.”

Seward led Van Helsing back to the smoking room by way of the gymnasium. A few gentlemen and their wives milled about, looking either bored or concerned. John Jacob Astor was leaning against one piece of exercise machinery or another entertaining his wife and a few of the other ladies present by cutting open a lifebelt with his penknife and showing them what was inside.

"There goes one life-jacket," Van Helsing remarked as they passed.

"I believe that one was his," Seward said.

"He'll be sorry later."

Back in the smoking room, the card game was still in full-swing. A steward freshened the players' drinks, and accosted Seward as he sank onto the couch near the fire. "Would you gentlemen like something?"

Seward looked at Van Helsing, who nodded. "Might as well. I want a brandy, please."

"I'll take the same," Seward added. The steward nodded and rushed off.

Seward checked his pocket watch. "Fifteen after one and Art still isn't back." He snapped it closed and put it back in his pocket. Sighing, he looked past Van Helsing and to the door leading out of the room.

"You can go after you have your drink," Van Helsing said. He looked deep into John's eyes and saw disquiet. "It will calm your nerves."

"My nerves are..."

"Just wait, John."

It seemed almost an hour before the steward returned, but it couldn't have been more than five minutes. Van Helsing thanked and tipped him, and Seward nodded. Once he was gone, Seward drowned his brandy and stood.

"I wasn't expecting you to inhale it, John."

Seward sat the glass atop the hearth above the fireplace, next to a clock and before a grand painting entitled *Approach to Plymouth Harbor*. "I'm sorry, but I must go. Art might need me."

Van Helsing sighed. "Alright, go. My guess is that they wound up in third class again. Dracula seems to know it better than anywhere else on the ship."

Seward nodded. For some reason that he could not explain, he glanced at the glass, and his heart skipped a beat, for it began, even before his eyes, to slide down the hearth as if pushed by a ghostly hand.

"The..." he started, but stopped as the glass went over the side and shattered on the floor with a weak chink.

"You'd better hurry, John."

* * * * *

Another identical corridor brought him to another stairwell, and that in turn gave out on another long corridor, this one nowhere near as nice as the one that he had previously passed. Art was startled to see a steward standing at the end of the hall, leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette. He saw Art but made no motion to wave, or to yell, but only stood there regarding him with indifference. Art started toward the man, and became aware of the multitude of angry voices, stammering over one another, coming from up around the corner, which the steward seemed to guard.

As Art came closer, some of the words being spoken presented themselves, but many of them were so slurred by accent that he was unable to fully understand them.

When Art reached the corner, standing almost close enough to the steward to kiss him, he beheld the cause of the commotion; to the right was a gangway, which had been closed off with brass fencing, putting one in mind of bars from a prison or an insane asylum. Behind this was a crush of panicked humanity.

When the poor souls saw Art, perhaps mistaking him as an officer, many of them reached their arms through the bars imploringly, howling to be released. From their dress, Art surmised that these were third-classers. Among them were many woman and children; one woman at the head of the crowd was even clutching a small infant to her breast. A few small children were also at the vanguard of the desperate army, holding onto the bars and crying hysterically, out of utter fear, most likely. A few words were decipherable from the din. One that stood out most clearly, from the voice of a young girl (or maybe a young boy) was "water". A surly Irish man with a tangle of red hair atop his head and one beefy arm shoved through the gate, looking for all the world like a damned soul on the outside of heaven, wailing and gnashing his teeth, managed to silence his friends and family with a deep bellow. When the noise had gone down he spoke:

"Sir, sir, you have to help us, this monster locked us down here and the water's comin' fast. I got a wife and daughter; there are babies for God's sake..." Once again, the frantic prisoners all began shouting over each other, trying to add their own bits and pieces to the picture.

"They're going to let us drown!" came the voice of what may have been a Hungarian woman; and the children wailed louder and the babies added their own noise, frightened by the terror of their elders.

Art heard this, but from far away. His eyes were glued to the baby in the poor woman's arms, held protectively against her chest. It was a thin, frail thing wrapped in a tan blanket, quiet and asleep unlike its contemporaries.

How could someone stand there, apathetically smoking with deaf ears while men and women begged for their children to be saved? How could someone stand there up against a wall while babies and children and women (and men) were caged like animals while a ship sank into the frigid waters?

"What's the meaning of this?" Art asked roughly as he turned on the steward, hot anger rising in his chest. For the moment, Dracula was forgotten.

The steward shrugged and snorted as if he meant to spit on Art. He looked to his left at the distraught crush and then back to Art.

"Orders from the bridge," he said unemotionally, "we're to keep them here and give the others a chance at the boats."

Anger flooded through Art's veins on hearing this smug little nothing refer to a group of people in peril (children! babies!) as if they were a herd of cattle. Before he could stop himself, he had the gun out of his pocket and shoved into the steward's face.

"Let them out this instant," Art growled, "or I'll shoot you where you stand."

The steward, wide-eyed, nodded dumbly and fumbled a set of keys from his pocket, nearly dropping them.

"Hurry!" Art barked. "There isn't much time."

Without taking his eyes from the gun, the steward opened the gate and stood flat against the wall whilst those he meant to kill streamed past, throwing hate filled glances in his direction.

One of the last to leave the formerly gated stairwell was a tall Irish youth with a mane of red hair and a knobby Adam's apple. As he was passing the steward, he reached out one hand, grabbed his shirt, and cocked back his arm for a devastating blow...

But was dissuaded by Art. "It's over now, leave him be."

The young boy, really still not old enough to be out of high school, glanced at Art, his lips pursed and his eyes narrowed with hate. "Alright, gov; but just because you said so."

He shoved the frightened steward back against the wall, turned, and held his hand out to Art.

Art took it.

"Thank you, sir, you're a real fine man; I'll never forget it."

Art nodded, and the boy ran along after the main body of the exodus.

"Give me your keys," Art demanded. The steward complied. "Now go on, I'm sure there's better for you to be doing than trying to kill people." Before Art could even finish speaking, the steward was on his feet and fleeing.

For a long time, Art looked after the man, contemplating the blatant exhibition of inhumanity that he had just been privy to. Had those orders really come from the bridge? And if so, the bigwig on the bridge was Captain Smith; would he have done this? No, impossible. Smith was a man of kindness, compassion, and humility; the thought of him even considering such a horrible crime against nature was lunacy. But...

Maybe it was Murdoch, maybe he would be so low as to do something like this; he sure seemed like the type of man who wouldn't blink an eye at letting children drown. It would have to be; Smith never would have made such an order.

Art descended the stairwell and stepped into a small puddle of water on the bare floor. To his left, water was leaking from the vents along the baseboard; even as he watched, the trickle increased to a steady gush. His first instinct was to retreat to the bottom step; his socks were already wet, and the water was nearly intolerable, but his attention was presently commandeered by a crush of rats fleeing the water, squeaking and scurrying his way. One of them was bigger than the others, he noticed, coal black and limped...

Art raised his gun and fired, but the rat was already airborne, was already turning into a bat, was already a man.

With the force of a speeding freight train, Dracula smashed into Art, knocking him to the floor. Before the latter could even scream, Dracula had him up against the wall, crushing his throat with his large, dead hands. There was the same smile on his face, the same fire in his eyes, the same damned craggy Roman face.

Once again, the air to Art's lungs was cut, his vision began to darken, and he began to die.

But such a surge of rage and hatred tore through him that he quickly rallied. He balled his fist and slammed it into Dracula's mouth over and over...and, from the flickering of the fire in Dracula's eyes, Art could see that he was feeling the pain.

Pain. But not enough of it. He opened his mouth, again reveling his abhorrent fangs.

Unthinkingly, Art smashed his fist into Dracula's mouth again... and watched in amazement as Dracula's right needlepoint tooth wiggled, and then fell out in a small squirt of blood.

Face slack with shock, Dracula probed the empty spot in his gum with the tip of his tongue. He dropped Art from his vise grip and fell to his knees in a distraught search for the lost tooth.

"Goddamn you, goddamn you!" he wailed as he searched on his hands and knees. For a moment, Art was so shocked by the turn of events that he almost didn't seize the opportunity at hand. It was so surreal; not only had he just knocked Dracula's fang out but the vampire was now on his hands and knees looking for it.

Realizing that this was not to be passed up, Art reared back his leg and drove it into Dracula's stomach. The beast let out a howl more of shock than pain, and tumbled over to his side, splashing in the ever rising waters. Art took time to notice that the cold drink was up to his ankles, and was just now beginning to creep up the stairs.

"Having fun?" Art growled and then kicked Dracula again, and again, and again.

The monster was now in a pitiable heap on the flooded floor, moaning. Remembering the cross in his jacket pocket, Art pulled it out, and, without care or aim, brought it down; it sank into Dracula's broad back like a butter knife into rock, jarring and sending vibrations up Art's arms.

"You like to play around, do you?" Art asked barely hearing his own voice over the growling roar of the water. "You like games?"

Dracula was now getting to his knees, weak and shivering (shivering! He felt the cold!). "Here's for Lucy!" Art kicked him again. "And for Quincy!" Another savage kick, and another fulfilling bellow.

As Dracula rolled over and over in the deepening water, the cross sank deeper and deeper into his chest, but it was not close enough to the heart to kill him. Art kicked him again, and relished the grunts and moans. Kick. Kick. Kick. Dracula was lying prone, defeated. Art pulled his leg back one last time and kicked...

...hitting nothing. Dracula was gone. Just like that. Poof.

Art nearly tumbled over, fought to regain his balance, and turned this way and that, a predator searching for his prey.

He was gone. Escaped. The slippery, stinking bastard.

Chapter 21

John Seward stood in a rich, warmly lit hallway somewhere in the second class, looking strickenly about himself and wondering where to go. Titanic was such a big ship; there were so many corridors.

A few men in lifebelts rushed past him, commenting on the list, and disappeared up a well-appointed staircase.

Rounding a corner up ahead was a large group of what appeared to be steerage passengers. Reaching into his wallet, figuring it was worth a shot, he pulled out a faded photograph of Art (regal and stone-faced), and flashed it to the first person to pass him, a Hungarian woman in a kerchief. She looked at the picture, and made wild gestures while spewing out words in her native tongue.

A man in a cap leaned over his shoulder.

“Have you seen this man?” Seward asked.

“Ay,” the man replied in a thick Scottish accent, “e’s the one let us out not ten minutes gone by.”

The man went on to tell Seward about the gates and Art freeing them.

“Is the situation bad in steerage?” he asked.

“I’d say. The dinnin’ room was flooded.”

After the group went on its way, Seward stood indecisively. He considered venturing into steerage, but if the situation was that bad, he doubted Art and Dracula would be there. On the other hand, Art might be trapped.

Sighing, Seward tucked the photo into his pocket and followed the signs on the walls to a stairwell leading into third class. Here, the list was even greater. He started down the plainly appointed hall, but stopped when he became aware of an odd roaring din. He stopped, cocked his head, and listened for a moment, but couldn’t quite place it.

Suddenly nervous, he took the crucifix from his coat and advanced slowly down the hall; it was like descending a ramp.

A right turn brought him to the top of a staircase: Rushing water covered all but the last two steps. As he watched in amazement, the water closed over the second-to-last tread and began to rise.

“Art?” he called, his voice muffled by the sound of the water. “Art?”

No reply.

“Art!”

Nothing.

If he was trapped, it wasn’t here.

Licking his lips, Seward turned and started down a hall leading deeper into the ship, but stopped: Ahead, water gushed out of a vent grate along the bottom of the wall.

“Art?”

No reply.

Gnawed by worry, he went back up the hall and poked around a bit. The staterooms he found were abandoned, the lights left blazing and personal effects strewn across the floor. In one berth he found a man lying in the center of the room. With a jolt of the heart, he knew the man was dead.

Kneeling, Seward found that it wasn’t a man at all but a boy no more than seventeen. His face was white and shrunken, and two ugly red puncture wounds marred his neck.

Dracula.

When he returned to junction leading to the stairwell, he saw that the water had come up into the hall and was washing across the floor. The stairs were completely submerged.

In the smoking room, he found Dr. Van Helsing by the card table, standing over a large man's shoulder and smiling. The man, beefy and mustached, said something, and Van Helsing chuckled.

"John," he called when he saw him, "come here."

Seward approached the table, and Van Helsing introduced him to the beefy man, Archibald Butt.

"I came over to chat after one of these men spilled their drinks and they had to break while it was cleaned up," Van Helsing said.

"I did not spill it," a man wearing a monocle said indignantly, "it slid off the table."

Seward noticed that there were no glasses present on the table.

"I wonder how long it'll be until *we* start sliding around," Butt mused.

Van Helsing's smile died. "Not long, I am sure."

"The third class dining room is flooded," John said, "and so is much of steerage."

The men at the table looked as though he had told them an army of savages was on its way. "Third? Already?" asked monocle.

Seward nodded. "Dr. Van Helsing, could you come with me, please?"

Van Helsing nodded. He clapped Butt on the shoulder. "Hopefully I will see you again."

"Hopefully," Butt echoed.

Van Helsing hobbled past Seward. "Follow me to the deck. I want to make a round. How did your search go? You were not gone very long."

As they left the smoking room and stepped onto the icy deck, Seward told Van Helsing what he had learned.

"Good," Van Helsing said, "maybe he has Dracula."

"I just worry about the flooding. Hopefully he isn't trapped somewhere."

The number of people on the deck had tripled in the twenty minutes they had been gone. Van Helsing saw people of every social class; men, women, children, stewards, maids, and other Titanic employees. Two boats just aft of the smoking room entrance were being filled by several officers, one of whom stood in the boat and held fast to the davit, waving on women and children and waving back men. Van Helsing saw that J.J. Astor and his group had abandoned the gym and were waiting back in the crowd. Once several more ladies had been admitted to the boat, the Astors came forward.

"Do you mind if I join my wife?" Astor asked the officer, one arm protectively around Madeline's waist; "in her condition..."

"Sorry, sir; women and children first," the officer said.

Astor, looking a bit wounded, motioned his wife to get in.

So this was it. People were beginning to realize that Titanic was gravely wounded. In the twenty minutes it had taken John to search for Art, fear, disquiet, and foreboding had begun to color the prevailing mood.

"Let's walk, John."

On the port deck, a scene similar to the one on starboard was unfolding. There seemed to be more people here than there were on starboard, many more, and after a moment, Van Helsing understood why. The officers at the davits were letting almost anybody onto the boats.

Weaving through the crowd on the forward part of the deck, Van Helsing carefully inspected every face that he came across. Dracula wasn't out in the open, but it was possible that he was on the promenade deck.

Close to the bridge, a small stairway enclosed on three sides by a bland white wall, waist height to a man, gave access to B-deck. Seward unquestioningly followed Van Helsing down the gently sloping stairs, already having inferred what they were doing.

The promenade deck wrapped around the ship entirely; one could start at port stern and walk all the way around the vessel. A few steerage men and manual laborers were standing on the section of deck which connected the port and starboard bow, looking out at the ever lowering bow, talking and speculating excitedly. Looking aft, Van Helsing saw a massive crush of people huddled along the glassless windows, restlessly waiting for the boats to drop spider-like from above; so many of them were talking at once that he couldn't make out any individual conversations, but he didn't need to. They looked scared, all of them, their faces ashen and their eyes bright and clear. The deck was growing steeper by the moment; even the most imbecilic of men could now clearly see that the Titanic was in mortal danger.

How long before the deck erupted into full-blown panic? Van Helsing wondered, before men started to fight women for spots in the boats, before the thin layer of civility shattered and all hell came through?

Presently, a boat jerked past one of the wide windows and grinded to a halt. The resident officer, a rather rotund man, roughly oversaw the loading of nearly a dozen people, including woman, several small children, and a boy of roughly thirteen who was at first denied passage until his father demanded it. Several men asked if they could board, but each one was rebuffed.

Once the officer decided that the boat was full, he grabbed one of the ropes tethering it, looked up, and called, "Alright, lower her down!"

Van Helsing watched as the faces in the boat, wan and drawn, haltingly disappeared.

He looked then to the people around him.

"At any moment," Van Helsing said, "their masks could slip off."

"What?" Seward asked.

"Nothing," Van Helsing replied.

* * * * *

Arthur Holmwood was at a loss. Though a man to rarely ever rest in indecision, and certainly not one to give up when something lost any ease it may once have had, he hadn't an idea how to proceed. The hour was growing late and the list heavier, and Dracula was nowhere to be found. Searching every single cabin, each linen closet, each nook and cranny... wasn't merely a daunting task, it was an impossible one, as Doctor Van Helsing had said. The ship was simply too big to be gone over by one man alone, and time was running out. Most of the lowest decks were already underwater. Several times since the monster had escaped him, he had come to stairways leading down into nothing but glowing, bubbling ocean. The only thing the search had yielded was another gated passageway, this one presided over by a tall Irish man with blazing eyes and rotted teeth that would

have blocked the continued life of nearly three dozen frightened immigrants. The man crumbled easily enough when Art unpocketed the defunct pistol and aimed it (God forgive him) at his crotch.

"There are no others that I know of, I swear it!" the man yelled when Art cocked the trigger. A hefty, middle-aged man in a cap disagreed, however, and claimed that he had come upon three such barriers in his terrified search for safety.

"Go and tell the people watching them that Lord Godalming has demanded they be opened," Art told the man, who nodded and rushed away down a dim hall.

Now, as Art came to the second class stairway and sank to the bottom step in a posture of utter despair, he lit a cigarette and puffed angrily on it, filling the slanted corridor with fragrant smoke. God damn it all. Where was that son-of-a-whore? He had trouble believing he would crawl into a stateroom and die quietly like an animal in the wild, but that didn't mean anything. He was wounded and weak. He could easily become lost and stumble around until the TITANIC went down, thus depriving Art the pleasure of killing him.

There was no escape for him, Art realized, whether death came by his hand or not. And though the thought of Dracula dying filled him with indescribable joy, the thought of Dracula dying any way but by his hand enraged and agitated him.

He sighed and took another long puff. If he must, then he would accept Dracula's death in whatever form it came. He would prefer to look into the motherfucker's eyes as his filthy soul was ripped back to hell, to see the fear, the terror, the horror, the dread, the agony, but if he was unable, then that was something that he, as a gentleman, would have to come to terms with. There was no use in sulking around like a sullen child who hasn't gotten his way.

Sighing, he flicked his cigarette into the hall and stood. Below him, the step was uneven. He took out his pocket watch. 1:30 am. Another hour and a half, if he was lucky. God, was that the true time? It felt as if he had been after the thing much longer than that. Art closed his eyes and did a bit of mental math. The last time he remembered with any clarity was 12:30 on the clock on the grand staircase.

Time was short, and Dracula was nowhere.

* * * * *

Dracula stumbled, sank to one knee with a pained cry, and nearly toppled over like a once proud oak struck down by age. Agony coursed through his veins, and he was suddenly very cold.

Grunting, the vampire rose to his feet, staggered a bit down the hall, and collapsed against the wall; the world around him swam and darkened.

"Ey!" someone cried. "Ey! You alright?"

Dracula murmured something.

Time seemed to speed up, for suddenly a man in an Andy cap was helping him up. "Don't you worry," he was saying, "we'll get..."

Dracula went for his throat.

Chapter 22

When he entered the first-class smoking room, Lord Godalming was mildly amused to see that the card game was still in full swing. While families still streamed up the grand staircase, rushing much faster than they had been when they first came on deck and found nothing seemingly amiss, and while people were now entering boats more and more of their own free will, the men at the table in the corner were still gathered around, chomping their cigars and playing their hands. They had long ago forsaken the comforts of brandy, but the fire had been stoked by a steward with nothing else to do, so the blaze was roaring and radiating waves of pleasant heat.

What he did *not* see, however, was Seward and Van Helsing. The chair and sofa by the fire stood empty, and Art's stomach rolled at the thought of what could have happened to them.

He thought briefly of going out onto the deck to look for them, but from what he could hear in the smoking room, things were getting a tad chaotic out there; no screams of terror yet, but there was plenty of shouting. He decided to sit and wait. If they weren't back in five minutes, he'd go out and look for them.

This is what Dracula wanted, Art thought as he sank stiffly down on the couch, to hide under the cover of chaos, and to separate us.

Art sighed. Someone had left a newspaper on the seat next to him, and he picked it up. He only scanned the headlines, screaming in bold black, not having the interest required to read.

Putting the paper aside with a crisp rustle, Art sighed, and looked toward the slim glass door through which he had come, hoping to see Dracula coming through, ready at last to fight like a man. Through the glass, Art did see a blurry figure approaching, and was at once on his feet, his fists balled, his heart pumping adrenaline. But it only proved to be Mr. Isidor Straus, his wife, Ida, at his side.

Heart still thumping, disappointment washing over him, Art sat rigidly down on the sofa, and watched as Isidor and Ida took to a small table in a quiet corner of the room. Sitting across from each other, Isidor reached across the table and took Ida's hands into his own. They passed a few quiet, solemn words.

Art smiled at the sight. He did not personally know the Straus' (he had met them briefly at a party in America when Isidor had been in the U.S. House of Representatives), but he knew them to be very close, nearly inseparable. It was no wonder, they had been married for years, they had grown old together, and had (barely) never known a day apart.

Art's smile slackened as his thoughts turned to Lucy; they had never had the chance to grow old together, to forget what a life without the other was like, to raise children; all thanks to that bastard Dracula.

Art pushed these thoughts away and gazed deeply into the crackling fire. From behind him a man was protesting the hand of another, and the others were laughing at their foolishness.

"It is only a game, Henry, don't take it so seriously," said an American.

"You don't have as much money riding on this as I do," came the refined British reply.

"No," replied the yank without a trace of irony or sarcasm, "but by the end of the night, everyone's money will be only lumps of wet paper, anyway."

A nervous titter met this, and someone replied that that was true, and loudly clapped the American's back.

"Art!" someone cried from behind him, startling him nearly out of his skin. Turning, he saw Van Helsing and Seward hurrying toward him.

Smiling, Art stood. "I knew I'd find you two here."

They all embraced.

"Did you catch up to Dracula?" Van Helsing asked.

"Yes," Art replied, "he escaped, but he's weakened. Very much so."

"Then we may not have to do anything," Seward was hopeful.

"I'd like to kill him myself," Art said, "I want him to..."

"Yes, yes," Van Helsing dismissed, "we must get back into the search." Now that Art was back and he knew for certain that Dracula was in danger of dying, a new vigor awoke within him.

"He must be on the deck somewhere," Art said, "there isn't much dry space below."

Van Helsing nodded. "You take to the port side; John and I will go starboard."

Chapter 23

Things on deck were starting to get out of hand. More and more people crowded noisily around the lifeboats, clambering for admittance, pushing and shoving, and even more people were dressed in their lifebelts. Whatever semblance of order there may have been just moments ago was gone, replaced by rapidly mounting panic.

Watching one boat, Van Helsing was sickeningly sure that hysterical masses on deck would swamp it and that all the women and children would be dumped into the sea. But the officer, standing tall and clinging to the rope, aimed away from the ship and let roar three mighty gunshots that stopped the men dead.

"Women and children!" he cried, "woman and children!"

A few huddled women, cringing at the men around them, came forth and were helped into the boat by an able seaman. An ocean of arms passed forth a small child, and another, two small cherub boys with dark, curly hair. The sailor, seeing that there were no more women or children, climbed up into the boat, and it began dropping haltingly to the black sea.

"Dr. Van Helsing," Seward said, putting a hand on the older man's shoulder, "come."

By unspoken consent, they moved up the tilted deck, passing several people they had met on the voyage. Thomas Andrews and J. Bruce Ismay were tossing deck chairs into the water, working in grave and frantic silence. Archibald Butt, done with cards for the night, was calmly smoking a cigarette and gazing out to sea, seemingly to a twinkling light on the horizon.

"A steamship," a small man standing next to him said.

Butt shrugged. "Maybe, Clinch, but why isn't it coming any closer? It's been there for over an hour, or so one of the officers said."

"Maybe she can't make it through the ice."

Butt grunted.

From above, three more shots rang out.

"It's nearing the end," Seward observed.

"Yes," Van Helsing replied.

* * * * *

It's almost done, Art thought as he pushed his way through the crowded port boat deck. Many of the davits toward the stern were empty, and the ones that did hold boats were swarmed with panicked men. Art counted eight women and three children as he fought his way forward, many of them second or third class passengers. He thought back to the gates he had come to during his final search of steerage, and wondered if he had found them all: The thought of people drowned in a narrow corridor sent a shiver down his spine.

Near the entrance to the smoking room, an officer stepped back from a lowering boat and right into Art's path: They collided.

"Terribly sorry," the man said. Art had never seen him before.

"No harm," he said. Suddenly remembering the sketch, he took it out of his coat pocket. "That is if you can help me."

"Certainly," the officer said, looking over his shoulder. Through the crush of humanity, Art couldn't see whether there were any more boats being loaded or not.

"I'm looking for a friend of mine." He handed the sketch to the man, who took it and held it a foot from his face.

"I just saw him," the officer said. "On his way to the wheelhouse. Had Murdoch with him."

Murdoch.

That single word struck Art like a bullet. He remembered the man's unprovoked hostility, his contemptuous manner. The man in black was Officer Murdoch. He was under Dracula's spell.

"Are you alright, sir?" the officer asked.

"Yes, sorry," Art said. "Thank you."

With that he went off into the crowd in search of John and Dr. Van Helsing. For a horrible moment they were nowhere to be found, but then he saw them ascending the forward stairs to B-Deck.

"Art, have you seen Dracula?" asked Van Helsing excitedly, no doubt noticing his pale hue and the wild look in his eye. They knew who Dracula's cohort was, and getting to him, they could thus get to Dracula.

"No, but I have discovered the identity of the elusive man-in-black."

Happy shock swept Van Helsing's face. "Who is it?" he asked eagerly.

"Mr. Murdoch," Art breathed.

Stunned silence.

"But of course," Seward said like a man who had just figured the solution to an arduous equation.

"We should have known that it was him from the first," Van Helsing said.

"That doesn't matter, we know now," Art replied, and pushed past Seward and Van Helsing.

* * * * *

Art mounted a metal ladder fixed to the wall of the officers' quarters and stood atop the poop deck for a moment before the massive forward funnel, digging in his pockets for loose bullets. Off in the distance, a ball of light shone on the horizon, an approaching steamship; it seemed that Dracula would not have his holocaust after all.

Barely noticing Seward and Van Helsing in tow, Art snapped the cylinder shut and walked to the edge of the deck.

The forward most part of the boat deck was empty, eerily so. A daunting wave of humanity, becoming more and more panicked as the list grew, pressed closely aft. But here, there was...

There! Two figures along the fore-bridge, one of them exaggeratedly tall. Surely, Dracula.

"...Kill 'em, that damn Lord Bastard was heavy, I tried my best to get him over, but..."

Apparently, some ice had been left on the deck after the collision, and Art had the queer misfortune of stepping on a crisp chunk as he sneaked up behind Murdoch and Dracula. With a muttered curse, realizing that his plans had been foiled, Art raised and fired the gun, even as the two men simultaneously swung around.

The first bullet sang harmlessly over the bow and into the night, the second hit Dracula in the back of the head, knocking it forward and bringing a small cry of pain from his throat. The third took Murdoch in the head, and with a leaping heart, Art was sure that he had killed the son of a bitch. But, with drawling horror, Art watched as Murdoch, his hat carried over the barrier by the bullet, steadied.

"Bastard!" Murdoch screamed, raising his own pistol and firing twice in rapid succession, both bullets whizzing past Art's head. Up the deck people screamed.

Ducking behind a wall, Art aimed and squeezed the trigger.

Click-click.

"Goddamn it!" he howled. Another bullet whizzed by him.

He dug in his pocket for more bullets, but Murdoch, emboldened, started coming forward. With a muttered curse, Art abandoned his position and rushed up the deck, nearly knocking into Seward and Van Helsing, who joined his flight.

Glancing over his shoulder, Van Helsing saw that Murdoch and Dracula were close behind. Thinking fast, hoping that Dracula would keep after Art, Van Helsing ducked in the next doorway, mashing himself up against the closed door to the wireless hut. Dracula, in his rage, had outrun and passed Murdoch, and flew by the door without so much as a second glance.

Please let me do this right, Van Helsing silently prayed. Gripping his cane in one hand, Van Helsing emerged from the doorway like jack-in-the-box, just as Murdoch was passing. With a grunt of exertion, Van Helsing swung the cane, and delivered a noisy whack to the back of Murdoch's right leg. With a pitiable howl, Murdoch dropped to the deck, the gun sliding away.

Van Helsing, cane raised high, fell on Murdoch. But after only two light smacks to the legs, Murdoch lunged, wrapping his arms around Van Helsing's ankles and

upsetting him. With a cry of shock, sure that he was as good as dead, he toppled back...

Chapter 24

Dr. Seward didn't realize that Van Helsing was not at his side until he slammed through the door to the first-class entrance. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that the old man wasn't behind him either.

Pausing for a moment, panic rising within him, Seward yelled when Dracula crashed into him, knocking him hard to the floor. The breath sucked out of him, Seward's vision grayed and threatened to go black.

Shaking with blind, stupid fury, Dracula fell on him then, wrapping his cold hands around his throat and squeezing.

The world went dim. Dracula was grinning. Opening his mouth. He had only one fang.

A loud boom filled the void, and Dracula jerked back.

Seward sat up just as Dracula got unsteadily to his feet, an ugly red hole in his forehead. Behind him, Murdoch skitted into the room, and Art fired at him, hitting him in the shoulder. Yelping, he fell back.

"You!" he said again, this time lower and meaner. "You..."

"Me," Art spat, pulling the sharpened crucifix from his jacket. Dracula's eye flickered to it, and then back to Art's hard face.

"You think you can kill me with that?" Dracula hissed, cautiously moving forward. "You think killing me will bring back your precious Lucy?"

At the mention of her name, Art seized, his heart leaping into his throat. Dracula smiled at the effect that his words had had.

"You're a fool, a buffoon, a tired joke..."

Shaking with rage, Art flung himself at Dracula, screaming like an Indian warrior on the American plains. Such a direct assault took Dracula by surprise, for when Art hit him he fell with a startled cry.

Art lost himself to primal fury. Weeping, yelling, trembling, Lucy dancing through his mind, dear, sweet Lucy in the vampiric state, her face cemetery pale and her lips bright red, her teeth long and her hands cold, he hit Dracula with a closed fist, the way that he would hit a normal man. He barely registered the flash up pain that snaked up his arm, barely realized that he had dropped the crucifix.

Dracula's dreadful face, twisted with hatred, caked with blood, molded and dented with each hit. He reached out and swiped Art's cheek with one clawed hand, drawling blood, but that didn't deter Art. He was like a man possessed. His fist rose, fell, rose, fell, rose, fell.

"...Motherfucker!" Art was screaming. Somehow the gun was in his hand again. Hadn't he dropped it? He was sure he had. But that didn't matter. He shoved it under Dracula's chin and fired.

Blood splattered Art's face.

"Die, motherfucker, die!"

He fired again.

Chapter 25

“Art!”

The voice (it was a familiar voice) came from far away: it was muffled and distorted, like words spoken underwater.

“Art!”

The ship trembled, and Art started, his heart blasting into his throat. His head cleared, and he realized that it was only Van Helsing, gripping his shoulder and shaking.

“Arthur! Are you alright?”

Art shook his head, caught his run away breath, and nodded. “Yes.” His voice was small, winded. Before him, Dracula lay like an offering to a dark god, his head shattered and his black ichor splashing the walls, the floor, everything.

“He’s dead,” Art muttered. Instead of the blooming joy and triumph he expected, he felt... nothing. It was as though he had done nothing more than take out a bag of trash.

“Yes, Art; he is!” Van Helsing sounded quite happy, and Art smiled despite himself. “We have done it!”

“You sound as if you doubted we would.” Art got shakily to his feet, and stumbled on the slanted floor. Through the open entrance behind him, shouts, low mummings, and music drifted in. “Where is Murdoch?”

“I think he ran away,” Van Helsing said. “Dracula no longer has a hold on him. He is free.”

“That’s good for him,” Seward said, rolling his neck. “I took quite a hit to the head when Dracula knocked me down. I think I need a drink.”

Van Helsing laughed and clapped the younger man on the back. “Yes, yes. I’m sure the smoking room is still up and running. Come.”

Van Helsing was so happy that, for a moment anyway, he could forget the ever growing list, the mounting panic, and the specter of Death looming over them. Dracula was dead, and for the moment... that was all that mattered.

Chapter 26

The tilted smoking room, dim and warm, the fire still roaring in the hearth, was a study in the surreal. Though nothing seemed terribly out of place, the perspective was off, some of the chairs and end tables had slid from where they had sat and the doors to both the deck and points otherwise hung open, plastered against the walls by gravity. Some small glass trinkets, cups, a clock, an ashtray, lie shattered on the floor. Stumbling in, nearly losing his balance at the near-

diagonal angle, Van Helsing found himself imagining this purgatory, where souls were to wait indefinitely for their final judgment.

Art led the way into the still ambient room, past a few other men standing here and there, talking and drinking. The card game had finally broken up; the floor around the table littered with glasses, cigar butts, and playing cards.

At the fireplace, Archibald Butt, John Jacob Astor, and Benjamin Guggenheim were standing around, despondently staring into the licking flames, their usual rigid postures now slackened in the face of the inevitable. They clutched drinks in their hands, but the only one seeming to remember this fact was Astor, who swayed on his feet as if he had had too much to drink.

"Gentlemen," Art greeted curtly as he, Van Helsing, and Seward joined them. Guggenheim smiled and lowly said something. Butt turned, noticed Van Helsing, and warmly greeted him. Astor seemed lost in thought as he stared on into the fire.

"Are there any drinks left?" Art asked, "Doctor Seward hurt himself and needs a bit of medication."

"Here," Guggenheim said, offering a glassful of sparkling amber liquid to Art, "you can have this. I assure you, I didn't touch it; I seem to have lost my thirst."

"Thank you, Ben," he said, taking it and handing it to Seward, who took it and swallowed it.

"I'm not much thirsty anymore myself," Butt added, looking down into his glass. "Dr. Van Helsing, would you like mine?"

Van Helsing shook his head. "The last thing that I want is to be even the slightest bit drunk right now."

Butt chuckled. "Sober of mind and body. I take it that you're doing well, then?"

"I am doing well, Major," Van Helsing said, and he was; now that Dracula was dead, he felt splendid, "hopefully you are too."

"As well as can be expected," Butt said and turned back on the fire. "It's not every day that a man finds himself in such a tight spot. I've had my fair share of scrapes with Death, but this... this is different." He took a toss of brandy

"I think there is grave doubt that any of the men will get off," Guggenheim reflected as he too stared into the flames. "I am willing to remain and play the man's game if there are not enough boats for more than the women and children. I won't die here like beasts..." he took a stiff drink from his glass "...tell my wife I played the game out straight and to the end. No woman shall be left aboard this because Ben Guggenheim is a coward!"

"Not all of the men are standing up as well as we are," Art said, looking at John Astor's profile; his face was pale, and his eyes were red and puffy as if he'd been crying. Suddenly, he didn't feel much like a drink anymore. "Some men are selfish and think only of their own wellbeing. If there were enough boats, that wouldn't be so damn disgusting, but as it is, there aren't."

Guggenheim nodded gravely, "I've never before understood the need for so many boats to clutter a deck; now I do." He let out a tortured chuckle.

"I've heard of ice, but this is ridiculous," Astor said finally after finishing his own drink. He turned around and scanned the smoking room behind him; the men at the card table were still there, but the others who had been around the door were gone.

“Steward!” he called, slurring his words only slightly. None came. “Steward!”

“I believe they have all gone,” Butt offered as he tossed his glass into the fireplace.

Art checked his watch: 1:55. He looked left and right, clearly hearing the mass confusion on deck.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I would love to stay and chat, but I feel that I must make myself useful somehow. Good evening.”

The men muttered farewells amongst themselves, knowing deep in their hearts that they would be forever. Butt shook Van Helsing’s hand and clapped him on the back. Ben squeezed Art’s shoulder and shuffled toward the grand staircase, and John Astor stood stoically before the fire, a lost soul.

None of them are going to make it, Art found himself thinking. He shuddered at the morbidity of it, but somehow he was certain. Their faces had been the faces of the soon dead; white and dark, shriveled and ghostly. Each and every one of the men he had just been drinking with would go down in TITANIC tonight.

He looked from Seward to Van Helsing, and shuddered.

They would *all* go down.

* * * * *

On deck, pandemonium had broken out. People screamed and stumbled incoherently this way and that, their eyes wide and terrified. The band was still playing from near aft, a somber rendition of *Ode to Joy*, lending the desperate madness a bizarre quality.

“There is not much we can do,” Van Helsing said lowly as he surveyed the deck. “I...” he was cut off by the sound of gunfire. Up the deck near one of the davits was clustered a group of clamoring men in lifebelts, jostling and bellowing like wild animals.

“Back!” yelled an officer. One of his arms was wrapped around the davit and the other outstretched, a small pistol grasped tightly in his large fist. “Get back!”

Someone stepped forward, and the officer fired. The man spun and fell to the deck, dead. “You’ve killed him!” someone cried indignantly. A sound of outrage rippled through the crowd.

The officer shouted something, swung his arm to the side, and fired again. “Back! Back, damn it!”

The crowd, seeming to have learned its lesson, fell back a slight step, but Art could tell from their tightly tensed postures that they were waiting to strike once more. Another officer pushed his way through the crowd and spoke into the other’s ear. The first officer nodded, and then climbed into the boat. A pair of men in fairly decent clothes began working the pulley system, and the boat, overfull, started to descend.

Several of the men on deck made a rush for it, but the officer shot them in rapid succession.

“Things are getting worse than I ever could have imagined,” Van Helsing said. Seward, slack jawed, nodded. Art went to speak, but a passerby accidentally elbowed him in the back, and his words came out as a muffled Humph.

“John...” Van Helsing started, but was again cut off, this time by an officer, a small, winded man in blue who materialized from the ether.

“Do any of you have any experience at sea?” he ejaculated.

“Yes,” Art said, “John and I have done plenty of sailing.”

“Thank God. Come with me.”

Art and the others obediently followed him forward, through the masses. Disoriented, like men emerging from a forest after several days of being lost, they finally shambled into a clearing before a boat. A young officer, looking scared, and an older one looking dour, stood before a ring of unhappy men, most of them muscular and dressed in the clothes of stokers. The older one, his hat cocked to one side like a cowboy, held a pistol at his hip; the younger’s was at his side, forgotten.

“These men have experience,” the small officer said.

The older glanced at Art and the others. “I only need two of them.”

“That would be John and I,” Art said before the small officer could reply.

“Both of you, get in the boat.”

John and Art looked at each other.

“We won’t do that, sir,” Art said, “not while there are still women and children aboard.”

The older officer’s face darkened. “There are fifty women in this boat,” he flashed, “and if we wait much longer they’ll sink with the ship!”

He was right, but they both knew that even if all of the women were safe in boats, they could never abandon each other.

“We won’t leave,” Art retorted.

“I have experience, and I’m a White Star employee!” someone shouted bitterly from the crowd.

The older officer, gritting his teeth, looked from one of his companions to the other. “Alright. Lowe, Pittman, you go.”

The young, frightened officer jerked round to face his superior. “Go?”

“Yes, damn it, that’s an order!”

He nodded emphatically, and then climbed in. Pittman followed, stopping to squeeze the older man’s shoulder. “Take care, Lightoller.”

Lightoller nodded.

Once the two officers were situated in the boat, Lightoller gestured to Art and John. “You two, come here. One of you will help me with the pulley and the other’re guard them”—he hooked a thumb at the crowd.

“Alright,” Art said, and then nudged Seward in the ribs. “You get the honor,” he smiled wearily, “don’t go off thinking you’re Jesse James now.”

Lightoller handed Seward the gun and proceeded to explain to Art how the lever-and-pulley system worked; he could barely hear him over the noise on deck; hundreds upon hundreds of voices babbling at once, a phantom chorus.

Speaking of phantoms, the men amassed before him put him uncomfortably in mind of the dead, their faces dark yet pale, blurry and indistinct, their eyes black and hollow, gaunt, starved, desperate.

Seward licked his sandpaper lips and held the gun shakily before him.

“Why don’t you let us in, eh?” one of them, a tall, burly man with a thick moustache cried, “you can’t just let us drown like dogs! We’re people!” His comrades voiced their vigorous agreement.

“W-women and children first,” Seward stuttered.

“There aren’t anymore!” another man, tall and red-headed, screamed. “That’s the last of ‘em there!”

“Yeah!”

“Plenty of room for us!”

Other hisses, catcalls, and howls rose into the night. Seward swallowed hard and waved the gun from side-to-side. “Calm down, gentlemen! Women and children first! Be English!”

“This ain’t English!” someone shirked, “this is murder!”

The crowd, growing more restless by the second, erupted into screams and bellows. One daring soul moved threateningly forward, and Seward jabbed the gun at him; he fell back, pure hatred writ across his craggy face.

“Stand back! Be manly, for God’s sake!”

“Put down that gun and see how manly we are!” somebody challenged.

If this kept up, Seward thought as he scanned the men’s faces, he would be forced to shoot someone.

“Please, be reasonable!”

Before those words had even escaped his lips, a man leapt from the crowd and caught him with a swift right hook, knocking him back.

The world flashed bright red. Reflexively, Seward pulled the trigger thrice. The first two shots found their mark; the third went wild and smashed into a window.

Dizzied, disoriented, Seward swayed on his feet, the world graying around him. Loud screams and more shots rang out. Opening his eyes, Seward saw the men desperately clawing at Art and Lightoller, the latter firing into them and the former beating them back with his fists. Someone punched the officer in the jaw, and he stumbled back, bumping into Seward and upsetting his balance. Flailing his arms, he fought to stay on his feet...

...but fell over the edge instead.

Chapter 27

Six bodies lie crumpled on the deck, dark red blood spreading under them. Most of the agitators were dead or fled, some aft and some forward. The remnants of the army stood along the wall, watching with cold, calculating eyes, too afraid to move forward lest they meet the same fate as their marauding comrades. Had Art not had the pistol in his pocket, the jeering sea of cowardice would have overtaken the davit and swamped the boat.

Panting and holding the gun before him, Art stepped back and looked down over his shoulder. The boat sat suspended several feet over the black water, the white, round faces peering up at him haunting and indistinct.

“How is he?” he called. He turned back to the deck; the remaining ruffians stood tense and coiled. One of their numbers broke away and brushed rudely past Van Helsing, who wore a worried expression,

“He’s unconscious but alive!” a woman shouted back, and Art’s heart leapt. He relayed the information to Van Helsing, who looked relieved.

At least John was safe. For that he was endlessly grateful. If only Van Helsing had fallen into the boat with him...

"He take the gun with him?" Lightoller asked.

"Went into the drink!" someone replied.

Lightoller looked back to the tiny remains of the crowd, sizing them up. "Here, you"—he said to Art—"help me with this and let's be done."

Van Helsing stood back along the wall while Art assisted with the lowering. A few of the leftover men made a run for it and leapt into the sea, perhaps hoping to climb into the boat once it was down. The officer on deck craned his head over the side, and from below someone yelled. Another report cracked in the night.

These men were cowards, but they didn't deserve to be gunned down like vermin. Van Helsing closed his eyes and muttered a prayer for their poor, yellow souls.

Shortly, Lightoller relieved Art, who shook his hand and came back to Van Helsing's side. "The ship's doctor happens to be in that boat," he said, "and he says John is just knocked out. He'll probably wake up in an hour with a splitting headache, but that's all."

"Good," Van Helsing replied, but before he could add anything further, Lightoller was at Art's shoulder.

"There're two last boats on the poop deck," he said, looking from one man to the other, "if you're interested, follow me." He brushed past Van Helsing and hurried down the deck, fighting his way through the growing crowd. Without speaking, Art and Van Helsing followed, struggling to match Lightoller's pace, nearly losing him in the massive crush of humanity.

Close to the wheelhouse, Lightoller scurried up a metal ladder. Art went to follow, but stopped when Captain Smith appeared from the wireless hut.

Van Helsing didn't know the man very well, but he seemed a study enough sort. It was surprisingly then that he should look as stricken as he did. His face was nearly as white as his beard, and his shoulders were stooped as if under the enormity of the disaster unfolding around him.

"Edward!" Art shouted.

The captain didn't seem to hear, or if he did he didn't register: He turned and made his way dazedly down the deck, disappearing into the wheelhouse.

Art hesitated, seemed to consider going after him, but climbed the ladder instead. Van Helsing came behind, casting a worried glance forward: The water was almost to the deck, tinged an ethereal green by lights along the forward enclosed promenade deck, now submerged.

On the raised poop deck, Van Helsing stumbled and nearly went down. A man grabbed him and righted him. The old doctor turned to thank him, and saw that it was the wireless operator, the one he had spoken to earlier.

"Thank you," Van Helsing said.

"Think nothin' of it," he replied and started toward the boats, which, Van Helsing saw, were lashed upside down in the shadow of the rising forward funnel. A group of men circled each one, trying frantically to free them. Something occurred to him then.

"Son!" he called, hobbling to catch up.

The wireless operator turned.

“There are rescue ships coming? Correct?”

“The closest is fifty miles out,” the operator replied gravely. “We’ll be an hour and a half down by the time they get here.”

Without a further word, he turned and went to one of the boats.

Fifty miles out.

The thought boggled Van Helsing’s mind. Fifty miles. By the time it arrived, all of the people onboard TITANIC would be dead; even the strongest of men couldn’t last more than a half an hour in such frigid water.

Shaking his head, Van Helsing went to one of the boats. Men were shouting and sawing the thick ropes with pocket knives. He couldn’t help but wonder why in the name of God they had stowed the boats here, far from the nearest set of davits. The answer, of course, was arrogance. The TITANIC was unsinkable. What need was there for boats?

He almost believed that the TITANIC *deserved* to sink, for what was it but a temple to arrogance? To ego? To pride?

The last twenty years of the Victorian Age had produced more marvels than any generation before it. The reason was simple: God had finally decided to open new vistas of knowledge to man. But instead of thanking and praising Him, man praised himself. Electricity, the automobile, the telephone...came not from man, but from God. They were gifts, and man had proven himself unworthy. Yes, the TITANIC deserved to sink. Not one soul aboard her deserved to die, but they would, hundreds of them. Ours is a jealous God, we are to have no gods before him, and man was becoming his own god. This was a punishment, a warning, and a harsh lesson in humility. God would not suffer fools, He would not suffer human hubris, He would not suffer idols in the shape of ships.

This... *this* was the day of reckoning, the end, the apocalypse and Judgement Day. Men around the world would see and take note. They would realize that they are not Gods, nor supermen, but lowly, childlike creations attempting to usurp the Almighty.

It was over.

The nineteenth century.

Now for the twentieth.

Hallelujah.

Hallelujah.

The TITANIC began to sink.

“Hurry, damn it!” Lightoller yelled, glancing toward the bow. “She’s going!”

Art was next to Lightoller, holding a rope with one hand and furiously sawing with the other. His face was red from a mixture of the cold and the work; snot ran freely from his nose.

The deck was sliding out from under them. Van Helsing, holding one of the ropes, watched in dreadful awe as the water splashed over the wall flanking the wheelhouse, cascading and collecting on the deck. Dear God, it was here; it was finally here.

The sound of the sea gobbling the ship was very loud then. Underneath it Van Helsing detected music still. Sad, hymn-like; a funeral dirge.

Across the poop, the other boat slid off and crashed to the deck below. Several men jumped after it.

Van Helsing looked forward. The deck was entirely submerged now, the water gushing into the wheelhouse. The ship continued to slip, slip, very quickly now.

“Faster!” Lightoller screamed.

The water was up to the roof of the wheelhouse now. Looking dumbly left and right, Van Helsing saw only ocean where there had once been deck. People struggled in the water, screaming.

Suddenly, the ship jerked forward, and a great wave seemed to sweep across the poop deck. Van Helsing’s grip on the rope instinctively tightened and he braced himself just as the water hit him like concrete, knocking the breath from his lungs and pushing him down; around him men were swept away with screams of horror.

He was underwater now, the frigid ocean pouring into his mouth and nose. Under the icy surface, the sounds of people howling in pain and terror were greatly distorted and made even more hellish. The salt stung his eyes like acid.

Many years ago, as a young man, Van Helsing had once fallen through the ice of a frozen pond in December. The memory flashed across Van Helsing’s mind now as the sea enfolded his legs, and threatened to carry him away. There had been a thick blanket of snow on the ground, and the pond had seemed to be solid; it had been for dozens of people. But half way across, the thought of getting into the warmth at home on his mind, the ice had snapped suddenly with a frightful cracking. Before almost even his heart could drop and his stomach could ascend into his throat, Van Helsing had fallen through, and was up to his neck. He had been ashamed his whole life to say that he could not properly describe the terrible sensation of the water numbing his flesh, biting and stabbing him from head to toe. Now he understood; there was no description for water that cold. One could equate it with being picked all over by pins, but even that was settling for subpar words. You could never articulate that degree of cold, you could only *feel* it.

The force of the ocean pushed Van Helsing up the deck, or so it seemed to him. He was just beginning to think that it was over when he washed up on a dry surface. Getting to his knees, he saw that he was on the boat deck, a good ten yards aft of the bridge.

Presently, the old doctor was caught up in another wave, this one a wave of humanity: Screaming and jostling passengers pushed Van Helsing aft, nearly knocking him over with their violent movements. He tried to pull himself away, but his one attempt nearly sent him to the deck, where he would surely meet an unpleasant end. Up ahead, a poor girl of no more than sixteen had fallen, and was being trampled by many running feet. Van Helsing was still unable to escape the tide, and thus only helplessly passed and listened as her shrieks of agony bled into pitiful, heart tugging whimpers almost inaudible over the apocalyptic din.

Van Helsing looked over his shoulder at the frightened faces pushing him on, irrational anger simmering in his breast. These beasts! What were they doing anyway?

The stern would not save them; they would all be sucked down with the ship.

Finally, exerting more force and anger than he was accustomed to, Van Helsing ripped himself from the crowd and stumbled toward the edge of the rising ship. He would have pitched over the side had not there been a davit there for him to throw his arms around.

For a moment, Van Helsing clung to the cold steel, panting, his muscles and back signing a weary song of pain. Down the deck, a few people who had been struggling in the white water were climbing the deck, hunched over as if they were ascending a mountain. In the sea where the bow had been, Van Helsing saw many men flailing, swimming either to the deck to join the others at the stern, or to the boat which they had been working to free just before the ship plunged; it was still overturned, and some of the men had climbed atop it seeking refuge from the cold water.

Clearly it was the end, there was nothing more that he could do. His legs screamed in protest even as they were still and his arms were slipping from the davit that he clung to as the stern of the ship rose higher and higher into the night. He stood no chance in the ocean; he was exhausted, and the thought of struggling in the water, or of even standing for a moment longer, sapped his energy that much more.

He was an old man, he had had a good life, and he had done the work of the Lord twice; his purpose had been served. He had raised a family, he had taught things to young men who had taken what they had learned from him into the worlds to do good by others; he had spent many long, happy years with his wife, and he had had a chance to make the most of his time on earth.

Man's life was but a speck of sand on the beach of time, he had once heard from a poet in France, and it was true. From the day that he had been old enough to understand death, he had known that one day it would come along, take notice of him, and claim him. There was no reason to fight, no reason to go on living in the less than perfect world of man. There was no question of God's being there, for He was, and he was waiting for each of His children with a joyous heart and a loving smile. There was no reason to be a glutton for life; he'd had more than his fair share. His father had died at sixty, and now he himself was far beyond that.

But, even though, the thought of leaving behind the known, the comfortable, and the familiar was frightening. But Van Helsing had never been a coward.

He peered tentatively over the side at the black sea. How would it feel as the water poured down his mouth and was then absorbed by his frantic lungs? How would it feel as cold salty death shot up his nose and down into his stomach? Would it hurt, or would it be not more than an annoyance?

With a deep breath, Van Helsing rudely shoved these thoughts aside, and whispered the Lord's Prayer to himself as the ship tilted upward, ever upward.

Hitherto, his closed eye lids had been bathed in golden light, but now, with a queer electric sound, the lights onboard TITANIC flickered, and then were doused.

Still holding onto the davit with one hand, for the ship was at too extreme an angle for him to stand, Van Helsing took another deep breath.

And gave himself to the ocean.

Chapter 28

Time slowed to a trickle, and the ear grinding noises on the deck formed into an unintelligible blur of sound. Art's heartbeat slowed, as did his breathing; the biting chill in the air faded, and his face was no longer numb; he felt not the snot trickling down from his nostrils, or the burn of the rope cutting into his hand. With his pocket knife he sawed vigorously, but his arm did not become tired. His entire being was focused on the rope, which was sluggishly but steadily parting in the middle. The other men doing likewise were carrying their part of the work, and he had to carry his; if the rope defeated him, then the boat would be dragged down into the dark depths of the Atlantic with TITANIC, thus denying salvation to dozens.

Art had always had the keen ability to shut out the world around him when he became engrossed in something. It wasn't really a controllable talent, he knew, but a natural function that had come to him either at birth, or some time before he reached the age of ten. During his world travels with Quincy Morris and John Seward, Art had been envied by one and all for his trait. He had once read an entire Dickens novel while the wooden ship he was on was tossed back and forth in the stormy Pacific. The muttered prayers and religious fear of the men around him; the sickeningly frightful groaning and moaning of the wooden hull around him; and the crashes of thunder, like God firing a massive cannonade at wicked humanity had not been enough to penetrate his concentration. Once, a wave struck the side of the ship with such force that the book was knocked from his hands and slid along the floor, and under a man's bed.

Aware for the first time of the reeling sea and the utter danger surrounding him, Art frantically scrambled to the book, and once again dipped in, this time in a conscious effort to escape the battering sea, and the wailing wind, and the specter of Death.

The damn rope was a stubborn thing, so thick that it could conceivably have tethered the TITANIC itself to a berth. Though his mind had slowed and thoughts had been shoved aside in an attempt to "dehumanize" himself for proficiency, Art did have enough power encased in his skull to wonder why in the name of God anybody would use such a plump rope to hold a boat to the deck. In stormy sea, with waves lashing the ship, rocking it from side to side and washing over the deck, that kind of rope would be real fine. But in other situations, such as the bow of the ship sliding into the waves, it rendered the small craft useless. One would need nothing short of a sword to chop the damn thing in half; and all that any of the men had were small little pocket knives which would grunt and sweat attempting to half a stick of butter. Art's knife was no better than anyone else's, and he damned himself, when he had a thinking moment, for not carrying something a bit more manlike.

He was making a bit of progress though, for the intertwined strands were starting to flay and unravel. After doing a bit more damage, Art figured that he could rip the rope with his hands; that would go a lot faster than using this child's plaything.

Little by little, the rope eventually began to sever, and Art intensified his attack, his teeth gritted and grinding to dust, his heart leaping in anticipation of the coming Great Accomplishment. When the boat was free, then he and Van Helsing

and all the other men on the roof of the officers' quarters had a chance for it. If only the damn... rope... would... give!

Nearing triumph, Art was jostled as the ship lurched out from beneath him. Casting one frantic glance toward the bow, he started at what he saw: The water was rushing over the roof of the wheelhouse, approaching swiftly, putting him crazily in mind of the Angel of Death. The sea had already washed across most of the boat deck, leaving the raised bridge feet above the surface. People struggled in the tide, screaming and thrashing. The water made a terrible roar as it swept over the ship. Faintly, he could hear music still playing, a grotesque accompaniment.

Art stopped what he was doing, so overwhelmed by the sight was he. The ship was sinking steadily now: He could feel the deck sliding forward.

"Hurry, damn it!" Lightoller yelled.

Suddenly, the ship lurched forward, and a wall of water seemed to rush up the bridge, hitting Art in the mid-section and knocking him down. He gasped as the bitterly cold Atlantic pounding him, his hand tightening instinctively on the rope. The knife was knocked from his hand and disappeared into the drink.

Screaming almost against his will, he pulled on the rope with all his might in an attempt to get back to his feet, but the rope snapped and the sea shoved him into Lightoller; both of them went under.

Under water, the sounds of the sinking were distorted and lent a nightmarish quality. Art kicked and flailed his arms, and when he broke the surface he was several feet ahead of where the bridge had been. TITANIC's lights glowed jauntily, mockingly, and its decks were jammed with people running hysterically toward the stern. Countless people were in the green-tinged water, along with a jam of wreckage, mainly deck chair but also suitcases, life preservers, pieces of wood paneling, and garbage. Here and there water bubbled white as beneath, the sea rushed into every conceivable opening. The screaming was very loud then.

Art was transfixed by the terrible yet strangely beautiful sight. He was awoken from his stupor, however, by a rough, metallic grinding. The stinging cold of the sea forgotten, he jerked around, and gaped: The forward funnel, surrounded by water and bobbing heads, was kneeling over like a wounded animal, sparks showering out of it. Presently, the wires securing it to the deck snapped with whip-crack reports, and the stack toppled over, seeming to fall very slowly. Art reflexively closed his eyes as it fell into the sea; a dozen people had been directly in its path.

Art, thankfully, was far enough away to escape the impact, but not far enough away to avoid the massive splash: It knocked him under, and suddenly he was being dragged down into the darkness. He fought, but was unable to escape the suction: He was ripped against one of the grates on the bow and stuck fast.

Art had never feared death, and at that moment he was prepared to accept his fate; however, he still found himself fighting against the suction, his actions governed by his mindless body, flesh and bone intent upon preserving itself.

This is...

Before he could form the rest of his hopeless declaration, an air pocket somewhere in TITANIC's hold burst, and a geyser-like eruption shot him to the surface and beyond. Screaming, albeit silently, he was propelled several feet into the air, and came back into the sea head first, dropping like a stone before he

frantically began clawing his way back up, toward the light, his lungs bursting and heaving. It seemed like it was a lifetime before he again tasted sweet air, but in actuality it couldn't have been more than three seconds.

Head again in the world of oxygen, Art coughed so hard and long that his head throbbed and his vision grew gray. Close by, someone screamed, and Art, still hacking unabashedly, saw the entire forward section of TITANIC, which lay some twenty feet ahead, diving below the sea, the second funnel slipping beneath the waves.

Again, he was taken by the morbid beauty. In fact, he had never seen a more beautiful vessel, not even the TITANIC he boarded in Southampton.

Snapping presently back to reality, Art looked about himself, and saw the sea dotted with dozens of people, all or most swimming mindlessly away from the foundering ship. Off in the distance, he caught a green twinkle, and surmised that most of the boats had pulled at least a mile and a half out.

Thinking of the boats reminded him of his mission before he had been sucked under; the overturned collapsible, the one that was washed off of the bridge when the Titanic dipped.

Turning in the water, Art saw it not far behind him, upside down. A number of men clung to it and circled the water around it, clawing like damned souls at the gates of glory.

Quivering with exhaustion, Art tried to swim toward it, but stopped, his muscles spasming and weariness heavy upon him like the clothes he wore. He tried once again to swim for it, but agony thrummed through him. He would have to rest a moment.

But even treading water was suddenly too much, and Art found himself sagging lower and lower.

Damn it, man, he reprimanded himself, snapping back to attention, *get ahold of yourself, you...*

But before he could finish that thought, the lights burning aboard the TITANIC dimmed, flickered, and then went out; the screams on deck grew louder, more terrified.

She's going!

If he stayed where he was, he would be dragged down with the ship.

Momentarily throwing off the yoke of exhaustion, Art swam for his life. Behind him, in another world, a great grinding roar split the night, and the screams came together in a hellish melody.

He looked back only once: The ship rose black against the sky, sliding down, down.

Yelling and splashing surrounded him. He realized that he was shivering, his teeth chattering noisily together. God, it was so cold.

And he was so tired.

Being as dark as it was, he didn't know where the boat was. Not that it mattered. Death awaited him. He resolved to close his eyes and sink into eternity, but suddenly, someone grabbed him by the back of the coat and pulled him up. His aching eyes shot open, and a startled yelp passed his lips.

More hands laid ahold of him and dragged him out of the sea and aboard the overturned boat, laying him out like a trophy kill. Above was the night sky, vast and wondrous, the cold stars twinkling like icy fire.

"Lord Godalming!"

A circle of wan faces were peering down at him, their eyes seemingly black hollows and their drawn flesh clinging tight to their misshapen skulls. Fear burst within him, and for a moment he believed that he was being met by a group of TITANIC's dead for a trip across the Styx.

"Lord Godalming... is it you?"

The man who spoke, Art saw, closely resembled Archie Butt, but certainly wasn't. He tried to match a name with his face, but couldn't; his mind felt as though it were mired in cold mud.

"Y-yes."

God, the sky was so beautiful; star washed was the phrase that came to mind. And a good phrase it was.

"Are you alright?" The man asked, drawing Art back to reality, back to the dark boat which rocked side to side in the swell, back to the sea, where a chorus of hundreds of dying voices sang praises to hell.

Annoyed, Art snapped, "Yes, damn it, I'm fine!" He wasn't, though. He felt like a man stripped naked and thrown out into a blizzard. His heatless flesh was numbing, his wet, heavy clothes clung to him like a curse, and when he spoke his teeth chattered.

"Are you sure?" the man asked, his voice nearly drowned out by the din of death surrounding them. The most heart wrenching screams, shouts, wails, and moans filled the icy night. The boat swayed sickeningly back and forth as people in the water splashed nearby and tried to climb aboard. Someone shouted hysterically for them to get back or they would swamp the boat. Art tried to sit up, but didn't have the strength.

"None of that, now," the man said. He was huddled over, rocking back and forth for warmth. "You just rest a moment."

Art let out a shivering sigh and nodded. "It's turned out to be night to remember." He chuckled. He thought of Dracula, dead, his ashes, his slime, his whatever, resting on the ocean floor, in a deep, dark tomb forever lost to man, and smiled.

The man, of course, thought only of TITANIC. "It has. Absolutely dreadful. Hopefully the rescue ships aren't too far off. They can't last long in that water, nor we ourselves."

"No," Art mumbled as his eye lids closed.

"Lord Godalming!" the man reproached, "you must stay awake. If you don't you'll die."

Art opened his eyes and blinked them. "Right. Help me up."

The man helped Art sit. He was too weak to stay up on his own, and had to lean against the man. It hurt.

"Are you alright? I doubt we can sit much longer. There'll be more room if we stand."

Art revolted at the thought of standing. "We'll be fine here for a bit," Art said. They were to one end of the boat, near the tiller. Most of the other men were at the further end.

"Yes," the man said.

Art yawned.

"How was your trip other than this, Lord Godalming? Fair, I hope." Art knew that the man was trying to keep him engaged lest he fall asleep.

And hated him for it.

"I... I didn't have much time to enjoy the ship." Art's eyes slid closed again. It was dark, Surely, the man wouldn't see and make him open them. He would just rest them a bit.

"Neither did I, I suppose. I spent a lot of my time on the squash court."

"An athlete, then," Art commented apathetically.

"Oh, yes. In fact, I had an appointment for tomorrow morning. Earlier, before I jumped, I happened to meet my instructor and canceled. The court was no doubt underwater by then, but it seemed the right thing to do."

"Yes," Art murmured. "Lose anyone? I think I lost Doctor Van Helsing." Art was too cold to grieve, too cold to care. When he realized that he had lost the old man back on the boat deck, he hadn't felt more than a slight jolt to the frozen heart.

"No, thankfully, I was traveling alone."

"That's good," Art said.

And slept.

Epilogue

"Pandemonium," John Seward said.

It was May 23, 1912, a warm spring day in New York City. The courtroom was packed with people; mostly reporters, but also a curiosity seekers, families of the dead, and several survivors.

The United States inquiry into the TITANIC disaster had started a little over a month ago. Called to testify on account of his actions onboard the ship, Seward was prevented from returning to England, and had been staying in a hotel overlooking Midtown since April 22.

Behind their lofty bench, the seven subcommittee members watched him expectedly. Seward realized that it was hot in the courtroom, too hot.

"You were therefore forced to open fire, were you not?" Senator William Alden Smith asked. A tall, severe looking man, Smith was the chair of the committee.

"That is correct."

"And you were given the gun by Officer Lightoller for the express purpose of keeping the men at bay, is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many shots do you think you fired, Dr. Seward?"

"Three or four, sir," Seward replied. "I honestly cannot remember."

"And you hit people with them?"

“Yes.”

Smith nodded. “Do you think, as a citizen, Dr. Seward, that it is fair for officers on a passenger liner, much less those they deputize, to go about shooting the passengers they were sworn to protect?”

Seward had pondered that question many times since he had been called to testify.

“If there is a situation where the lives of women and children are endangered by chaos, then yes. I am not a brutal man, Senator. I do not delight in pain and suffering. I regret being forced to use the gun, but I do not regret doing so. Had I not, the men would have stormed the boat and could very well have caused it to break free of its moorings.”

Senator Smith nodded sternly. “In the altercation you fell into the boat.”

“Yes, sir. Rather, I was knocked into the boat.”

“You were unconscious?”

“I wasn’t until I hit the boat.”

“When did you next regain consciousness?”

“Some time after the ship had gone down, sir.”

Seward remembered the panic he felt when he saw that the ship was gone... when an officer told him that it was “all down.” Art and Dr. Van Helsing were still aboard; knowing them, they never would have departed the ship ahead of any women or children, and when the TITANIC sank, or so he was told, it was crammed with both.

During his testimony the week before, Officer Lightoller had given his account. He mentioned Art and Dr. Van Helsing... not by name but by description.

“When did you last see Lord Godalming?” Senator Smith had asked.

“When the water came over the bridge,” Lightoller replied. “He was knocked under and that was the last I saw of him.”

During *his* testimony, the American real estate investor Archibald Gracie, who had met Art several times in the past but didn’t know him very well, recounted Art’s last moments, and Seward openly wept:

“I tried my best to keep him awake and talking, but he slipped away.”

“And what became of Lord Godalming?” Smith asked.

“Me and another man pushed him overboard. There were people in the water still and I figured that a man such as Lord Godalming would wish his spot taken by someone who could use it.”

The “someone” turned out to be wireless officer Harold Bride.

As for Dr. Van Helsing, no one knew what became of him. The last person to see him was Lightoller. “He was sucked away from me and I didn’t see him again.”

Presently, Smith cleared his throat. “What happened once you woke?”

“Officer Pittman rowed us to a group of boats that were lashed together. There was talk of sending a boat back for survivors, and I volunteered my services.”

Seward told the committee how he, Officer Lowe, and a few others had emptied a boat (distributing its passengers to other boats) and gone back into the night.

“Was there much screaming?”

“It had died down before I woke,” Seward lied. In fact, there *had* been a great deal of screaming. Seward still heard it even now, ringing in his head. Last week there had been a parade of sorts past his hotel, and the sounds of jubilation

reminded him so much of that night that he was forced to leave and return only later, once it had stopped, lest he go mad.

“Did you find any survivors?”

“Yes,” Seward said. He recalled the faces of the dead, white and bobbing in the swell, and shuddered. He remembered seeing a baby clutched against its mother’s breast, both frozen solid, and shuddered. It was a sight he saw each night in his dreams, and a sight he expected to see each night until he died.

“How many?”

“Five or six.”

The one that stood out most to Seward was the Japanese fellow who had been clinging to a piece of wreckage. Officer Lowe was against taking him aboard. “There’s others better worth saving than a Jap!”

“You persuaded him to take on the Japanese man, correct?” Smith asked.

“Begged is perhaps the closer term.”

A nervous titter ran through the spectators.

The Japanese man recovered quickly and began to row with great gusto. Lowe said: “By Jove, I’m ashamed of what I said about the little blighter. I’d save the likes o’ him six times over, if I got the chance.”

Seward heard that the fellow returned to Japan where he was held in high disdain by his countrymen for surviving while so many others had died.

“Alright, Dr. Seward,” Smith said now. “That is all. You may go now.”

* * * * *

I miss my friends terribly. Dr. Van Helsing was a second father to me, and Art like a brother. The ache in my heart does not abate. In fact, it grows stronger each day. And now word has come that Quincy Harker, whom I love as a son, has been killed at Ypres by German artillery. My heart cannot take it. When I am awake I hurt, and when I sleep I dream: A thousand dead, white faces bobbing in the darkness, their eyes open and staring. I see Dr. Van Helsing, Art, Quincy, now, and Dracula. Though I know it cannot be, I fear that we did not kill him, that he is alive down there, trapped in the decaying husk of TITANIC, waiting to emerge from the depths once more. This thought is perhaps the most horrible. It was all in vain. Dr. Van Helsing drowned, most likely, and Art frozen... for naught. I am sorry to John and Mina. I know you feel the losses as acutely as I do, but I simply cannot take it. Perhaps if I had not been aboard TITANIC like you, perhaps if I hadn’t shot two men and looked over a field of dead women and children, I could soldier through. But I did shoot two men, and I did look over a field of frozen women and children. And it haunts me to this day. It gnaws me. A slow burning cancer eating my heart and soul. I love you all. Please forgive me.

—John. November 29, 1914.

[Ed. Note: The numerous errors in text have not been corrected.]

